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Abstract

There has been a revival of interest in cooperative enterprises as an alternative to capitalist enterprises. After visiting the Mondragon Corporation, the largest workers' cooperative in the world, established in the Basque region of Spain in 1956, the Marxian scholar Richard Wolff wrote an op-ed piece in *The Guardian* where he argues that cooperatives like the Mondragon Corporation must be seen as a central element of a socialist alternative to capitalism. While the conventional understanding of Marx's own writing on cooperative enterprises suggests that such a form as a cooperative enterprise cannot escape the teleological thinking which subsumes it under the forces of monopoly capital, the actually existing cooperatives around the world have occasionally received positive reaction from the Marxian scholars. This paper is an attempt to situate cooperative enterprises in the extant literature on production

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organisation within the Marxian tradition, keeping in view the ambiguities and contestations about the place of cooperatives within the Marxian scheme of things. We argue that a perspective founded on the class processes, which entails the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus value, could help us understand the nature of a cooperative enterprise vis-à-vis capitalist enterprises. In this perspective the conventional ways of judging 'successes' and 'failures' give way to an understanding based on the *fundamental* and *subsumed* class processes. Drawing on the works of Resnick and Wolff and using primarily the data collected through a survey of the handloom weavers' cooperatives in West Bengal, and a few other cases from the literature as well, this paper aims at broadening our understanding of the potential of cooperatives for providing a viable alternative to capitalist production organization.

JEL Classification: B51, P32

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1. Introduction

After visiting the Mondragon Corporation, the largest workers' cooperative complex in the world, established in the Basque region of Spain in 1956, the well-known Marxian scholar Richard Wolff wrote an op-ed piece in *The Guardian* where he argues that cooperatives like the Mondragon Corporation must be seen as a central element of a socialist alternative to capitalism. While the conventional understanding of Marx's own writings on cooperative enterprises suggests that such a form as a cooperative enterprise cannot escape the teleological thinking which subsumes it under the forces of monopoly capital, the actually existing cooperatives around the world have occasionally received positive reaction from the Marxian scholars. The interest in cooperatives among the Marxian scholars has ostensibly been motivated by a normative concern for an ideal form of production that would be non-exploitative in the Marxian sense, i.e. a production organization which is free from domination of capital over labor in the process of production, appropriation and distribution of surplus value. However, there are others who are still skeptical about the possibility of cooperatives to provide an alternative. The well-known philosopher of 'rational choice Marxism' Jon Elster, for example, expresses his skepticism by asking '(i)f cooperative ownership is so desirable, then why are there so few cooperatives?' (Elster, 1989, p 99).

What is a cooperative? There could be several alternative ways of defining cooperatives. The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA, established in 1895) defines a cooperative as 'an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprise'. Clearly, each of the words in this definition requires further specification of meaning. For example, one-person-one-vote rule has been seen by ICA as the decision-making norm to ensure internal democracy. Cooperative enterprises are generally seen as being managed by

the workers. For our purpose, however, drawing on the literature that takes class processes as the core idea of Marxian political economy, we adopt the following definition as our entry point:

‘...the appropriation and distribution of the surplus are done cooperatively and that the workers who cooperatively produce the surplus and those who cooperatively appropriate and distribute it are identical’ (Wolff 2012, p.82).

Evidently, there has been a resurgence of interests in cooperatives in the Global North since the global financial crisis of 2008 (Wolff 2012, Dinerstein 2015, Dow 2017). By contrast, although cooperatives of various forms have had a long and checkered history in India, interests in cooperatives are rarely seen in public discussions in the recent times. The cooperative ‘movement’ in India originated at the initiative of the colonial government at the beginning of the past century. Even though the number of cooperatives has swelled over time, most of them are the products of a top-down approach with heavy dependence on the state for their functioning. The enthusiasm about cooperatives, which was evident in India after independence, especially during the 1950s and 60s, has eventually given way to a pessimistic prognosis that cooperatives are destined to fail without government support. In spite of the lack of interest, a good number of cooperative organizations in production, marketing, credit and other areas have emerged and persisted over the past century or so, some of which indeed show resilience and dynamism. Therefore the lack of interest does not seem to be justified given the importance of cooperatives in the lives of thousands of people in India.

This paper is an attempt to situate cooperative enterprises in India in the extant literature on production organization within the Marxian tradition, keeping in view the ambiguities and contestations about the place of cooperatives within the Marxian scheme of things. This has been motivated by the apparent contradiction between the ‘doomed to fail’ thesis or ‘degeneration thesis’ and the richness of the variety of actually existing cooperatives. The ‘doomed to fail thesis’ or ‘degeneration thesis’ willy-nilly tends to

emphasise the so-called 'structural problems' of cooperatives, 'unstable' nature of cooperatives etc. In order to counter such assertions a stream of literature has aimed at comparing and contrasting cooperatives with traditional capitalist firms and tries to show how cooperatives can outperform capitalist firms.

