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Embeddedness without Structure? An attempt at a Polanyian analysis of the Polish consumer-cooperative movement

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Embeddedness without Structure?
An attempt at a Polanyian analysis of the Polish consumer-cooperative movement[1]

Aleksandra Bilewicz[2]

Abstract

This paper discusses Polish consumer cooperatives – informal consumer groups that have been emerging in the country since 2010 – in terms of the embedded economy as understood by Karl Polanyi. Following Polanyi's understanding of the relationship between human economy and social institutions, I analyse reciprocity and redistribution as forms of integration in Polish consumer cooperatives. The structure and economic operation of these new consumer cooperatives is compared to pre-war Polish consumer cooperatives (organised into the national union Społem) that serve as a point of reference and inspiration for some of today's cooperative activists. I argue that the present structure of consumer cooperatives does not provide a base for symmetry and centricity – "supporting structures" for reciprocity and redistribution – although some cooperatives offer solutions for those deficits. This paper also discusses the nature of class barriers in the contemporary and historical consumer-cooperative movements, relating this issue to the Polanyian notion of countermovement and class interest.

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Introduction

Polish consumer cooperatives are mostly informal groups of consumers organising to buy produce directly from farmers; they consider themselves democratically, consensually governed entities based on the principle of mutual help. Most of the cooperatives declare that they strive for "a more just, democratic and environmentally friendly economy".[3] These mostly informal entities have been emerging over the past six years (since 2010). Overall, there have been over thirty attempts to form consumer cooperatives all over the country. Not all of them survive the first years or even months. By way of comparison, in Germany, similarly structured groups, called food co-ops or *Lebensmittelgemeinschaften*, number in the hundreds, with Berlin as home to the greatest number, around fifty.[4]

One could argue that such an ephemeral, still nascent phenomenon as Polish consumer cooperatives is too insignificant to be worth analysing, yet its significance, in my opinion, is not determined by the number of cooperatives or their popularity. What I found worth investigating in these new developments is primarily their relationship with the cooperative legacy, especially with the rich tradition of consumer cooperatives in Poland that formed one of the largest and strongest Polish social movements before the Second World War (Chyra-Rolicz 1985, 1992). After 1945, cooperatives were delegitimised as a result of their incorporation into the Communist state's planned economy (Brodziński 1999). Leaders of today's cooperatives refer to the "real" or "original" democratic-cooperative traditions.

The possibility of reviving the old cooperative model, born in the industrial age as a response to the disastrous situation of industrial workers, should be interpreted as rather illusory in the post-industrial age. However, it must be also emphasised that today's activists do not understand this revival literally – they are not trying to simply reactivate the old cooperative model in its old form. Actually, the structure and aims of the new movement, as I will show, are quite different. However, I find it fruitful to take this declared connection with the past seriously, and track structural and ideological differences between the 'old' consumer cooperatives that traced their roots to the 1860s and the new groups that are partly grounded in anarchist-inspired currents in the "newest social movements" (see Day 2005). When referring to the old cooperatives, I limit the scope of my comparison to the Union of Consumer Cooperatives of the Polish Republic "Społem"[5] (referred to subsequently simply as Społem, meaning "together"), the largest cooperative union in the country during the interwar period. Established in 1911 in Warsaw as a local cooperative union, it was transformed into a national organisation after Poland regained independence in 1918.

Another problem that attracted my attention as a researcher is the disjunction between the widespread media attention the cooperatives have received and the movement's struggle to attract a broad and lasting membership. In 2011 and 2012, the pioneering Warsaw Consumer Cooperative (Warszawska Kooperatywa Spożywcza) could not handle all the requests it received for interviews from newspapers, public and private television stations, lifestyle magazines, and documentary makers. In 2011, two members of the Łódź Cooperative (Kooperatywa Spożywcza w Łodzi)

[3] A slogan coined by a pioneering cooperative in Warsaw, now found on websites of other cooperatives also. See the website of the Warsaw Consumer Cooperative (established in 2010): http://www.wks.waw.pl/kim-jestesmy/ (accessed 17.11.2016) and Krakowska Kooperatywa Spożywcza: http://kooperatywakrak.pl/ (accessed 17.11.2016).
[4] An estimate based on the data found on http://www.foodcoops.de (accessed 17.11.2016).
[5] The name of the organization changed over time. In the moment of it establishment in 1911 it bore the name "Warsaw Union of Consumer Associations". The full name mentioned in the text was introduced in 1935. Usually, the Union was referred to simply as "Społem" or the "Społem Union" (Związek "Społem").

appeared on one national TV channel's breakfast programme. The largest Polish newspaper, the liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza*, has reported on almost every newly established cooperative in the capital and other large cities. The newspaper's tone has been enthusiastic: "They are self-sufficient and ecological", reads the headline of an article about Dobrze, the first new Warsaw cooperative to open a store. In 2015, Dobrze received a prize in a prestigious municipal competition for "non-governmental initiatives" operating in the capital. However, the continuous attention of the media and even of public authorities does not seem to have awakened interest in cooperatives in milieus other than the urban intelligentsia and some middle-class circles. It is this exclusive character of the movement that seems significant.

Last but not least, my interest in the practice of consumer cooperatives lies in their generally shared ideas about economy, most notably food exchange. They seem to agree with the Polanyian diagnosis that it is necessary to re-embed the economic sphere into social relations to protect society from the destructive impact of the free-market utopia. Hence, my research project was initially designed as an attempt to document this re-embedding process in consumer cooperatives. However, during the analysis rather different questions emerged: To what extent can we regard Polish consumer cooperatives as institutions capable of re-embedding the economy, at least on a small scale, if at all? Do they in fact constitute a part of a countermovement in the Polanyian sense? To address these questions, I will analyse economic "forms of integration"[6] identified by Karl Polanyi (Polanyi 1977: 35–43) – namely reciprocity and redistribution – in "old" and "new" cooperatives. I will also try to link these findings on forms of integration with the broader strategies of the two movements – the pre-war Społem and today's informal cooperatives.

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in fourteen Polish cooperatives between 2012 and 2015. During the research, I undertook participant observation as a member of the Warsaw Consumer Cooperative as well as interviews and shorter observation periods in other cooperatives, mostly in large Polish cities (where most are located): Łódź, Gdańsk, Kraków, Poznań, Katowice, Białystok, and Opole. In 2015 and 2016, together with Ruta Śpiewak,[7] I also conducted interviews with farmers delivering to cooperatives (Bilewicz and Śpiewak 2015). The discussion of the Społem movement is based on documents on the union found at the Polish Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, articles from the cooperative press issued between 1906 and 1939, and books and brochures published by Społem in that period.

Before I turn to the analysis, I find it necessary to make a remark concerning the perspective of my research. As a former participant in the independent left-wing movement in Warsaw whose members initiated the first cooperatives, I turned to studying cooperatives as a socially engaged researcher. My project was initiated from an insider perspective, with all its advantages and drawbacks, although, my viewpoint underwent a significant transformation over the course of doing fieldwork. Although I had initially perceived my research as supporting the cooperative cause, I became interested in their structural constraints as well as issues of class boundaries that became visible to me during my study.

[6] Polanyi used different terms to categorise reciprocity and redistribution, which he either called "principles" (Polanyi 1968a: 25), "forms" (1977: 35–45) or "mechanisms" (Dale 2016: 52). He also understood market exchange (1977: 42–43) and householding (1968a: 16) as other forms of economic integration.

[7] An introductory study; we plan to do more fieldwork on farms belonging to cooperative deliverers and in their social surroundings.

