

# The “awkwardnesses” of aid and exchange

## Food cooperative practices in austerity Britain

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*Abstract:* Self-help and mutual aid have been at the heart of the consumer cooperative movement and its response to food insecurity since its inception. Yet how these terms are conceptualized and practiced in contemporary food co-ops often has more to do with their individual histories, ideologies, and the values of those involved than it does the history of the cooperative movement. Drawing on ethnographic examples from two London-based food co-ops with different backgrounds, this article explores how each enacts ideals of aid and exchange. It argues that the context of austerity creates “awkwardnesses” between and within personal values and organizational structures in the face of inequality, leading to blurred boundaries between different models of aid and exchange and the forms of moral accounting that these entail.

*Keywords:* austerity, cooperative, exchange, food, humanitarianism, mutual aid, value

One Saturday afternoon at a quiet moment, an East African man came into Fareshares, a vegan wholefood cooperative in southeast London. He told Alison and me (two white European women), who were working the shift, that he was “a little bit homeless at the moment” and asked if we could give him any crisps or other food. Alison explained that it was a volunteer-run project and a cooperative, so we could not offer him anything on behalf of the collective. As neither of us had any cash on us, unfortunately we could not buy him anything with our own money either. After he had left the shop, Alison looked troubled. She was clearly torn between her personal humanitarian desire to help the

man, and the responsibility of being a collective member to do right by the food co-op. Not only did she feel that we could not make the decision to give away food on behalf of the collective, she was also worried about the impact it could have on the finances at Fareshares (a nonprofit co-op) if it became known as a place that gave out donations, therefore setting a precedent for a charitable form of aid (Graeber 2011: 110–111) that diverged from Fareshares’s organizational model.

At the end of the shift, we had two loaves of bread left. We acknowledged that we could have suggested that the man came back at closing time. Alison looked around the street for him,



but could not find him, so we agreed that we would each take a loaf home unless we saw him after leaving the co-op. Just a few doors down we did, and he seemed happy enough to accept the bread. Alison finally looked satisfied that we had been able to do something to help him without compromising the co-op, its finances, or its ideology.

The story raises questions about notions of aid and reciprocity within the cooperative model and within Fareshares itself. Since the Rochdale Pioneers first came together in 1844 to found one of the most famous consumer cooperatives in British history, the concepts of self-help and mutual aid have been at the heart of the cooperative movement and its response to issues of poverty and access to safe and affordable food. By pooling their time, resources, and efforts, the Pioneers were able to buy food in bulk for the mutual benefit of all the co-op’s members, therefore helping themselves and each other. Within this ideology, everyone was perceived as needing help, but also able to give it. The interaction between collectivist ideals of self-help and mutual aid configured the relationship and power dynamics between aid givers and receivers very differently to the more common philanthropic and humanitarian practices of the time, which typically reinforced these hierarchies (Kropotkin 2014: 179). In Peter Kropotkin’s words, this simultaneous role of giving and receiving was a means of bringing “the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own” (ibid.: 8).

Like the Rochdale Pioneers, Fareshares’s form of cooperative contained elements of self-help and mutual aid, albeit differently configured to the Pioneers in some ways. This raises questions about how such concepts play out in an era of growing inequalities, in which charitable practices are increasingly being invoked in response to the consequences of austerity—a “policy dogma” that “aims to change social formations and re-evaluate the worth of people’s lives” (Rakopoulos 2018: 2).

In this paper I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2017 with

two London-based food co-ops born of different eras and ideologies—Fareshares and St Hilda’s East. I explore the ways in which each conceptualized and negotiated practices of aid and exchange, along with the tensions and disparities that could arise within and between organizational logics and personal values in the face of inequality. One of Fareshares’s founder members, Martin, described these tensions as “awkwardnesses.” I build on Martin’s term here, focusing on those with decision-making power, as they are the people who were, in principle, able to reinforce or adjust the practices of each co-op. They were also the people who most commonly felt and had to deal with the different forms of practical, ideological, and moral negotiation between aid and exchange and the revaluation of people and things that these awkwardnesses engendered.