After presenting a brief review of alternative economic perspectives on enterprises, we contrast with them a Marxian perspective that takes class and class processes as the entry point in analyzing economic enterprises. The perspective that we have followed here has been drawn on the works of Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff (RW, henceforth) (1987, 2002) who took the concept of class as the entry point of Marxian social theory. Following RW, Chakrabarti, Dhar, Cullenburg (2012), Chakrabarti & Dhar (2016) have developed their framework for developing countries like India and presented a political economy analysis of the Indian economy. In this perspective, society has been viewed as a totality of 'overdetermined' processes and therefore devoid of any 'essence' that is supposed to 'determine' the societal outcome. The concept of overdetermination has been deployed to overcome the determinism and essentialism that underlie various interpretations of Marx's writings. In the approach followed by RW, class process is understood as a distinct social process of performing and appropriating surplus labor. However, what distinguishes this approach from others is that the class process is seen as being overdetermined by all non-class processes existing within the social totality. People participate in class processes and thereby occupy class positions. While some of them perform necessary and surplus labor, who are called the 'direct producers', others extract or appropriate surplus labor. What is important here is that an individual can occupy more than one class position. This theoretical perspective helps us understand cooperatives in a country like India where the conditions of existence of cooperatives vary widely across regions and sectors. It would be useful if we could see cooperatives as overdetermined by various class and non-class processes. While undertaking our empirical study we have followed two properties that characterize a firm as a cooperative: (1) regular voting or assembly of existing worker-members i.e. annual election of board of directors – decision

making through this assembly of workers, and (2) firm's profit sharing with the existing workers. These two criteria in a way combine the two definitions of ICA and Richard D. Wolff (2012).

The idea of 'efficiency' has been thoroughly criticized in the literature that takes Marxian class process as the core (Resnick and Wolff, 1987; Wolff, 2012; Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenberg, 2013). The perspective based on *overdetermination* rejects a simple causal connection between efficiency (no matter how it is measured) and its determinants. *Mutual constitutivity* of various processes – natural, social, political, cultural – with their complex interplay would characterize the functioning of cooperatives, as it would in other cases. A concrete example would be helpful here in understanding the complexity which goes beyond successes and failures of cooperatives. From the perspective of Marxian political economy, at times 'failures' may reveal more than 'successes'. For example, in the case of 'Sonali Tea Estate' that we have discussed later, when the owner abandoned the estate for its alleged lack of potential to generate profit, workers took it up and ran it as a cooperative (Bhowmik 1988). As the enterprise was turned around and made viable with intense effort from the workers, the owner came back and claimed its ownership after winning a legal battle. It seems that unsupportive legal and institutional framework, capitalists' power to influence delivery of justice, general lack of support for cooperatives from the political class and people in general – all these are important factors behind such a phenomenon. This particular case highlights the complex interplay of several processes and complex nature of the idea of successes and failures in cooperatives within a given structure which is dominated by the capitalists. An analytical approach based on Marxian class process that follows the logic of *overdetermination* would suggest that a simplistic understanding of successes and failures of cooperatives would be grossly inadequate. This way of looking at the cooperatives has practical implications for the normative viewpoint that sees cooperatives as a meaningful alternative to capitalist enterprises. It would also help us counter the tendency to view cooperatives as inherently unviable and therefore unlikely to thrive in a capitalist system.

The paper is divided into five sections. In Section 2 we present a brief account of the debates on cooperatives, presenting the positive features as well as negative characteristics. Section 3 elaborates on the building blocks of the theoretical approach adopted in this paper drawing on the literature on Marxian class process which we believe has relevance for cooperatives and is about the evaluative criteria we are proposing here. Section 4 briefly discusses the general scenario of production organization in India dominated by the informal sector and how surplus value production and appropriation can be seen in this specific context. Section 5 presents the empirical analysis in which we discuss three distinctly different cases to demonstrate how the theoretical perspective could be meaningful in illumination the varieties of experiences of the actually existing cooperatives in India. We make a few concluding remarks in Section 6.

2. Contestation about cooperatives

The keywords in the ICA definition of a cooperative are 'jointly-owned' and 'democratically controlled'. Thus, on the basis of the nature of ownership and control one can think of a four-fold classification of enterprises among which two are worker-controlled and two are capital-controlled. In a worker-controlled firm workers may or may not own capital. Similarly, in a capital-controlled firm, ownership of capital may or may not be with individual capitalists. A typical capitalist enterprise is controlled by those who own capital, but in a socialist enterprise control rests with the owner of capital, i.e. the state, rather than with the workers. A cooperative enterprise is ideally worker-owned and worker-controlled. This is not to be confused with either a profit-sharing firm or a state-owned enterprise, since neither type can be meaningfully called a cooperative enterprise if the right of the workers to make decisions democratically is absent. However, a state-owned enterprise can be labour-managed without being a cooperative enterprise. The Yugoslav model practiced during 1949-91 is an example of this type.