The Cooperative Movement in a Polanyian Framework

The birth of consumer cooperatives is symbolically marked by the establishment of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in 1844, traditionally acknowledged as the first proper consumer cooperative (Holyoake 1908; Webb 1930). The original impulse came from socialist thinkers and social activists later referred to as "utopian", in particular Robert Owen, whose first radical social experiments based on cooperation were either paternalistic and hard to reproduce (such as the New Lanark project) or totally unsuccessful (such as the American New Harmony Commune; see Carmony and Elliott 1980). Yet the idea, taken up by working-class leaders and adjusted to their everyday needs, proved its practicability. As Polish writer and cooperative activist Maria Dąbrowska, who visited England in the early 1920s to study the consumer movement's development, put it in her report on the Cooperative Wholesale Society, the Rochdale Pioneers "planted a [romantic] Owenist branch on a tree of reason" (Dąbrowska 1922: 17). Consumer cooperatives proper were inspired by a variety of currents in the workers' movements of the time: Owenist, guild socialist, and Christian Socialist (Webb 1930; Fairbairn 1994). The Pioneers created a core set of principles guiding cooperatives that would later come to be known as the Rochdale Principles. The most significant of these were open membership, democratic control, limitation of member compensation, autonomy and independence, and a focus on education (Fairbairn 1994). The general idea behind the cooperative movement was to counter economic exploitation by regaining control over consumption through the establishment of democratically governed enterprises run by the people. After taking control over the exchange process and eliminating private trade, the cooperatives were to take over production (see Gide 1922). Although this far-reaching aim was never realised, cooperatives all over Europe had various degrees of success: they owned bakeries, food processing factories, and even facilities in other branches of industry. In many places, they had considerable impact on lowering prices and raising the standard of living of the working people.

While Polanyi rarely refers to the consumer cooperative movement as such in his writings, the streams of pre-Marxist socialist thought in which he took an interest during his Viennese and British years (see Dale 2013: 61, 2016: 18–32) were the same streams that inspired cooperativism. Likewise, the social movements that contributed to the growth of the cooperative idea were also at the core of Polanyi's interests in his later period. In *The Great Transformation*, he devotes a large amount of attention especially to the Owenist movement that fostered different forms of economic institutions based on the principle of cooperation (for example, the Villages of Cooperation). "The consumers' cooperatives of Great Britain, which found imitators all over the world were, of course, the main practical offshoot of Owenism", Polanyi wrote. "That its impetus was lost, or – rather – was maintained only on the peripheric sphere of the consumers' movement – was the greatest single defeat of spiritual forces in the history of industrial England", he concluded (Polanyi 2001: 178).

The starting point for my approach to cooperatives is the Polanyian concept of embedded economy, understood basically in opposition to the domination of the market over other social institutions. According to Polanyi's writings, the free-market economy is most fully exemplified by nineteenth-century Britain, where laissez-faire policies utterly transformed the human environment in an attempt to subordinate society to the rule of a separate economy, creating free markets for labour, land, and money (1968a: 67–68). Following Polanyi in his essay *Aristotle Discovers the*

Economy (1968a: 82), I work with the premise that "the development from embedded to disembedded economies is a matter of degree. Nevertheless, the distinction is fundamental to the understanding of modern society." However, I also acknowledge that fully embedded and disembedded economies should be treated as ideal types (Hann and Hart 2011b: 9), since Polanyi was aware both of the fact that markets were present in pre-modern societies and that a fully disembedded economy would lead to the virtual destruction of society and nature. Even in the fervour of the Industrial Revolution, the economy was not entirely separate from society.

However, following Beckert (2009) as well as Dale (2013: 202), I reject Fred Block's idea (and similar interpretations) that Polanyi changed his understanding of embeddedness in his later writings to the concept of the "always embedded" economy (see Block 2003; Block and Somers 2014). In contrast to market-dominated societies, an embedded economy, according to Polanyi, rests mainly on other forms (mechanisms) of economic integration – "the economic prerequisite for community", as Dale (2016: 52) puts it. These are reciprocity and redistribution (Polanyi 1977: 35–43). Market exchange is also seen as one of these forms of integration (as is householding), but is not dominant in an embedded economy. This changes with the laissez-faire economic model, which Polanyi perceives to be a result of grounding economic policy in the "liberal creed", a set of economic ideas dominant in England since the 1830s (Polanyi 2001: 143). Polanyi considered them utopian; the liberal creed, or "dogma", as he wrote in *The Great Transformation*, "evolved into a veritable faith in man's secular salvation through a self-regulating market" (2001: 141). The disruption caused by liberating trade and the labour market could not entirely succeed: it released mechanisms of social protection in the form of countermovements (Polanyi 2001: 136–140).

I believe that consumer cooperatives, in their classic form based on the Rochdale Principles, can be treated as a part of a countermovement in a Polanyian sense – that is, the self-protection of society from the forces of the market. Countermovements materialised in a wide range of social activities: in demands for state intervention by different social classes (Dale 2013: 60–61), but also in the many forms of society's self-organisation. By organising direct exchange between producers and consumers to the benefit of both (offering the producer a fair price and distributing surplus funds among members), cooperatives tried to protect both groups from the negative outcomes of creating fictitious commodities: land, labour, and money.[8] Consumer cooperatives not only provided working-class households with affordable quality goods, but offered them communal, cultural, and intellectual possibilities (for example, lectures, Cooperative Day Celebrations, reading rooms, popular houses), creating a sense of belonging and community. This dual nature of consumer cooperatives is in accordance with a characteristic that Polanyi attributed to nineteenth-century social experiments of the Owenist movement – their emphasis on "appreciation of man as a whole" (Polanyi 2001: 176), as they were supposed to not only emancipate the people from their miserable material conditions but also fill in "the cultural void" that the working class found itself in during the rise of the industrial and free-market order (ibid.: 166).

While many interpretations of Polanyi's concepts concern themselves with the macro-level (see Block and Somers 2014), I turn to those currents in Polanyian analysis that concentrate on tracing embeddedness "on the ground", in grassroots social initiatives. In doing so, I in no way intend to diminish the need for an analysis of the relationships between the market and the state, or for a broader view of the relationships between market and society in contemporary capitalism,

[8] Polanyi argues that land, labour, and money are treated in the market system as commodities although they were not meant to be for sale (Polanyi 2001: 71–80).

especially after the 2008 crisis (see Frazer 2013). Despite this "micro-perspective", my own research project leads me to conclusions that oppose the views of some who advocate reading Polanyi in the "new regionalism paradigm" (see Dale 2016: 128–138) and have suggested that it is on the level of local self-organising communities, engaging mainly in reciprocity-based activities, that a fruitful solution to the destructive forces of the market can be found (Hettne 1990, 2006; Mandell 2006). Indeed, other studies have already shown that the potential of grassroots initiatives of the third sector to successfully replace the welfare state has certain limitations in practice (Alexander 2011).

The "regionalist" voices mentioned above did not discuss the more recent development in new social movements that focuses on everyday alternative modes of "practicing democracy" and new forms of organisation – something that, according to David Graeber, should be understood as these movements' very "ideology" (Graeber 2002: 9). The new consumer cooperatives, although operating in the very limited space of a few Polish cities, show clear connections to these movements in terms of both their form and, as Graeber suggests, their ideas (non-hierarchical structure, consensus decision-making). While I am aware of the limitations of my study and its immersion in the domestic Polish context, I also see it as a modest contribution to investigating the question of whether more globalised, interconnected movements that directly contest market fundamentalism (Hann and Hart 2011b: 9) can be regarded as a successful form of contemporary countermovement – that is, successful in the sense that they are able to mobilise a significant section of society against the destructive effect of the market.

Społem: the Polish consumer cooperative legacy

The first Polish consumer cooperative was established in 1864 in Warsaw, which at the time was within the Russian-occupied part of Poland. It was only after the 1905 revolution, which resulted in the loosening of the tsarist regulations concerning associations, that consumer cooperatives were able to develop on a larger scale in this part of the country (Chyra-Rolicz 1985). Soon they were supported by the Cooperative Society (Towarzystwo Kooperatystów), founded in 1906 by members of the progressive intelligentsia. The best known founder of the Society and a pioneering theoretician of the movement, Edward Abramowski, had also been a cofounder of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) in 1892, but soon decided to leave partisan politics, mainly due to his strong opposition to the idea of "state socialism" (see Abramowski 2013). Another founder of the Cooperative Society was Stanisław Wojciechowski, likewise a cofounder of the PPS (he left in 1905) and president of the Second Polish Republic between 1922 and 1926. He later pursued a career as a scholar and was one of the leaders of the leftwing peasant movement. Abramowski's influential ideas on cooperativism were crucial for the development of a distinct ideology of consumer cooperatives, although he was also regarded by some as a romantic idealist whose thinking had to be counterbalanced by the more down-to-earth approach of leaders experienced in trade and the practical aspects of operating cooperatives in a market-dominated reality (Giełżyński 1986).