### Food cooperatives and austerity

Cooperatives have often been a compelling model through which to redress imbalances in power, improve workers’ rights, provide consumer access to necessities, or simply weather the storm at times when capitalism’s cracks start to show (Rakopoulos 2020). The financial crisis of 2008 was no exception, catalyzing resistive responses to neoliberal capitalism and austerity, while rejuvenating interest in alternative economic practices premised on solidarity, mutual aid, and cooperativism (see, for example, Rakopoulos 2014 on Greek anti-middleman food co-ops).

This highlights the cooperative’s long-standing role as a counterpoint to capitalism. Marcel Mauss, for example, a longtime consumer cooperative member, saw cooperation as a means of change from within the capitalist system, in which reform “is and will be made by a process of building new groups and institutions along and on top of the old ones” (Mauss, in Hart et al. 2010: 8). Meanwhile, more recent theorists engaging with alternative economic visions, such as Gibson-Graham (2006), focus on activities that

can be said to sit outside the dominant capitalist economy in some way, including cooperatives.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, the cooperative is not immune to reproducing and reinforcing capitalist labor relations and inequalities (Kasmir 1996), or from more overt corporate co-option (Rakopoulos 2020). They can also get entangled with other ideologies and political agendas, becoming technologies of government for more disadvantaged communities rather than the egalitarian enclaves that many grassroots groups or social movements would wish for them to be (Rakopoulos 2020). In the case of British food co-ops, these became a policy focus for both New Labour and the Conservative Party as part of their respective Third Way and Big Society agendas in relation to community engagement, nutritional health, social inclusion, and food insecurity.

Within the constraints and challenges of global capitalism and neoliberalism, co-ops can also become amorphous and ephemeral (Vargas-Cetina 2005). British food co-ops can range from loose associations of friends or neighbors, running buying groups together to access certain kinds of food more affordably, to vegetable box schemes, shops, and weekly fruit and vegetable stalls run in community spaces—all with different structures, ideologies, and relationships to capitalist enterprise. Many of these projects call themselves cooperatives “even when they are structured and operate following very different principles from those supporting classical cooperatives” (ibid.: 229). This highlights the ways in which the internal structures of a cooperative can be determined by the wider social, political, and economic environment in which it operates as much if not more than by strict “adherence to cooperative rules and principles” (Nash and Hopkins 1976: 15). As a consequence, both the financial models that food co-ops use today (some generating profit, others not) and their relationships to self-help, mutual aid, capitalism, or, indeed, cooperation itself can vary significantly, as is demonstrated by the examples of Fareshares and St Hilda’s East explored here.

While the UK saw a groundswell in grassroots food co-ops following the financial crisis

of 2008, many of these have since ceased operation or changed form. Their ephemerality has been exacerbated further by a period of austerity in which inequalities have grown substantially while funding opportunities have become scarcer, and humanitarian impulses around issues of food access stronger.

In the wake of the financial crisis, many European and North American governments implemented austerity policies that aimed to reduce national deficits through harsh public spending cuts, the efficacy of which has since been critiqued (Blyth 2015). These processes reinforce existing forms of social stratification within countries, while eroding social cohesion and drawing a widening socio-economic group into precarious living conditions (Rakopoulos 2018). The forms of moralization that accompany austerity in relation to national spending, collective responsibility for belt tightening, and deficit reduction can also lead to the financialization and revaluation of everyday lives, feeding into the measurement of individual worth. This creates tension between ideals of egalitarianism, collective burden, and inequality (Rakopoulos 2018: 2; Powers and Rakopoulos 2019: 5). As the welfare sector becomes hollowed out and outsourced to business, charity, and the voluntary sector, these valuations can also produce moral discourses of deservingness in relation to limited welfare resources (Koch and James 2020).

As others have acknowledged, austerity is neither a new thing nor specific to Euro-America (Rakopoulos 2018). Instead, it is connected to a broader global picture of financialization, structural adjustment programs, and neoliberal reforms, which form part of capitalism’s accounting system (Powers and Rakopoulos 2019: 4; see also Bear and Knight 2017 on financialization). Nonetheless, contemporary British austerity has its specificities. This got underway in earnest after the election of the Conservative-led coalition government in 2010. It entailed more aggressive restructuring of a welfare system and public sector that had already been substantially reduced due to the UK’s early adoption of neoliberalism and minimal welfare protection,

which began in earnest after Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979 (Koch and James 2020: 3). Combined with growing precarity in relation to work and housing conditions in Britain, this has led increasing numbers of people into multiple forms of insecurity. In 2016 the UN’s Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights went so far as to suggest that the country’s austerity measures could be in breach of its human rights obligations (Booth and Butler 2018).