Cooperative enterprises are generally perceived as inefficient and therefore 'doomed to fail' as they are seen as lacking the

dynamism necessary to compete with capitalist firms. This negative prognosis about their future can be contrasted with the actually existing cooperatives around the world, some of which have been in existence for more than a hundred years. In some specific industries in some countries, cooperatives form a substantial share of output and employment. The relative performance of cooperative or labour-managed firms vis-à-vis capitalist firms has been the subject of many empirical studies. Meta-analyses of these studies fail to produce any conclusive evidence apparently because only the firms producing the same range of goods and services can be compared, and within a particular industry it is less likely to see any difference in performance in terms of standard indicators between the two types of firms. Even when one finds that a cooperative firm is less efficient in terms of certain efficiency criterion, it does not necessarily mean it is nearing its doomsday. One has to establish theoretically that for survival of an organizational form efficiency criteria must necessarily satisfy. There are many cases of survival of inefficient institutions which are explained in terms of market failure or multiple equilibria in game theoretic models.

Apart from inefficiency and lower performance, theoretical arguments also suggest that cooperatives would underinvest and therefore would suffer perennially from undercapitalization. If we assume that the median member of a cooperative is a senior person who will attain superannuation before the investment in which she has contributed generates positive returns, she would not invest. In other words, in a democratic system of one member one vote, if senior members who have a few years to go are in the majority, new investment to finance long-run plans will not be made. As a result, the cooperative will remain small and stuck with outdated technology (Furubotn and Pejovich, 1970).

There is very little agreement among the Marxian scholars on the role of cooperatives or labour-managed firms in the overall scheme of things, which can be traced back to Marx's own statements on cooperative factories. As in the following quote, one can smell a kind of utopian flavour in the statement extolling the virtues of cooperatives first, even though statements that follow soon after

express his skepticism about the possibility of thriving cooperatives in an economy dominated by monopoly capital:

We speak of the co-operative movement, especially of the co-operative factories raised by the unassisted efforts of a few bold 'hands'. The value of these great social experiments cannot be overrated. By deed instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands (Marx, 1864, p 6).

...however excellent in principle and however useful in practice, cooperative labor, if kept within the narrow circle of the casual efforts of private workmen, will never be able to arrest the growth in geometrical progression of monopoly, to free the masses, nor even to perceptibly lighten the burden of their miseries' (Marx, 1864, p 6).

He further writes elsewhere, reiterating his skepticism:

The cooperative factories of the labourers themselves represent within the old form the first sprouts of the new, although they naturally reproduce, and must reproduce, everywhere in their actual organization all the shortcomings of the prevailing system. But the antithesis between capital and labour is overcome within them, if at first only by way of making the associated labourers into their own capitalist (1894, p. 571–2).

The actually existing cooperatives around the world had rarely received positive reaction from the Marxian scholars earlier. The pessimistic prognosis about cooperatives by Marx himself is perhaps the reason why there is so little interest on cooperatives within the Indian left political parties as well. A related reason might be that emphasis on cooperatives might be seen as supporting a 'revisionist' position thereby compromising on the need for radical transformation to reach the transcendental goal of socialism. Even unequivocal advocacy of cooperative organizations by Lenin has not had much impact on the Indian communist

parties⁴. The neglect of cooperatives in the left political discourse as well as in practice is evident from the manifestoes of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. Table 1 lists if there is any mention of cooperatives in the successive election manifestoes of the CPI(M) for the general elections to the Indian Parliament.

Table 1: Mention of cooperatives in the election manifestoes of CPI(M)

2014	‘Paying special attention to solid waste management of recyclable/reusable waste; hazardous electronic/ chemical and biowaste through cooperatives of SWM workers without PPP.’
2009	No mention
2004	‘A network of fair-price shops and cooperatives should cover all panchayats.’
1999	‘A network of fair-price shops and cooperatives should cover all panchayats.’

In spite of the general lack of interest in cooperatives among the party functionaries in the CPI(M) in India, the current finance minister of the state of Kerala, T. M. Thomas Isaac, who is a senior member of the party’s central committee, has recently co-authored a book on Uralungal Labour Contract Cooperative Society (ULCCS) of Kerala. ULCCS is one of the oldest surviving cooperative societies in India (Isaac and Williams, 2017). More recent developments in Marxian scholarship therefore have viewed cooperatives as a non-exploitative alternative to corporate-capitalism, as Marx went on to the extent of characterising cooperative production organization as ‘possible’ communism:

If cooperative production is not to remain a sham and a mare; if it is to supersede the capitalist system; if the united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under

⁴ ‘.....not all comrades realize how vastly, how infinitely, important it is now to organize the population of Russia in cooperative societies’, wrote Lenin (1923)

their control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of Capitalist production – what else, gentleman, would it be but Communism, ‘possible’ Communism?’ (Marx, 1871, 1993, p 61)

We argue that the potential benefits of a strategy of worker-control through cooperatives and weaving political movements in and around cooperatives with an active guidance of the left in India has not been theorised with adequate care and rigour. This paper is an attempt to theorize cooperatives in the context of a country like India where production, appropriation and distribution of surplus value are carried out through a variety of forms besides the typical capitalist firm.