Abramowski emphasised the ethical dimension of cooperatives. Forming consumer associations was a way for individuals to rediscover their agency after many years of passivity imposed by the partitions of the Polish people under foreign rule. Through cooperatives they could rise to form a new society, emancipating working people from the chains of capitalism but also from the

impositions of the state. Abramowski expected that cooperatives would supersede important social institutions to form an aggregate that he called stateless socialism (Abramowski 2010, 2013). Firmly believing in the role of self-help and brotherhood, he initiated friendship associations and ethical circles to encourage the development of these virtues in practice. In fact, Abramowski's emphasis on the role of individual virtues in cooperatives resonates with Polanyi's individualism and his stress on the ethical dimension of social action (see Hann 1992; Dale 2016: 19–21). The two thinkers also shared a basic appreciation of Christian ethics understood as a background for socialism.

Consumer cooperatives, emerging under the harsh conditions of tsarist rule, built in different social milieus and influenced by several political streams (including Catholic and conservative), soon began to unite under the insignia of Społem, a union of cooperatives founded in 1911 that provided education, practical tutorials, and assistance in securing supply (the union's wholesale centre was established in Warsaw in 1911). After Poland's independence following the Treaty of Versailles, Społem united under its banner the cooperatives dispersed all over the country. It also launched its own factories and mills, producing chocolate, sweets, cosmetic items, cigarette papers, and more. In the interwar period, the union would also establish the Społem bank, providing loans to consumer cooperatives according to cooperative rules.

In 1926, after many heated debates, Społem united with a rival cooperative union with a much more direct political stance, the Union of Workers' Cooperative Associations (Związek Robotniczych Stowarzyszeń Spółdzielczych), formed in 1919. These two conflicting currents were labelled, respectively, "neutralist" and "class" cooperatives (terms used in the cooperative press in numerous disputes between members of the two camps). Społem demonstrated a strong anti-capitalist stance and positioned itself on the side of *ludzie pracy* ("working people"). But it followed the Rochdale principle of political neutrality and adhered to the vision of gradually changing the economic system from within to build a "cooperative republic", a concept propagated in Poland by Abramowski and inspired by Charles Gide, a classic French cooperative thinker and early movement leader (see Gide 1922).

Numerous polemics were held in the cooperative press regarding the relationship between "socialism" and "cooperation". Marian Rapacki, a long-time head of the Społem board of directors, argued in the spirit of Abramowski that although both socialist and cooperative movements aimed for social ownership of the means of production, the cooperative movement opposed "state socialism" because the latter was based, in his view, on "mandatory state organisation" and "social change implied from above" (Rapacki 1923: 507), while cooperation rests on collectivities formed by free individuals that gradually contribute to the peaceful building of the "cooperative republic". Rapacki also claimed that cooperativism is a distinct way of fighting capitalism that should remain independent from political parties or trade unions – the latter pursue "class struggle", while cooperativism creates relations between producer and consumer that are essentially non-capitalist (Rapacki 1923). Cooperatives, as the socialist activist Bronisław Siwik (1923) argued in a similar vein, should constitute a much wider movement than political parties or trade unions. While revolutionary socialist politics has to rest on the use of violence, according to Siwik, cooperatives enable the development of the "social spirit", a driving force of the socialist movement from below. For the Społem "neutralists", it was the moral dimension of cooperatives – not just their purely economic function – that represented the core of the cooperative movement. In three articles that appeared in the journal *Rzeczpospolita spółdzielcza* (*The Cooperative Republic*) issued by Społem,

the authors polemicised, indirectly, with the ideology of the rival "class" movement that followed what was believed to be the Marxist stance on cooperatives (Gide 1922: 40, 261–263). The "class" activists disavowed cooperatives as sidelining relations of production and, therefore, withdrawing from class struggle. Through a Marxist lens, consumer cooperatives should be restricted to the working class and controlled by parties and trade unions, serving only as an auxiliary tool in the wider political struggle of the proletariat (Jossa 2005). The "class" cooperative movement in Poland was led by the Polish Socialist Party's left-radical faction and the Communist Party of Poland (made illegal in 1919, but it continued to exist unofficially). After unification of the two cooperative movements in 1925 under the neutralist Społem banner, the Communist Party dismissed the union and the "neutrals" as "bourgeois" or even "fascist" (Rusiński 1967).

In fact, the movement's independence and "neutrality" can be regarded as one of the sources of its relative success. At the time of reunification in 1925, Społem already had 600,000 members (Mielczarski 2010), while in the 1930s around 10 per cent of the country's population participated in cooperatives of different kinds. While leaders complained that the Polish movement did not reach the scale that cooperatives had attained in Scandinavian countries, it was nevertheless celebrated as a huge success.

People in a variety of social classes joined cooperatives. The movement was born in the cities, as the largest cooperatives emerged in industrial areas among working-class circles. Cooperatives of state officials constituted a somewhat separate category, representing a more moderate, middle-class standpoint in the movement. In the late 1920s, more and more small cooperatives emerged in the countryside, and in the 1930s the majority of Społem members belonged to such cooperatives. Indeed, most Społem leaders were sympathetic to left-leaning peasant movements struggling for land reform and social progress in the mostly poor and overpopulated villages. In various publications, cooperative activists emphasised the emancipatory role that the cooperative movement could play for the peasantry and called for solidarity between urban consumers and peasants – this aspect of the cooperative cause was especially emphasised by the renowned writer Maria Dąbrowska (Dąbrowska 1939). Sympathy for the struggle of peasants, who constituted around 70 per cent of the Poland's population, was one of the issues that distinguished Społem from the mainstream of partisan socialist politics.

Statistics from the 1930s demonstrate the predominantly peasant and working-class character of the union. According to Dąbrowska, 43 per cent of members of consumer cooperatives belonging to the union were peasants and 32.5 per cent were working class, with the rest labelled "other wage workers" (Dąbrowska 1939: 28). The last group included many kinds of urban intelligentsia: not only state officials, but also clerks, teachers, and artists. An especially strong emphasis was put on strengthening the identification of members, who came from various backgrounds, with the movement: educational work took the form of organising very festive Cooperative Day Celebrations (from 1925), along with issuing flyers, posters, speeches, songs, poems, etc. that were published, for example, in the popular magazine *Spólnota* (Community).

As archival documents show, consumer cooperatives varied in size and not all of them managed to be successful in the long run. In the countryside and towns, cooperatives usually owned a small shop employing one assistant and consisted of a few dozen members – consequently, the capital accumulation capacities of such cooperatives were limited and the board often consisted of people with little education and business experience. In the cities, the largest cooperatives had close to a hundred stores in different districts and hundreds or thousands of members. As in other European

countries, cooperatives were run by a management body and a board of directors chosen by the members (in a majority voting system) during yearly meetings. The main role of an individual member was to stay loyal to her cooperative and refrain from buying elsewhere, even if a private merchant could offer lower prices. Both reciprocity and redistribution were present in cooperatives in the form of institutional arrangements: the cooperatives were reciprocal in the sense that all members had to pay quite a significant entrance fee (share) upon joining (this amount would be recouped over time if the member stayed loyal), and their loyalty to the cooperative made its very existence possible, especially in the moments of crisis which were all too frequent, particularly during the huge inflation crisis just after the establishment of the state (1919–1924) and during the 1929 economic crisis, which lasted until 1936 in Poland (Rusiński 1967). But redistribution played an equally meaningful role: in a classic Rochdale arrangement, cooperatives sold their goods for market prices, but the profit margin that would ordinarily go to the private merchant was divided between a common fund and a dividend that was usually repaid to the members in the end of the year. Thus, cooperatives offered not only a sense of community, a strong belief in a common cause, but also the potential for substantial economic support for the working families. Although the leaders of the movement emphasised its ideological aspects, it was mainly material interest that led members to join the cooperatives (which meant that many left when their cooperative went through difficult times). This was a serious problem that Społem had to address. In order to maintain the integrity of the movement, it was necessary to spread the idealist cooperativist ethos. The extensive education about cooperatives was meant to raise awareness that the cooperative is "not an ordinary store" (Thugutt 1934), but a part of a larger-scale project of social change requiring loyalty and commitment.