Within the public consciousness, food became a particularly potent symbol of the extreme inequalities evident in Britain since 2010. By 2017, more than eight million people were thought to be suffering from food insecurity (Lambie-Mumford 2017). This catalyzed a massive expansion in emergency food schemes, ranging from food banks to surplus food redistribution initiatives, typically coordinated by third sector organizations. These are usually premised on charity rather than exchange, therefore representing a very different model to the cooperative. Due to the “humanly graspable scale” (Malkki 2015: 9) of food insecurity by comparison to many other humanitarian crises, people often feel that they can actually *do* something about it by giving food or time spent volunteering (Poppendieck 1998), therefore fostering heightened humanitarian sensibilities in relation to food issues. Inevitably, this changing landscape of food aid, combined with a growing crisis around food access, has had an impact on food cooperative practices, leaving more space for the kind of awkwardness that Alison experienced. In the following sections, I explore in turn the ways in which this landscape has impacted practices of aid and exchange at Fareshares and St Hilda’s East food co-ops and the different valuations of food, people, and models of aid and exchange that these have necessitated, along with their awkwardnesses.

### **Ideals of mutuality**

Fareshares was set up in Elephant and Castle, southeast London, in 1988 during the Thatcher

era by a group of anarchists, leftists, and squatters. In line with the countercultural food projects of the 1960s and 1970s, it was a place to buy wholegrains, organic vegetables, and fairly traded and vegan products, while also practicing alternative politics. Social anarchism, collective ownership, reconfigured economic relationships, and nonhierarchical organizing were fundamental to its political ideology, along with the rejection of wage labor and profit. When Fareshares started, organic, fairly traded, and vegan goods were not easily accessible in the UK and were often prohibitively expensive. Many of the people who got involved with Fareshares were also on low incomes. By providing more affordable, “ethical” goods, Fareshares therefore fed the food needs and the ideologies of the local activist and squatter community of which it was a part, while reinforcing a sense of collectivity. As well as serving this group of like-minded people, there was a desire from the very beginning for the project to be a resource for the wider neighborhood. Fareshares, therefore, chose not to have a prescriptive membership model. Unlike a consumer cooperative which is open only to its members, in principle, anyone could shop and socialize at Fareshares or get more involved by becoming a volunteer.

The shoppers were also expected to pull their weight, bagging and tallying their own goods and cleaning up anything they spilled while weighing out what they wanted. They were encouraged to offer spare change, stationery, and other resources to help keep the project running if they could not offer time to volunteer. This was intended to create a different sense of connection, solidarity, and “communal exchange” (Gudeman 2008: 39) between those selling and buying the food co-op’s stock—stock that should be seen as a mutual resource, just as the space itself was. The shoppers’ participation in these transactions reconfigured the relationship between sellers and buyers, along with the conventional capitalist roles that each performed. All these practices were part of Fareshares’s performativity as an anti-capitalist space and a means of building forms of trust and sociality,

all of which are fundamental to the practices and values of mutuality (Gudeman 2008).

At the time, Elephant and Castle was a run-down inner-city area known for large housing estates and low-income households. Today, the area is undergoing rapid regeneration and gentrification. Despite the influx of more affluent city workers, however, it is still diverse in terms of income, ethnicity, and race. This diversity is represented to some extent in the people who shop at Fareshares, and the volunteer-members are ethnically diverse but majority white. They choose to volunteer for many different reasons, ranging from access to more affordable organic and fairly traded goods to environmental concerns, leftist ideology, or a combination of all of these. While I was at Fareshares, few of the co-op's members worked in well-paid, full-time jobs. Instead, some were freelance, others worked part-time in anything from retail jobs to the gig economy, and others still received various forms of benefits due to physical and mental health issues.