3. Class process and cooperatives

There are mainly three broad Marxian traditions that are relevant for studying cooperatives. While Bowles and Gintis (1993) followed the economic approach emphasizing on competition and efficiency, Gibson-Graham (2006) have argued in favour of cooperatives by invoking the notion of diverse economies, communities, local etc. Resnick and Wolff, as mentioned earlier, deployed such concept as class process to study cooperatives. To quote from RW:

What distinguishes one industrial enterprise from another, therefore is not the existence of extraction or distribution of surplus labor, or, in this case, of production of commodities for profitable sale, private ownership of means of production, bureaucracy and hierarchy, size of unit and technology used. Rather, it is the precise qualitative form in which surplus labor is appropriated and distributed. Different forms of the appropriation and distribution processes have as their conditions of existence different economic, political, and cultural processes. It is the different forms of these extraction and non-extraction processes that define different industrial enterprises and their different class structures (Resnick & Wolff, 1987 p.227).

Following RW, here we approach two different types of enterprises

with different 'qualitative forms' – capitalist enterprises and cooperative enterprises. The concept of exploitation, which is defined in terms of production and appropriation of surplus value, is important here, and cooperative enterprises are supposed to be non-exploitative. David Ruccio succinctly addresses the issue of exploitation and non-exploitation in the context of cooperatives:

...when the collectivity of workers, those who perform necessary and surplus labor, appropriates and distributes the surplus they create, we can refer to that as nonexploitation. Why? Because the Marxian definition of exploitation is when a group other than the direct producers, for example, the capitalists appropriate the surplus labor... (Ruccio, 2011, p 336).

According to the Marxian class process analysis, production-appropriation-distribution and receipt of surplus can be divided into two different class-processes – *fundamental* class process that consists of production and appropriation of surplus value and *subsumed* class process which consists of distribution and receipt of surplus value. Subsumed class processes and subsumed class payments, non-class processes and non-class payments are important as they ensure the conditions of the fundamental class process. In capitalist enterprises direct producers usually produce surplus value but capitalists who are not direct producers are the appropriators of the surplus value. Hence direct producers i.e. workers are not the appropriators of surplus value in a capitalist enterprise. On the other hand, in producers' cooperatives direct producers i.e. workers are producers of surplus value and the same workers currently working in the firm are the collective appropriators of the surplus value. In producers' cooperative workers collectively produce, appropriate and distribute the surplus value. Hence producers' cooperatives are non-exploitative. The non-essentialist, nondeterministic Marxian class process analysis follows the logic of overdetermination which does not prioritize economic processes over such other processes as natural, social or political. According to the Marxian class process analysis all these processes are overdetermined by each other which cannot be reduced to

separable one way causalities. A concrete example would be helpful here. The long standing extraordinary performance of Mondragon Cooperative Complex is well documented (Bradley & Gelb 1983). Yet moving beyond Mondragon's economic performance it is important to point out the role of different processes such as cultural processes (which create meanings) in promoting better performance of Mondragon. The Basque culture, its identity and independent nature, schools colleges and cooperative universities that are established by Mondragon are all creating cultural conditions that help sustain economic conditions for managing the Mondragon cooperatives. The logic of overdetermination, the idea of mutual constitutivity of different processes such as economic and cultural is important here in conceptualizing and understanding performance, prospects and problems of cooperatives. Moreover, the impact of *Caja Laboral Popular* i.e. the bank which was established in 1969 by the Mondragon group also provided important conditions for the better economic performance of Mondragon. Cooperative Banks can provide and ensure important non-class process for the successful performance of producers' cooperatives. The overdetermined nature of production can be read from the following lines quoted from *Capital*, Vol 1:

The control exercised by the capitalist is not only a special function arising from the nature of the social labor process, and peculiar to that process, but it is at the same time a function of the exploitation of a social labor process, and is consequently conditioned by the unavoidable antagonism between the exploiter and the raw material of his exploitation (Marx,1982 p. 449)

Focus on exploitation, anti-essentialist and non-deterministic conceptualization of the process can be well complemented by the notion of 'class-justice', which is developed by DeMartino (2003) following the Marxian class process literature. This concept of 'class justice' is appropriate here in conceptualizing non-exploitative production enterprises such as producers' cooperatives. A fully realized cooperative is, first and foremost, a test of a just and non-exploitative society. From Rawls to Amartya

Sen nearly every theory of justice has argued that a society that fails to guarantee a decent living standard to all citizens will fail the test of justice. It has been therefore argued that the desirability of cooperatives as an alternative should be tested by the yardstick of justice as it has been claimed that through cooperatives and worker-control of production it may be possible to create employment and provide a decent standard of living for the masses in a dignified way. Moreover De Martino's idea of 'productive class justice' would also be relevant here, which refers to 'fairness in the allocation of the work of producing the social surplus' (DeMartino 2003, p 8). Hence class justice is compromised under exploitative production processes. The essence of exploitation is not that something is taken away from the actual producer. Rather, it is that the producer is cut off from the conditions of social possibility that the surplus both enables and represents. Restricted to the necessary labor that sustains the worker, separated from the surplus that sustains the larger society, the worker is constituted as an individual 'bereft of a possible community and communal subjectivity' (DeMartino 2003, 16). Cooperatives may offer a way out of this deprivation and move towards realizing 'class justice' by building non-exploitative production processes. Workers in a capitalist system, on the contrary, are deprived of the possibility of politically participating in distribution of surplus because almost all 'social wealth' in capitalism is appropriated by private capitalists, who make private decisions about how to distribute 'their' wealth.