The Społem union survived the Second World War under German surveillance reduced to only its economic function and banned from educational or cultural activities (Jasiński 1965). After the war, with the advent of communist rule, some of the cooperatives were revived, but they could not regain their independence and democratic structure while incorporated into a state-planned economy. No longer seriously in line with the Rochdale Principles, they were also no longer able to gain social trust and recognition comparable to that enjoyed by the pre-war movement. Cooperative leaders who survived the war had to accommodate new regulations or leave the movement, their activities subject, as in all other economic sectors, to the party nomenklatura (Duszyk 2007). However, the cooperatives provided jobs, as well as the stability and predictability that were by no means certain after the economic transition around 1988–1992.

In this "shock therapy" period of rapid liberalisation imposed by the first democratic government (Kowalik 1991, Harvey 2009), surviving cooperatives experienced a rapid decline, in part also the result of hostile changes in legislation and a blackmail campaign in the media: they were portrayed as inefficient and invariably connected to the communist past (Brudziński 1999). One source of their bad reputation after the transformation was the fact that all forms of cooperatives had been bureaucratised and made subordinate to state structures during the era of the Polish People's Republic (1945–1989). *Spółdzielnia* (cooperative) had become practically synonymous with outdated, bureaucratised, non-transparent enterprises bound to perish in a new market order. Housing cooperatives gained an especially bad reputation and became a sort of symbol for this institutional arrangement more generally (Peisert 2009). Many of the existing Społem cooperative retail chains were privatised, others became shady quasi-companies run according to cooperative law only in theory. The phenomenon of "non-cooperative cooperatives" (private companies

operating under the guise of cooperatives, such as quasi banks operating as cooperative credit unions) became common (Piechowski 1999). In this context of old cooperatives' loss of credibility and the normative chaos regarding the definition of a cooperative, it was all but impossible to seriously invoke cooperative values and principles.

New Cooperatives: the revival of a tradition?

Since the mid-2000s, we can observe a slow but gradual return of the notion of cooperativism in the Polish public sphere. In 2006, the Parliament passed a law on social cooperatives, a specific kind of workers' cooperative designed to support "socially excluded" groups in finding employment; these cooperatives were based on the workfare framework of the new wave of social economy (Kazmierczak and Rymsza 2008). But renewed interest in the pre-war cooperative tradition did not appear until the new consumer cooperatives began to form. Founders of these first emerging cooperatives referred especially to Edward Abramowski, whose cooperative writings were reissued the same year (2010) that the first consumer cooperative of the new type was established (see Abramowski 2010). These cooperatives claimed to revive the 'authentic' notion of cooperation while establishing informal, independent and community-like entities capable of building direct links with farmers and creating, in Abramowski's terms, a "school of democracy and solidarity" again.

In fact, however, these new institutions that appealed to past and forgotten voices hardly resembled the classic consumer cooperative of the pre-war period. The structure and design of these entities was almost wholly inspired by more recent influences. The first of the new cooperatives – established in 2010 and 2011 in Warsaw, Łódź, and Gdańsk – were initiated and run for some time in large part by members of the Young Socialists Association (Stowarzyszenie Młodzi Socjaliści), an organisation founded in 2005 on the basis of the former youth organisation of the Labour Union party (Unia Pracy). These first three cooperatives had temporary locations at Young Socialist Social Centres that would soon be liquidated due to lack of funds. Members of tiny anarchist organisations , including the Left Alternative (Lewicowa Alternatywa) were among the founders of the Warsaw Consumer Cooperative. In Gdańsk, the founders included activists from ecological, antinuclear, and tenant movements. These first cooperatives were founded with a strong and peculiar anti-capitalist message – "we will abolish capitalism using this carrot" – as stated in a slogan on the website of the first Warsaw Consumer Cooperative.

The Young Socialists are inspired by European socialist youth movements, particularly those from Germany (they organised communal summer camps, for example). The design of the cooperatives resembled food coops and other alternative organisations with roots in New Left traditions and later enhanced by anarchist currents in the alter-globalist movement (Day 2005): all put emphasis on loose structure, absence of formal hierarchy, small scale, and consensus decision-making. This kind of new or alternative cooperative had already emerged in various Western European countries in the 1970s, experiencing a particular boom in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries, for example (Hettlage 1979; Stryjan 1994, 1996), as well as in the United States (Knupfer 2013). Another wave came after the 2008 economic crisis. Soon the notion of "new cooperativism" emerged, which encompasses a range of cooperative initiatives characterised by their "grassroots" character and a strong anti-capitalist and often environmentalist stance (Vieta 2010). Without any stable governing bodies (except temporary "coordinating groups" set up for

specific tasks), the work in most of those entities is handled by members in rotation. All important decisions are to be taken at meetings (usually monthly), typically by using the consensus method. With their strong emphasis on inner relations, "participation", and community, the new cooperatives tend to deliberately maintain their small-scale and informal character.

"Społem" cooperatives	**"New" cooperatives**
Formal organizations, operating according to the law on cooperatives passed by the Polish Sejm (lower house of Parliament) in 1921 and registered with local courts	Mostly informal collectives (a minority formalizing as associations)
Centred around a jointly owned store or stores run by paid staff (shopkeeper/shop manager)	Goods distributed during "shopping sessions" (every one or two weeks or irregularly) often organized in temporary spaces (an NGO, a café); a small minority of cooperatives have stores
Governed by the management (2–3 people, including a president of the cooperative) and a board of directors chosen by all the members on yearly basis (one-member, one-vote system)	Intentionally "non-hierarchic"; initially all functions performed on a rotational basis. At a later stage, many cooperatives established groups of coordinators chosen by members. Decisions taken by consensus during meetings (usually once a month). Some decisions taken by smaller "special task" groups; in reality cooperatives often managed by the "most active", informal leaders
Conditions of membership: a substantial entry fee (around one month's salary of a labourer); dividend paid to all members at the end of the year on the basis of the value of their purchases; part of the profits collected for a common fund	A small entry fee; 10% of the price for each product is paid into a common fund; in some cooperatives monthly contributions are a condition of membership; no individual dividend
Duties of members: cooperative loyalty, adherence to cooperative values	Participation in cooperative duties (on a rotational basis) and social activities

Table 1. Differences in structure and economy between "Społem" cooperatives (before 1939) and the cooperatives that have emerged in Poland after 2010

The aim of consumer cooperatives is to reach local farmers to obtain high quality, preferably organic food for their members. Initially, the new consumer cooperatives had no experience in contacting farmers, so members started by delivering produce which they bought at big wholesale centres on the outskirts of cities, where some individual farmers sell their produce – this was, however, considered a temporary measure while establishing stable relations with specific farms. The choice of wholesale centres was also connected to the initial emphasis on low prices for produce so that it could be accessible "for everyone". However, the necessity of having members deliver the produce from these centres and the conventional character of the food sold there made most members seek direct relationships with the producers; this was also desirable from the point of view of supporting "local" agriculture. Eventually most of the cooperatives managed to establish relations with individual farmers, with difficulty due to members' lack of knowledge about

agriculture and the realities of rural life. Some cooperatives established lasting ties with food producers, while others struggled to retain them, largely due to very small orders that meant that delivery to the cities was simply not viable for farmers. As our initial research among farmers working with cooperatives has shown, most of them are not traditional small farmers, but have made a conscious decision to establish "alternative" farms that follow ecological natural farming models. Most have also a university degree and either grew up in an urban setting ("back-to-the-landers") or returned to their family land after studying and working in large cities (see Bilewicz & Śpiewak 2015).