Tensions around charitable giving have been a part of Fareshares since the very beginning, as Martin, one of the founder members, recalled:

I guess it was always one of the regrets and awkwardnesses of running a strictly nonprofit organization . . . you couldn't give things away. You couldn't say that things were free because it was going along with the idea that it's not yours in the first place and you're just paying cost price for what they want. You've got no way of saying "oh have this for nothing because I know you are in a difficult position" . . . there wasn't a mechanism for collectively authorizing people to take what they needed when they couldn't afford it, which I didn't like . . . You could give everything away, but you could only do that once because it's effectively the same money coming back week after week that you were buying the next lot with, and that's the beauty of it, but it only works if it does come back.

Martin's comments reinforce the ideological belief that the co-op and its goods were a form of commons, belonging to everyone involved, but also to no one. Viewing them as belonging to no one and to everyone worked to "neutralise" their capitalist qualities (Müller 1991: 25). This non-alignment with the dominant capitalist narratives about the value of food formed part of Fareshares's performative work by creating spaces for alternative practices and ideals (Vivero Pol et al. 2019: 2). Yet the co-op was reliant on capital if it wanted to keep going, and its capital was tied up in its stock. Fareshares's goods, therefore, had to have a fixed exchange value for the project to be sustainable. This commensurability inevitably ran the risk of driving out other, more social and moral values (Pratt and Luetchford 2013: 189), however, putting the relationship between mutual sharing and market commerce into tension, and thus highlighting the dialectical relationship between exchange premised on social ties and forms of mutuality and more impersonal forms of trade, which simultaneously oppose and overlap each other (Gudeman 2008).

At the other end of the spectrum sits charitable aid, which again revalues the goods and people involved in more hierarchical rather than egalitarian ways. In the context of austerity, this tension raises questions about who benefits from Fareshares's model of mutuality today and who gets left out—to return to Kropotkin's words, whose "rights" are considered and whose are not. As John O'Neill points out, mutual aid depends on a "rough equality of vulnerabilities" (2018: 112), and through its acknowledgment and the mutual support that it engenders, this form of vulnerability has the scope to be resistive (Butler et al. 2016: 1) and performative as a different form of social organization and a model of responsibility, aid, and community. A compulsion to be charitable disrupts the model by introducing a vision of aid that "does nothing to enhance solidarity" (Mary Douglas, in Mauss 2002: x) or foster mutual ties. These unequal charitable relationships can slip back into forms of paternalism, in which one's own vulnerability

is forgotten and replaced instead with perceptions of vulnerability as weakness and passivity that requires more hierarchical forms of support (Butler et al. 2016). To give things away, therefore, would not only challenge the finances of the food co-op, but also revalue those involved in the exchange. Not giving, however, highlighted one of the tensions of mutual aid in relation to equity, while creating an irreconcilability between Fareshares’s politics and practices and Martin’s personal desire to help. Herein lies a key awkwardness for Fareshares in the face of unequal needs.

### Doing something

While I was at Fareshares, many of the volunteers were concerned with austerity and its consequences. For some, this showed the strength of mutual aid, and for others its cracks. For example, when I asked Kellan, an anarchist, non-binary<sup>2</sup> punk and long-term volunteer-member at Fareshares, about the project’s politics, K put the food *co-op* into contrast with the food *bank*. K told me, “you’re not giving things to people in a very one-way traffic basis and it’s not based on pity or largesse or paternalism or anything else. It’s not a hierarchy in that sense.” Yet as a long-term benefit recipient due to ill-health, Kellan had no illusions about the fact that not everyone would be able to afford the prices at the food co-op, highlighting tensions between Fareshares’s ethos in relation to typically more expensive ethical goods and the needs of people on lower incomes in the area.

Critiques such as Kellan’s, which engage with the differences between solidarity and charity, are not uncommon in activist circles. In austerity-stricken Greece, for example, Theodossopoulos (2016) and his research participants faced a dilemma about the implementation of food bank-style aid schemes in response to the crisis. Some suggested, on Marxist grounds, that these reinforced the status quo rather than challenging it. Others argued that “you cannot stay passive and do nothing” in times of crisis, believing

that such political arguments are “an excuse for inaction” (ibid.: 176).