Following the logic of *overdetermination* and *mutual constitutivity* of different class and non-class processes, it is possible to develop a critique of the simplistic notion of 'successes' and 'failures' of cooperatives. We argue that good or poor outcome of the economic process of an enterprise and other processes such as political, cultural and natural mutually constitute each other. Multiple factors in an *overdetermined* way are responsible for the final outcome of that enterprise. Therefore picking up just one or two factors to explain the good or poor outcome in a causal way is a deterministic and essentialist way of analysing the issue and it is possible that the bigger picture and the nuanced story is amiss in this rush to find the essence.

Hence our approach is to present a nuanced analysis of interactions between different processes and the consequent outcome. Before going to the detailed exploration of different class processes and before proposing our approach of examining different class processes, it is important to comment on existing notion of measuring successes or failures of different organizations, or social arrangements in general. Here we argue that efficiency or simple productivity measurement or profitability figures are not enough to understand such complex processes of interactions and mutual constitutively. This is how Wolff (2012) criticizes the efficiency argument:

‘...the efficiency argument hangs on identifying and measuring all costs and benefits of either [i.e., market-driven or centrally planned] distributional mechanism. Yet that is not – and never has been – feasible. The costs and benefits of either run into an unknowable future. The project of identifying all potential consequences and measuring them in some common unit is simply impossible.’ (p 94)

To invoke the alternative perspective, Table 2 borrowed from Chakrabarti and Dhar (2008) can be helpful.

Table 2: Different forms of performance and appropriation of surplus labour

Appropriation Performance	Direct Labour (A)	Non Labour (B)	Collective Labour (C)
	AA	AB	AC
	CA	CB	CC

(Source: Chakrabarti and Dhar 2008)

In the pairs of the letters in the cells, the first indicates production of surplus labour and the second indicates appropriation. If direct labour, non-labour and collective labour are indicated respectively by A, B and C, we get a number of pairs indicating combinations of who produces surplus and who appropriates surplus. AB, for

example, indicates surplus being produced by direct labour but appropriated by non-labour, and so on. Here among all these class processes two different types of class-processes can be demarcated – exploitative and non-exploitative. AA and CC are respectively independent class processes and communistic class processes which are by definition non-exploitative, while AB and CB indicate different kinds of exploitative class processes. CB can be understood as a capitalist class process where surplus is produced by collective labour but appropriated by non-labouring capitalists. On the other hand CC is the communistic class process in which workers collectively produce the surplus value and collectively appropriate surplus value.

Here it is important to note that producers' cooperatives also fall in the category of CC which is a non-exploitative class process. We need to assess the performance of cooperatives based on this class process analysis. One way to do this is to see whether over time a cooperative enterprise is able to sustain the CC class process or not. If a cooperative is able to maintain its CC class process for a considerable amount of time then rather than calling it a success or good performance it is better to enquire what kinds of interactions with other class processes culminate in the observed outcome. It may produce a nuanced and illuminating picture of the fundamental class process, subsumed class process and non-class processes, and various interactions with different social and cultural processes that produce such a result. In a system dominated by exploitative class processes like the capitalist class process, it is not easy to establish a non-exploitative class process like CC in a cooperative enterprise. This is because other processes i.e. social, cultural processes may not be conducive for proliferation of cooperatives. Rather, the established CB type capitalist class processes have developed their conditions of existence by developing social and cultural processes according to their requirement. Also, if a cooperative eventually moves from CC type class process to CB due to various interactions with different processes then that cooperative, whatever may be its legal form, or even if it carries the cooperative tag, it would essentially entail an exploitative capitalist class process. It would be interesting therefore to find out rather than

celebrating or mourning the failure, what kinds of interactions between different processes, what conditions are responsible for CC to be degenerated into a CB class process.

Problematizing the terrain further

The Marxian formulation suggests that the direct producers of surplus value are productive workers and the enablers of this production process such as supervisors, managers, secretaries are unproductive workers (Resnick and Wolff 1987). However, there is no rank ordering of importance in this categorization of workers. Both groups are equally important for the process of production. In a producers' cooperative as well, enablers and surplus producers i.e. unproductive and productive workers must decide on the following issues together democratically. First, how much surplus value to produce, appropriate and distribute, and second, what portion of the surplus value should be made available for distribution.