Although today's cooperatives are seemingly based on the same basic principle as entities from the past (forming an organised group of consumers to eliminate middlemen and trade directly with producers) as well as the same broader, long-term goals (countering the capitalist mode of exchange and ultimately production), the organisational shape of the new cooperatives is very different from their precursors. Supposed commonalities with the "old" cooperatives, suggested by references to Abramowski or the pre-war consumer-cooperative movement in general, are in fact misleading, as the new cooperatives were formed with a social background that differs significantly from that of the "old" movement. Furthermore, due to their structure, they are often unable to provide economic stability or perform their necessary functions sustainably and fluidly. Some also fail as communities, which invites consideration of factors at play that are not purely structural. The structural differences between the past and present cooperatives are presented in Table 1.

How Re-embedding Food Exchange Does (Not) Work in Cooperatives

Reciprocity and Redistribution

There are several reasons why the re-embedding process in cooperatives is at best fragmented and slow, in my view, and I believe that the very structure of the majority of cooperatives should be considered a constraint. In fact, as I will try to demonstrate, for these communities, the food provision is sometimes even only a marginal goal, a fact that is accepted by a substantial part of the membership, who treat cooperatives mainly as facilitators of networking or as a circle of likeminded friends, and don't expect to purchase most of their daily food through it.

A Fragile Community: the problem with reciprocity

According to Hettne (1990, 2006) and other authors who interpret Polanyi in the "new regionalism" paradigm, in the era of neoliberalism the re-embedding process is likely to happen in small, decentralised communities and be based predominantly on the principle of reciprocity. While redistribution is most typically attributed to the state or another social institution with a centralised governing body, the movements of reciprocity are "symmetrical, its locus is the community" (Dale 2013: 117).

While in my opinion it is in general doubtful whether reciprocity alone could ensure a successful re-embedding of the economy, it is also necessary to look at potential constraints to reciprocity in a given social structure. Many of the cooperatives are highly fragile entities that experience recurring crises and may be disbanded temporarily or permanently as a result. My interviews and observations suggest that these crises are caused by the lack of volunteers to perform essential duties (insufficient commitment of members), a huge member turnover, and insufficient coordination of work. These factors in fact endanger the continued existence of reciprocity in

cooperatives. They may even lead to the conclusion that consumer cooperatives, in their present incarnation, are simply a failure – although it would be probably more suitable at this stage to regard them as experiments that may develop in different directions in coming years.

The first factor – the passivity of the majority of members – was often invoked by the most active members, mostly founders of cooperatives, who complained about having to do all the work on their own. The majority of members, in the reports from the "activists" or factual leaders, do not really participate in cooperative activities, instead treating the cooperative as an "ordinary store". This expression recalls Thugutt's observations and suggests that it is a problem also encountered by the historical movement.[9] It came up in many of my conversations with cooperative members. One of the founders of the cooperative in Gdańsk and a former leader of the Young Socialists Movement said to me:

> "Unfortunately, many cooperative members treat it as a slightly better, cheaper and healthy food store, at least half of them, the same half that buys ecological products. Yes, a cheaper, a slightly more cool ecological food store. They come or send some of their friends, they select their purchases, and this is how their participation in a cooperative looks. We find it lamentable, since the cooperative, by definition, should be democratically governed by us all, and every member of a cooperative has one voice that is equal to all the others[10]."

During the second nationwide Consumer Cooperative Rally, organised in 2013 in Łódź, a discussion on "participation" was held in which members from different cooperatives from all over Poland tried to find a solution to this problem. Their diagnosis was pretty similar:

> "I think that we still understand the cooperative in a simplified way. For a cooperative is not just a store where you buy healthy food from a farmer. The cooperative is cooperation in a group, it is social cooperation."

The passivity of the majority results in a situation in which all work and virtually all cooperative affairs are in the hands of the few most committed activists. These people sometimes consider themselves "idealists" or "freaks" deeply convinced by the ideology behind the cooperatives. As Marcin[11] of the Gdańsk Cooperative recalled, he had to "watch over everything": he set the date of the shopping sessions and informed the group, opened and closed the Social Centre, and made sure that the people expected to take shifts for weighing, packing produce, and cleaning up had shown up. He often also delivered produce from farmers and carried out other "functions" meant to be performed by all members on a rotational basis.

> "I went often [to bring produce], it was often the case that no one wanted to do it, so I said – okay, I'll go, so that the shopping session can take place anyway. I've had enough of that. So recently there was simply no shopping."

[9] It is, however, important to remark that this affinity is somewhat superficial, as commitment meant something else in the former cooperatives, where everyday duties were usually performed by paid staff or board members. A member's duty was regarded not as participation in the everyday tasks, but as faithfulness to one's cooperative store against all odds as well as spreading the ethics of cooperation.

[10] All translations of quotes used in the article are mine.

[11] The names of cooperative members have been changed.

Marcin tried to distribute some responsibilities among other members, but was not always successful. He also admitted that his disproportionate involvement in cooperative matters gave more power to him than the others, as he and a few other active members made de facto decisions on matters that were meant to be discussed collectively. Sometimes the daily management of cooperative affairs required some sort of sacrifice. Maciej, another active member of the Gdańsk cooperative, a person with irregular work and very modest earnings, took part in the cooperative labour, often volunteering to go early in the morning to the wholesale centre to buy food from farmers, even when he couldn't afford food from the cooperative himself. He said it was his contribution to the cooperative when he was unable to "support it financially" by taking part in shopping. Even the most committed "idealist" gives up sometimes. The Gdańsk cooperative collapsed in 2014, around a year after my visit.

A similar situation occurred in the Łódź cooperative, as recounted by Piotr, once one of its leading activists:

> "It was a major problem connected with participation and the fact that I took on too many of the obligations, and that we had not enough people to work. At some point I felt burnt out, I wasn't able to keep going like that and the cooperative had to be suspended for a month."

Indeed, the Łódź cooperative, which for some time was one of the most successful with around two hundred members, has had more than one period of inactivity due to both lack of member participation and internal conflict. The cooperative was recently relaunched, but Piotr no longer participates as a member. Brief terms of membership, even among the most committed and active members, is a typical situation in most cooperatives. After five years in the Warsaw Consumer Cooperative (in 2015), I was virtually the only person who had been continually present since the cooperative's first year (a few members left the cooperative and returned later). Only a few people had more than three years of membership. The cooperative had to operate with high turnover and a constant influx of new members who had to learn the rules and get acquainted with co-members and co-workers. Most members stay no more than a year, sometimes even only a couple of months.

Some activists have faulted other members, i.e., the inactive majority, for not having enough awareness of cooperative values and principles and not being "political" enough. For them, as for Piotr, the cooperative is mostly about politics:

> "It is political that we cooperate in a just way with our deliverers, it is political that we buy locally and seasonally, because it is totally political. We can buy a potato at the Lidl discount supermarket, which is transported over hundreds, even thousands of kilometres from Israel, or we can buy a nice ecological potato coming from a distance of forty kilometres. That's a huge difference, our money makes that difference (…)."

Therefore, it is the "normal" people (those who are not politically aware, in the terms used by some of my interviewees) who have embraced the cooperative as a "chic store" providing them with cheaper ecological foods and who fail to understand what a democratic collective enterprise is all about. While this might be true in part, I would suggest instead that the design of the institution itself does not produce a basis for the stable relations necessary for reciprocity. Most work of the cooperatives is done via the Internet, where many discussions on common issues also take place. The rotational working arrangement does not enable people to regularly meet on the same "shift"

and develop closer relationships as well as common "workshop rituals" that can facilitate stable cooperation (Sennett 2012). Although most cooperatives strive to integrate their members (organising picnics, communal cooking, discussions, or workshops), they fail to retain them for a longer period of time. The non-hierarchical cooperative structure, intended to avoid the alienation of the "petrified bureaucracy" of older cooperatives and enterprises, whether socialist ones or Western ones, has produced its own alienation: chaos, instability, and sometimes a surprising degree of anonymity in a small group meant to form a community, a "small society" (one member said of the cooperative: "it is a small society, a base of a society. It had to look like this in the beginning").