The next thorny and contentious issue is exploitation within cooperatives. Is it possible for exploitation to exist within a cooperative? Many cooperatives differentiate between a worker member and a hired worker. A worker-member is entitled to all the benefits of cooperation i.e. she can vote, she would get a share of profit, she can potentially become a member of the board of directors in the cooperative, but a hired worker is entitled to none of these benefits in the cooperative. This trend is observed in many plywood cooperatives in USA (Craig & Pencavel 1992). Hence the treatment for hired labor may be similar to that of the exploitative treatment prevailing in any capitalist enterprise. Hence, if a cooperative employs hired labor, exploitation may happen even though it remains a cooperative in form. However, employment of hired labor in cooperatives is not ubiquitous and hence exploitative cooperatives in this sense are not quite common. We can summarise the desirable attributes of a cooperative from the point of view of production, appropriation and distribution of surplus value as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Marxian criteria of successes and failures in cooperatives

Criteria	Description
1. CC mode	For a cooperative to be considered as successful its ability to sustain CC mode in the long run is of critical importance.
2. Hired Labor	Hired labor should be avoided in cooperatives or should remain in check – else exploitation of hired labor may turn a cooperative into an exploitative enterprise (i.e. from CC to CB).
3. Distribution of surplus	Surplus should be distributed with full participation of the direct producers.
4. Assembly	Regular assembly is another key factor to identify a cooperative. Free and fair process to elect board members.
5. Subject-cultivation	Cooperatives may act as a non-capitalist space of subject cultivation.

In case of distribution of surplus value within a cooperative, lobbying, politicization and power – all these factors may play important roles. The issue of what portion of surplus to distribute for what purpose may become a contentious issue in a cooperative. It may be possible that a section of surplus producers or enablers forming a coalition with the board of 14 directors may influence the decision regarding surplus distribution for their narrow self-interests. Hence surplus may be siphoned off to non-labour, or to a specific group among producers excluding others, may also happen in cooperatives. Somewhat similar issues are observed in sugar cooperatives in the Indian state of Maharashtra (Banerjee et al 2001). While discussing the issue of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ going beyond efficiency and various quantitative and qualitative indicators, it is important to invoke the idea of ‘subject cultivation’ as has been pointed out by Gibson-Graham:

What is salient here is a tendency to argue from an essentialist conception of the nature of cooperatives or of

workers themselves, and from a structural vision of economic dynamics and development. Essentialist ways of thinking constrict the ethical space of becoming, obscuring possibilities of (self) cultivation and the way that cooperative practice itself calls forth and constitutes its own subjects (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p 111).

Gibson-Graham has also pointed towards 'thinking limitation' and how Mondragon offers 'an ethical vision of subject formation'. Working need not only be about production of goods and services, work or employment also has effects on workers. That is why employment relationship and organizational practices have important bearings on 'subject cultivation'. In cooperatives through their participatory roles in decision making workers cease to be a mere appendage to the system of production; they perform as a real and conscious actor in production by actively taking part in decision making, which in turn facilitates subject cultivation. Somewhat similar responses we have obtained from the handloom weavers who are members of the handloom cooperatives. Beyond income they have a sense of belongingness to the cooperatives, the pride of a skilled worker, the pride of keeping the mahajan away and performing as a member of the cooperative, which seem to be important to the weaver-members of cooperatives in Dhaniakhali, West Bengal. Hence, while discussing 'success' and 'failure' of cooperatives moving beyond economic parameters, it is important to look for the cooperatives' role in the complex process of subject cultivation.

4. The Indian scenario

While discussing the Indian scenario we would like to specifically look at the potential benefits of cooperatives with respect to the informal manufacturing sector in India. This is because the majority of workers are employed in the informal manufacturing sector in India. Table 4, which summarises different types of putting out arrangements, can help us understand the organizational structure of the Indian informal manufacturing sector. The piece-rate wage system, putting out arrangements and merchant linked exploitation – these are systems prevalent in the Indian informal manufacturing sector.

Table 4: Various putting out arrangements

Labour Capital	Self product & process	Self product Other process	Other product & self process	Other product & process
Self fixed & working	Classical artisan	X	Contemporary artisan	X
Self fixed & other working	X	X	Putting out –I	X
Other fixed & self working	X	X	X	X
Other fixed & working	X	X	Putting out-II	Classical wage labor

Source: Basole & Basu 2011.

Using these arrangements the following types of surplus extraction mechanisms can be seen in place in Indian informal manufacturing sector: (1) wage work, (2) unequal exchange, and (3) unpaid work. Wage work may be of capitalist wage relation type or it may happen under a complex putting out arrangement. Under unequal exchange petty producers are exploited by the merchants or capitalists by using asymmetric market power and other means. Unpaid work refers to the surplus extraction from women and children without even considering their 'performance of work'. Their work is devalued and in return of providing subsistence surplus is extracted through unpaid labor. Unequal exchange is carried out mainly by reducing output prices and increasing input prices by using the asymmetric market power of merchants vis-à-vis petty producers.

Table 5 summarizes how cooperatives may be answers to different modes of exploitation prevailing in India's manufacturing sector.

**Table 5: Class and non-class process,
exploitation and cooperatives**

Class actors	Class process	Exploitation	Cooperatives
Banks/ money lenders	–	Exorbitant interest rates	Credit cooperatives
Merchants	–	Unequal exchange	Marketing cooperatives
Master weavers	Wage relation hidden behind putting out	Capitalist exploitation	Production cooperatives

5. Empirical analysis of three cases

The three cases presented below illustrate three different aspects of cooperative forms of organization. The first case is about handloom weavers' cooperatives in India which were actually created in response to exploitation of weavers by master weavers or middlemen. These cooperatives are in operation for more than seventy years and CC class process is apparent. The second case is regarding Sonali Tea Estate – a cooperative which was recovered by the workers from bankruptcy and run by them well enough for years, yet after a while the capitalist owner came back and took over the producers' cooperative after winning a legal battle. External contradictions between several class and non-class processes can be uncovered through this example. The third case is about the sugar cooperatives in the Indian state of Maharashtra. In terms of profitability and economic performance these sugar cooperatives are doing remarkably well for decades. Yet the internal operation of these cooperatives, particularly in distribution of surplus, is questionable. Hence we would like to understand the issue of internal contradictions within a cooperative from the standpoint of class processes.

Case 1: Handloom weavers' cooperatives:

Handloom weavers' cooperatives like 'Dhaniakhali Handloom Weaving Cooperative' and 'Somospur Handloom Weaving Cooperative' are in operation in the Indian state of West Bengal

since 1944. They are apparently maintaining the CC class process for the last seventy years. Production-appropriation-distribution and receipt of surplus happen in these cooperatives collectively by the weaver-members. The origin of these cooperatives was important for our purpose. These cooperatives were typically formed in response to the exploitative institution of master weaver or *mahajan* i.e.a middleman-based system. These cooperatives were products of a movement against the exploitative practices imposed by the middlemen. Handloom weaving is largely dominated by the piece rate contract. Marx clearly shows the mechanisms through which middlemen can use piece rate contract in exploitative ways:

... the quality and intensity of the work are here controlled ...piece wages therefore form the basis for the modern 'domestic labor'...as well as for a hierarchically organized system of exploitation and oppression...piece wages make it easier for parasites to interpose themselves between the capitalist and wage laborer...The profits of these middlemen come entirely from the difference between the price of labor which the capitalist pays, and the part of the price they actually allow the worker to receive' (Marx, 1982, p.695).

Handloom weaving cooperatives in West Bengal emerged as a response to such oppression and exploitation of weavers by middlemen. Das (2001) and Mukund and Shyamsundari (1998) argue that master weavers usually make contract with the weavers depending on weavers' requirement. For example weavers often need consumption loans for various purposes but options for such loans are limited in cooperatives. Hence the master weaver takes this opportunity and lends money to the weaver as consumption loan and then designs the contract in such a way that the weaver can never move out of his control. Often the consumption loan is not to be repaid in cash; the weaver would have to work under the master weaver under a piece rate contract. The piece rate wage is determined in such a way that the master weaver can charge a high implicit rate of interest and depress the wage as much as possible. Whenever the weaver tries to terminate this contract and

wants to move out of the stranglehold of the master weaver the latter would ask the weaver to repay the loan in cash, which would be impossible for the weaver. Thus 'debt bondage' would continue (Arora 2010). In Andhra Pradesh where cooperatives are not in operation the exploitation by master weavers or mahajan and the phenomenon of 'debt bondage' is widespread. The history of struggle against exploitation and other non-class factors have significant influence on performance of cooperatives in India.

Table 6: Handloom from the class process perspective

Arrangements	Class Structure	Class Process
Independent weaver	AA	Independent
Mahajon/ master weaver	AB	Exploitative
Cooperatives	CC	Communitistic

In our study area independent weaver (AA) is almost non-existent. There are mainly two arrangements which are predominant – mahajon/master weaver and cooperatives. What makes independent weaver in handloom sector almost non-existent? What kinds of interactions and push and pull factors between different class and non-class processes are making it impossible for the independent weaver (AA) to stay in business? Apparently, independent weavers are likely to face difficulty in terms of both access to raw material and access to market. The choice therefore is really between the two – cooperatives and master-weaver. As a result all the different modes of surplus extraction – exploitation, unequal exchange (by offering lower output price & raising input price by the merchant/ mahajan/ master weaver) and unpaid labour (by extracting labour from women and children without paying them) are present in different degrees. Here cooperatives seem to offer a non-exploitative space, protect handloom weavers from surplus extraction through the merchant route, even though in terms of pure economic return they are no better. Furthermore it has been observed that in the presence of cooperatives the bargaining power of master weavers gets curtailed.