Is there, however, more that can be learned from the passivity of the majority of cooperative members? According to Polanyi, reciprocity requires a "supporting structure" in the form of "symmetry", described as a sort of tribal subdivision involving individuals building partnerships or relations between villages or moieties (1977, 2001: 51). While it is important to remember that Polanyi is referring to pre-modern arrangements, long-term reciprocity in the new cooperatives still seems to need a personal and stable form of relationship based on more than just the types of friendship – or rather acquaintanceship – that develop through involvement in the cooperatives.[12] In pre-war cooperatives, reciprocity was ensured by what was called "cooperative loyalty", that was, in turn, strengthened by propaganda and moral education. Społem leaders took this very seriously – solidarity was a "duty", according to a text by Charles Gide translated and printed in a 1906 edition of *Społem* magazine. This moral dimension, taking the form of a duty or obligation, is absent or rare in present-day cooperatives: for the most committed activists, what matters is being on the right political path or on the ethical side of consumption; for most members, self-fulfilment and a desire to take part in something "alternative" or "non-conventional" motivates their participation. Indeed, as Marcin pointed out, cooperative activities for some resemble "play":

> "In general, the cooperative is a sort of a (…) nice way to have some fun (…) you can't rely on it in terms of your nourishment, you can't treat it as your only food supply, because shopping sessions are rare, most of the people have to commute quite far, and, somehow (…) to go and collect your shopping is anyway a sort of (…) effort in relation to what you get, because what you get is of (…) highly variable quality. Most of the wholesale center things are the very same things that can be bought on the market."

The weak and chaotic structure of many cooperatives prevents them from becoming a stable source of quality food, and there is no other strong motivation that would bind people to them for a longer period of time. In many cases, the cooperatives also cannot offer a stable source of income for farmers. Without some sort of a Maussian "obligation to give", reciprocity in cooperatives does not seem to have good prospects. What happens in cooperatives, however, seems to be in accordance with the general spirit of the new social movements developing in the West since the 1960s: their ephemeral structure is a reflection of a general emphasis on self-realisation and individual goals

[12] This aspect of Polanyi's thought is in fact problematic, as it is not entirely clear how we should apply the categories derived from studying ancient or tribal communities to the modern context. This ambiguity led to the split (now resolved) among economic anthropologists between "formalists" and "substantivists" (see Hann and Hart 2011a: 56–97). I would argue that the forms of integration are still applicable to the contemporary societies, although Polanyi himself was quite unclear about how to understand them in the contemporary context. His support for the Soviet Union (Dale 2016: 80–94), even during Stalinism, leads to further confusion, since his general style of argument, e.g., focusing on exchange and distribution rather than production, his view of class conflict, and the Christian and individualist motifs in his thought seem hard to reconcile with communist ideas and practice.

that underlie collective action (Melucci 1989; Rose 1997). This is confirmed in a recent study that analyses people's motivations for participating in recently developing informal movements (including cooperatives) in Poland (Górniak 2014). This larger framework means that people enter a cooperative then leave it readily when something more attractive is offered.

"Where Is Our Wallet?" Impaired redistribution

Redistribution was one of the most important functions of classic consumer cooperatives based on the Rochdale Principles. By establishing a direct link to producers and at the same time selling at market prices, cooperatives made it possible for profit that would otherwise be go into private hands to be owned by the community of members and partly returned as a dividend. As Stanisław Thugutt wrote, the aim of the cooperative was not profit, but "protecting its members from exploitation and generat[ing] savings for them" (Thugutt 1934: 4). It was thus meant to be a Polanyian countermovement against market forces. After covering necessary expenses connected with running the shop, the remaining surplus money was to be redistributed among members according to the value of their expenses in the cooperative (but irrespective of their initial shares). Some of the surplus was democratically allocated through a common fund (this could be used for the cooperative enterprise or cultural or educational facilities for members).

As mentioned above, in most new consumer cooperatives, redistribution took the form of a *fundusz gromadzki* (communal fund), established by adding ten per cent to the producer's price of each product. However, the fund's value has turned out to be largely symbolic in most cooperatives. Due to the small numbers of members and the often irregular "shopping sessions", any surplus cannot be considerable. In the Warsaw Consumer Cooperative, it oscillated from several hundred złotys up to two or three thousand (eighty to twelve hundred euros) in the cooperative's best months. This covered the costs of purchasing basic supplies for the cooperative's storage room (shop scale, shelves, food boxes, etc.) and organising common meetings, but not much more. Moreover, due to general chaos in the cooperative, it was difficult to accumulate the money for the fund. The simple reason for that was that it was held in a communal wallet that passed between the people who happened to perform the function of "shopping coordinator" in any given week. In 2012, the wallet disappeared, with all the cooperative's savings. The person who lost or stole it was never found, as no one bothered to launch an investigation. This caused many disappointed members to leave the Warsaw cooperative.

The initial aim of the fund, apart from covering necessary costs, was to support members in times of need (covering unexpected health care, for example). This, however, did not work, and not just because of the fund's paucity. To my knowledge, the possibility of asking the collective for help was only used once in the Warsaw Consumer Cooperative, by an unemployed member who used the funds to cover his costs for dental treatment. There were a few such cases in the Łódź cooperative, which were the subject of a TV programme's breakfast conversation with cooperative members. However, Julia, a Łódź member, complained about flaws in the way the communal fund works:

> "I know that there are people in the cooperative who can't buy a larger amount of food in a given moment, or almost nothing. And they will never ask for help. Even very active people. And I think there is a barrier on their side. And it is psychological. And there is the question of

> how to avoid this barrier. For me, more formalisation and more anonymity in asking for help would be a solution. In the state of total informality that we have here, a person has to talk about his problem at a meeting, that he simply does not earn much or is without a job, I think it is a big problem."

In the 'old' cooperatives redistribution was institutionalised as a more impersonal mechanism – the dividend was paid at the end of the year according to the value of a member's purchases, which was filled in on special sheets. The personal and informal character of the present-day cooperative meetings actually makes this more difficult implement. Most of the cooperatives that introduced the communal fund very quickly simply ceased to use it that way. The call to formalise this process seems very reasonable, as Polanyi reminds us that redistribution requires another supporting structure based on "centricity", which is "present to some extent in all human groups, provides a track for the collection, storage and redistribution of goods and services"; it must also result in an effective division of labour, as the economic system is a "mere function of social organization" (Polanyi 2001: 52).

As we see, the organisation of most cooperatives makes redistribution almost impossible. Storage of money is difficult due to lack of stability in positions requiring responsibility. Storage of other goods is also challenging in the long run, as most of the cooperatives, unable to rent their own space, must rely on NGOs, state cultural institutions or informal organisations (such as squats) to grant them temporary space for free. The cooperatives often change their location, which makes it hard to build permanent infrastructure.

Along with the absence of a fixed space, the programmatic lack of central authority (the "non-hierarchical" character of the cooperatives) seems to be for a key factor in their general inefficiency and the feebleness of the redistribution process. Cooperatives base themselves on a conviction, popular among different streams of the "newest social movements" (Day 2005), especially those with anarchist inspirations, that a new and more just social order should eliminate all hierarchy and ultimately all power. Thus, in the beginning, no provisions were made for creating reasonably permanent management or administrative roles. Later, many cooperatives introduced some reforms – the Warsaw Consumer Cooperative established a "coordination group" that was supposed to be chosen again every three months. However, this has not given any stable, lasting results, since the coordination group's scope of power was not precisely defined and most members did not appear to be very committed: presumably due to the lack of genuine answerability to the collective, which did not possess tools to dismiss the coordinating group. Many members complained about chaos, inefficiency, and prioritisation of the cooperative's convivial function above its provisioning tasks. Such formation of informal hierarchies and elites in informal structures has been described in a classic essay by feminist activist Jo Freeman (1971) as the "tyranny of structurelessness". She noted the ineffective character of such groups in dealing with complicated issues, as well as the emergence of informal elites and "stars" who dominate it. Such matters were also been invoked by my informants, who spoke of "people with stronger personality" and "rhetorical talents" dominating the group. "The force of the arguments" does not count, according to one of them.

In most cooperatives all matters are decided at meetings based on the consensus principle (Bressen 2007). A typical feature of many "alternative" organisations in the West, this principle has proven quite problematic (Sennett 2012), and most Polish cooperatives fully confirm this. Warsaw Consumer Cooperative meetings often lasted several hours, with lengthy discussions on minor

issues. A feeling of emptiness and infertility prevailed in those discussions. Adam, a former Warsaw Consumer Cooperative member, recalled:

> "Consensus decision-making is (…) very attractive in a way (…) on an ideological level, but hard to use in practice. It turns out that we can't make any decision (…), or finally, after many hours of discussion, we make some insignificant decision that does not really change much. We make this decision in a small group of people, because other people were somehow excluded from the decision-making process: they could not make it to the end of the meeting, or they let themselves be convinced because they were tired, or the pressure was so hard that they gave up. That is how I see it."

These long and exhausting meetings were another reason many members became disillusioned and left the cooperative or became completely passive. Almost all of the most committed members – namely, those for whom the cooperative actually formed a close circle of friends and was an important part of their lifestyle – have left.

Possible Solutions: informal and formal

It would be inaccurate to state that all Polish consumer cooperatives are in a state of stagnation or collapse such as that experienced by the cooperatives I described above. There are two basic types of cooperatives that transcend the model initiated by the Young Socialists: the first type is what I term consumption-oriented cooperatives (see Bilewicz and Potkanska 2013; Bilewicz and Śpiewak 2015), informal Internet networks that actually partly resemble shopping groups; the second is represented to date by just one cooperative, the Warsaw Dobrze, which is registered as a formal association and has established a shop. These cooperatives introduced very different, even mutually exclusive institutional arrangements that, however, enabled each of them to cope to some extent with the problem of disorganisation and insufficient member commitment.

Consumer-oriented cooperatives are usually not oriented toward democratic decision-making; they have centralised power structures in the form of so-called "group administrators" (usually two or three) who coordinate the necessary activities and take the most important decisions. Most of the work is done through the Internet, with individual members responsible for "actions" for products from a particular farmer or producer. Consumer-oriented cooperatives are able to have more members (sometimes a few hundred), and they meet weekly to redistribute the products, which they sometimes collect directly by car from farmers or small processing units (most farmers come to the city to deliver the goods). Some of these cooperatives meet at NGOs; others gather outdoors when the weather allows it (Kooperatywa Południowa in the south of Warsaw meets with farmers under an overpass, and the whole event resembles a closed-access bazaar). Lack of member commitment does not cause larger structural problems for these cooperatives – the administrators simply remove inactive members from the Internet group. This enables enduring reciprocity, but at the price of a kind of "despotic" power on the part of the administrators and the absence of the democracy that is crucial for cooperatives. Significantly, these entities have considerable

purchasing power that enables them to make large orders from farmers, providing them considerable profit; they offer also high prices for sophisticated goods of exceptional quality.[13]

In contrast, the Dobrze cooperative, established in 2014, is formalised as an association and has opened two stores in Warsaw (launching the second in summer 2016), run partly by members, who take rotating shifts, and partly by paid staff. Formally, it continues to be "non-hierarchic", adhering to the consensus principle in monthly meetings. There is, however, a coordination group that includes the formal management of the association. The legal form of association requires preparation of yearly financial reports, and the necessity of paying rent for the shops and wages of employees is among the factors that motivate most members to participate actively in cooperative tasks and daily life. Along with its own members (over two hundred), the cooperative employs people as shop assistants and supply coordinators. Dobrze, inspired by the rules of the Park Slope Food Coop in New York City, has introduced one mandatory three-hour shift per month for members in the cooperative shop. This gives the cooperative a comparably smooth existence, but all this also has its cost: products, notably bought from niche ecological farms, are much more expensive than at most other cooperatives, not to mention ordinary stores. But this is not all; the financial flows in the cooperative in fact constitute the opposite of redistribution: along with the initial share, members pay monthly contributions (twenty-five złotys, about six euros) to the cooperative to cover all its costs. Access to a community of embedded economy – at least to some extent – involving reciprocity and many personal relations, as well as stable contracts with mostly regional farmers, has its price. The cooperative, in this arrangement, no longer serves to "protect members from exploitation"; instead, it offers them a sense of community and access to regional and quality food in exchange for their free work and money. Somehow, strangely, embeddedness has itself become a sort of a commodity, and an exclusive one at that (some similar findings are in Winter 2003). Although in the classical Rochdale cooperatives the members were obliged to pay substantial initial shares, they later obtained dividends that made their membership, at least in most cases, a form of economic protection. In Dobrze, protection instead concerns the members' health and well-being (access to quality food), not their finances. It can be a solution for middle-class members, but obviously not for poorer people.

These two solutions, put in Polanyian terms, have introduced two different kinds of centricity: the first in the authority of the administrator, the second in the formal framework of the association and stores that imposes strict regulations on members. The stable character of the two cooperatives enables social relations to flourish (and to form certain kinds of "symmetries" in the group: in both cases, many joint activities are organised by members, such as picnics, bartering used goods, common charity actions in the consumer-oriented cooperatives, and communal cooking and cultural/political events, the last mostly in the Dobrze cooperative). These two forms of cooperative, centralised through a person or institution, enable a stable exchange of food between producers and consumers and offer a rich social life to members. Reciprocity and redistribution are present in both cooperative models, at least to some extent, but not in an individual manner as in the classic Rochdale model. The funds of the members serve their common needs (as assets to run stores, to arrange a storage room or to organise a communal meal), but are not returned to members in the form of dividends.

[13] It is important to remark that not all cooperatives that fall into the „consumer" category fit into this description. During the recent years, already after the end of my study, some cooperatives from this group became more democratic and no longer rely only on Facebook for their daily operations.

Cooperatives and Class Interest

Who has access to the benefits offered by a community that forms such an "embedded island"? In the case of "activist" informal cooperatives and, to a larger extent, the Dobrze cooperative, members are mainly young urban intelligentsia following a form alternative lifestyle (Bilewicz and Potkanska 2013; Bilewicz and Spiewak 2015). Many of them have precarious jobs that do not provide high incomes but allow for a flexible schedule that enables them to participate in cooperative "shifts" (often during regular working hours), lengthy meetings held on workdays, and picnics and parties. A diminishing minority are more strict in adhering to an alternative lifestyle, somehow managing to deliberately stay apart from the employment system, living in squats and practicing freeganism (some are "unemployed by choice", as one member put it). The majority work in NGOs, at universities, at public cultural institutions, in the media, or as freelancers; many are PhD students, mostly in the humanities and social sciences. A commitment to sustainable consumption and alternative lifestyle as well as general social and political engagement in both formal and informal contexts are common interests and activities for most members. Their self-definition as "freaks" living non-conventionally is contrasted with the figure of the "normal" (*normals*), a politically indifferent person outside the activist group or a potential member who needs to be drawn into the cooperative movement. The relationship between the "activists" and the "normals" is highly ambivalent: "normals" are seen as desirable and very welcome in cooperatives; simultaneously, when some of these "normals" join, they are partly blamed for cooperative inefficiency and accused of lacking proper political awareness.

The elitist character of the consumer cooperatives is reflected in the assortment of products they offer. The emphasis on buying organic food, which has grown stronger in recent years, makes the produce sold actually more expensive than in ordinary supermarkets, contrary to the goals of early cooperatives (although the produce is for the most part much cheaper than in organic food stores). Many of the cooperatives have decided to stay vegetarian and concentrate on selling specialty vegetarian and vegan foods (tofu, tempeh, chia seeds, etc.), with little to offer the people with more ordinary diets who constitute the vast majority, despite a growing interest in organic and quality foods. Cooperative members deem food sold in supermarkets to be inedible, unhealthy, and full of "chemistry", but the solution most cooperatives offer renders them even more exclusive. As Jack Goody argued in *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (1982), higher classes have distinguished themselves for centuries by eating foreign, exotic food, as the invention of *haute cuisine* can be linked to the emergence of complex social stratification. In the contemporary food regime, 'exotic' might be replaced, paradoxically, by terms including 'local', 'natural', 'organic', and 'vegetarian' (or 'vegan'). The emergence of industrially mass-produced food, according to Goody, contributed to making food manners more egalitarian. It seems notable that this argument was made just at the time of the birth of the Slow Food movement (Brunori 2007) and other alternative food movements that were soon embraced by a middle class inventing its "green distinctions" (Horton 2003). The alternative-food movements, although avowedly egalitarian, in fact engage in elitist consumption practices.