Case 2: *Sonali Tea Estate*⁵

Sonali Tea Estate is located in the Northern part of the state of West Bengal, India. After managing this tea garden poorly for years with unpaid bank loans, pending PF payments, wage dues to workers and with other payment dues, the actual owner disappeared by abandoning the garden in 1973. Forced by these circumstances, with the help of a union leader, workers marched to the district headquarters and three options were presented to them: takeover by the state government, takeover by the bank or takeover by the workers. Neither the state government nor the bank responded, and therefore workers took over the tea garden by forming the workers' cooperative – 'Saongaon Tea and Allied Plantation Workers' Cooperative Society Limited'. This cooperative was functional till 1978. By then, even with too many hurdles to overcome, it managed to clear all the wages due, all the PF dues, and so on. In 1979 the owner returned with an agent and through legal battles imposed injunction on the functioning of the cooperative. The court case continued for years and due to the court order the cooperative stopped functioning. Thus, even after managing the economic processes well, due to the lack of concomitant support from political-cultural-social processes the cooperative could not continue to function. This case also questions the simple notion of successes or failures of cooperatives that the adherents of the 'degeneration thesis' use while discussing about cooperatives in order to shun and foreclose the very idea of cooperation. Here again the logic of overdetermination and Marxian class process analysis is helpful in understanding and acknowledging the importance of *mutual constitutivity* of different processes.

Case 3: *Sugar Cooperatives of Maharashtra*

Sugar cooperatives of Maharashtra (Banerjee et al 2001, Baviskar 1969) are apparently successful cooperatives if we go by membership, growth, profitability etc. Yet from the lens of Marxian class process we might get a problematic picture against the

⁵ This part has been drawn on such secondary sources as Sen (1986) and Bhowmik (1988).

simplified story of profitability, growth and success. From the Marxian class process analysis a cooperative is supposed to follow the CC class schema – in which production of surplus takes place through collective labour and appropriation and distribution of surplus by collective labour as well. Yet it is important to note that contradiction between the board of directors and common worker-members within a cooperative may emerge in relation to distribution of surplus. Decisions regarding how to distribute the surplus, what proportion of surplus should go to whom, may become contentious in a cooperative. In sugar cooperatives of Maharashtra there is inequality among members of cooperatives in terms of land holding. Scholars have observed that big landholders dominate in such decisions within the sugar cooperatives. Big landholders capture the board of directors of sugar cooperatives and distribute the surplus according to their own interests in the name of *Dharmodaya* i.e. community development programme (Banerjee et al 2001). The contracts of these community development programmes are typically obtained by the friends and families of those big land owners who control the cooperative's policy and influence the decision of distribution of surplus for their own vested interest. Thus the case of sugar cooperatives shows that due to contradiction within cooperatives exploitation may happen even within cooperatives as well.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper is an attempt to develop a framework to study cooperatives in a non-western country like India using the theoretical framework of Marxian class process. Starting with the general debate on cooperatives and their potential to offer an alternative to capitalist enterprises, we make a contrast between the standard evaluative criteria of efficiency and profitability with the Marxian class process as an evaluative criterion. With the latter it has been possible to throw light on the variety of actually existing forms of cooperatives in a country like India. The case studies briefly reported in the paper are testimony to the rich variety of forms. While from a purely normative standpoint cooperatives are seen as non-exploitative forms of organization in the Marxian sense, but we have seen that in reality a cooperative

in apparent form may degenerate into an exploitative form if we look at them through the prism of class process. However, it can be argued that there is no reason to subscribe to the inevitability of the deviations from the ideal. This inevitability position has an ambiguous status in Marx's own writings. In support of Marx's pessimistic prognosis we find evidence of cooperatives facing hurdles within a system dominated by capitalist production organisations. On the other hand, there are cases of cooperatives which may not show spectacular success in terms of standard economic criteria, yet for long they maintain a fair degree of success in terms of decisions regarding production, appropriation and distribution of surplus value. Marx's prognosis about cooperatives has had strong influence on the perception of today's Marxian scholars, which is no different from the popular perception in general. The Marxist political parties in India have not had any serious engagement with this non-exploitative form of an alternative. Moving beyond the debate on the so-called viability of cooperatives this work has deployed appropriate theoretical apparatuses of Marxian class process to throw light on producers' cooperatives. Most importantly the decentered and disaggregated approach of Marxian class process literature has helped us generate a complex and nuanced characterization of different types of cooperatives.

Moving beyond the blanket understanding of cooperatives as 'alternative', 'non-exploitative' spaces of production vis-à-vis capitalist firms we have used three cases to point out the complex nature of operation of cooperatives in India. Operation of power, politics, culture and consequences of all these have been captured while discussing these three cases. From our analysis it is quite clear that non-class actors have played major roles in determining the working conditions in India and in functioning of cooperatives roles of these non-class actors are quite important in India. It is rather ironic that a lot more energy is spent on developing arguments to establish the inevitability of degeneration of cooperatives rather than working toward creation of cooperatives even when conditions are favourable to do so.

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