The intelligentsia in Poland, as in many other Eastern European countries, has had a singular position in society. Some researchers claim that this class – or stratum, as there is no agreement about the class status of intelligentsia (see Żarnowski 1964) – has had a hegemonic position in

Polish society since the second half of the nineteenth century that has lasted even through post-war socialist rule (Szelenyi 1982; Zarycki 2003, 2009). While there is no place in this article to discuss this thesis in depth, it is fairly uncontroversial to state that the significant role of the intelligentsia has continued, despite many voices proclaiming the "death" of the "true intelligentsia" (Zarycki 2009, 2014). Most intelligentsia come from a background of impoverished gentry: due to a lack of independent state structure in Poland and other factors undermining the formation of a bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia took a leadership position in the second half of the nineteenth century, when it was believed to be preserving national identity and values. However, intelligentsia leaders were also crucial in the formation of the socialist movement in Poland. The largest socialist party, the PPS, was led largely by intellectuals with backgrounds in the gentry and assimilated Jewish intelligentsia. The pre-war cooperative movement, involving many former prominent PPS members, was also initiated and led by people of typical intelligentsia or even gentry or aristocratic backgrounds, as is reflected in the authorship of early articles in the Warsaw journal *Ekonomista* in the second half of the nineteenth century to the leaders of the Cooperative Society and Społem. Most of the iconic pioneers and theoreticians of Społem, including Abramowski and Wojciechowski, were born, somewhat paradoxically, in country mansions or into impoverished urban-intelligentsia families with gentry backgrounds. Wojciechowski claimed in his memoirs that he could trace his lineage, proudly bearing the Nałęcz coat of arms, back to the fifteenth century (see Wojciechowski 1938). However, both PPS and Społem were able, after some time, to gain broad social support and attract workers and, in the case of Społem, wide peasant backing as well, with some of them joining its leadership.

I return to the history of cooperatives to provide a basis for my interpretation of Polanyi's argument about class interest and social change (2001: 158–171), which basically runs counter to the Marxist tradition. Because human interests are social before they are economic, as Polanyi argues, successful countermovements involve cooperation between different social classes that are able to join forces despite sectional interests. It is in times of change that the entanglement of class interest with "the needs of society" (as a whole) and, consequently, with the fate of other classes, becomes visible (2001: 159). Those needs, as Polanyi argues, are not predominantly economic. In the case of historical countermovements, he writes: "Almost invariably professional status, safety and security, the form of a man's life, the breadth of his existence, the stability of his environment were in question" (Polanyi 2001: 160).

In fact, according to Polanyi, a countermovement must involve class leadership, in which one class represents the whole of society struggling for self-protection. By joining or leading the protectionist movement, this class is not merely representing its own economic interests, since not only income, but also other basic needs, common to all classes, become endangered by commodification of land, labour, and money. Somehow, the (similarly elitist) leaders of the "old countermovements" in Poland were able to represent interests other than their own "sectional" class interests, enter into dialogue with part of the society they wanted to protect and mobilise hundreds of thousands of people to support the cause. This seems not to be the case for the new consumer cooperatives, at least not in their present shape. On their way to a "more democratic, ecological, and just economy", they fail to take a leadership position; they are enclosed in their own *środowisko*, the informal social milieu that Janine Wedel described as the essence of social life in Poland during the last decade of "real socialism" (Wedel 1986). The tendency to remain confined in small "intelligentsia ghettos", as described by sociologist Józef Chałasiński (1958) is, however, a

phenomenon with deeper roots in Polish history that goes back to the creation of an urban stratum of impoverished gentry that heavily relied on informal personal ties. However, trying to understand this phenomenon by referring only to the history of local class relations may be misleading, since similar movements in Western Europe and America are also reported to have a predominantly middle-class or upper-middle-class – and therefore also exclusive – character (see Goodman and Goodman 2009; Bryant and Goodman 2013).

Conclusion

As I have attempted to demonstrate, most of the new consumer cooperatives to date have failed in developing successful mechanisms of integration, namely reciprocity and redistribution. Although they offer an "alternative" to the usual shopping at supermarkets or other stores, providing access to ecological and healthy food in a personal, small-scale setting, few of them are stable enough to permit longstanding cooperation with farmers and a firm organisational structure. The membership turnover is high, as few members treat the cooperative as their main source for purchasing daily food.

The re-embedding process in cooperatives seems to be only partial, as it delivers only a semblance of trust and personal relations, a highly uncertain promise of *Gemeinschaft* rather than a stable economic mechanism integrated into the social fabric of the cooperative and its environment. The exclusive character of the cooperatives (strongly based on lifestyle and special food habits) and their peculiar 'structureless structure' makes them inaccessible to the majority. Thus, their countermovement potential is fairly weak – they are unable to mobilise an alliance of different classes.

It is possible, though, that this represents an initial stage of a larger movement: that some more stable and less exclusive structures will emerge in the future. The history of Polish cooperatives begun as feeble attempts by the intelligentsia to build cooperatives in the second half of the nineteenth century – something the Polish Marxist anthropologist Ludwik Krzywicki described as a failure due to their wrong social basis (Krzywicki 1903). The activity of the cooperative society that gave birth to Społem enabled the growth of a movement that transcended class barriers. The two different routes to stability emerging among present cooperatives, namely consumer-oriented cooperatives and store-centred cooperatives, show possible paths that might be taken in future developments. The first path, however, acquires stability through installing a strong leader, reducing the democratic aspect of the cooperative, while the other does so through establishing a store and formalising as an association but at the same time retaining relatively high prices and monthly membership dues, thus building an economic and social barrier to participation.

The interests that the new cooperatives try to represent – access to healthy and natural foods, protection of family farms, and re-embedding food exchange in social relations – are basically common to all social classes. These interests – just as in Polanyi's analysis – are not primarily economic; there are social interests (1968b) connected to physical as well as psychological wellbeing, a sense of security and ties to the local community and nature. While remaining cautious about overly facile historical analogies, it seems plausible to suggest that in order to gain wider social support, cooperatives will have to return to the Rochdale Principles (such as participation in profits) and invent a "new neutrality" that could help transcend class barriers. This would probably entail moving beyond strict political positions (including not insisting on "non-hierarchical" and

informal structures) and identities strictly based on alternative lifestyle and exclusive nourishment. Instead, most cooperatives, focused on the community aspect of the cooperative tradition, seem to neglect the individual aspect of the old cooperatives that is also rooted in Abramowski's thought. This includes individual economic benefits, on the one hand, and, on the other, the focus on the moral dimension: not only self-fulfilment, but also commitment.

This is not the place to speculate whether the proposed evolution is probable; it is also not my intention to suggest that the intelligentsia must or should be leaders of the countermovement. An emergence of a successful countermovement could also happen elsewhere and it may be more effective with a different leadership. To give an example from the food-exchange market, relying on direct, informal food networks formed by small producers and urban consumers is a habit that still has strong roots in Poland, realised both through completely private networks of friends and family as well as food markets (*bazarki* or *rynki*), a diminishing but still widespread phenomenon where one meets individual producers such as older ladies selling produce from their small farms or tiny backyard gardens. As shown by Smith and Jehlicka (2007, 2013) and Smith, Kostelecky and Jehlicka (2015), the Western idea of forming local, alternative food networks to counter the dominant "placeless foodscapes" (Murdoch and Miele 2004) has long been active in Poland and the Czech Republic in the form of widespread domestic food production and informal exchange schemes in both rural and urban areas (for the authors, a "quiet sustainability" that has gone unnoticed by researchers occupied in tracking the development of Western-style movements). These existing networks tend, however, to be ignored by the founders of most cooperatives. The media also concentrate on urban novelties, often celebrating their success prematurely, which has the potential to reinforce the alienation and social distinction of new social movements presented as fashionable and innovative.

Nevertheless, there are initial signs that some class alliances may be on the horizon. In 2016, the Dobrze cooperative supported the farmers' protest in Warsaw and was involved in fighting for a law to enable farmers to sell processed food directly to consumers. It is possible that cooperatives will yet become an important actor bringing together Polish food producers and urban consumers in a single countermovement.

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