For some at Fareshares, volunteering there was also seen as a means of *doing* something by improving access to more affordable, healthy, and “ethical” food in an area that was still diverse in terms of income levels, race, and ethnicity. Yet like Kellan, such volunteers were also aware that beyond the bulk sacks of wholegrains, many of the goods stocked in the food co-op would be inaccessible to people on very low incomes.<sup>3</sup> In informal conversations, for example, Holly, a more recent volunteer, often raised questions about how the co-op was, could be, and should be serving the local community, although she came to no conclusions. Indeterminacies around these issues persisted throughout my time at Fareshares, and for many volunteer-members, their time and headspace was taken up with the already-challenging job of keeping a nonhierarchical, nonprofit project running while managing busy lives and personal precarities, making it more challenging to find long-term solutions to such a thorny issue.

In the moments when members were forced to face the awkwardnesses that disparities of need created, however, solutions had to be found, often leading to individualized, “piece-meal fixes” (Forbess 2020). While Alison turned to surplus food, a strategy that sat comfortably within her own values and did nothing to undermine the co-op’s finances or logics in relation to exchange, others found different workarounds. In the early days of my fieldwork, for example, I spoke to Ava about the issue of trust in relation to shoppers bagging and tallying their own goods. She told me that there was one regular shopper who she and her shiftmates were sure was stealing from the shop. They chose to turn a blind eye, however, as they were aware that he was struggling financially. Although this approach avoided the discomfort of confrontation and the vivification of ideological conflict between a humanitarian compulsion to help and an organizational ethos that disallowed charitable aid, it was clearly not ideal for the food co-op’s finances.

During Martin's time at Fareshares, he also found his own solutions to these dilemmas, as he explained:

It's the back side of the coin of not being able to turn people away or restrict what they buy because you have a strong suspicion that they're really well heeled in the same way that you can't really let people who you have a strong suspicion are having a relatively hard time of it economically take things for nothing or half price . . . the way to do that is to make it clear that you are buying it for them. You are personally sustaining the loss, it's not the project . . .

In moments of encounter that rendered these inequities and the accompanying awkwardnesses more acute, switching hats between collective member and individual citizen enabled volunteers to negotiate between the structures of the co-op and their own values. Inevitably, these individualized and piecemeal fixes sidestepped rather than addressed issues of inequality, however, despite a desire for an equitable society and food system. In doing so, they also blurred the boundaries between mutual aid and humanitarianism, and the differing logics of collectivity and individualism, solidarity and charity, and the hierarchies contained in each.

### **The value of surplus food**

If Fareshares's starting point was more closely aligned to an ideal of mutual aid, St Hilda's Food Co-ops' model was more humanitarian.<sup>4</sup> The community center itself was founded in 1889 as part of the British settlement movement, which set up "colonies of learning and fellowship" (Scheuer 2011) in poor urban areas in which working- and middle-class people came together. Rejecting a charitable model, which they believed to be purely palliative, the settlers were confident that education, interaction, and instilling working-class people with the "moral,

spiritual, and aesthetic values" that capitalism's emphasis on economic concerns had denied them would improve the project's working-class subjects (*ibid.*). Although St Hilda's no longer subscribes to this nineteenth-century logic, much of its work still centers around supporting people in the same area where the settlers were based, and engages with issues of deprivation, diversity, and inclusion. The council tenants living in a local cluster of social housing called the Boundary Estate are a particularly important focus for the community center's services.

As well as the food co-op, the community center's projects range from advice services to volunteer placements, support for older people, a crèche, and youth and women's projects. Like Elephant and Castle, Shoreditch, where the center is located, is undergoing a process of gentrification, meaning that despite the high levels of deprivation in the area, the full extent of it can feel hidden. The Borough of Tower Hamlets also houses the largest Bangladeshi diaspora population in England, and many of the center's activities are tailored toward this community, highlighting the ways in which inequalities can often be drawn along racial and ethnic lines.

Like Fareshares, St Hilda's also has many features that distinguish it from the classic consumer cooperative model promoted by the Rochdale Pioneers. As Jenny, the food co-op coordinator, and Rupert, the community center's director, readily acknowledged to me in our discussions, St Hilda's weekly food stall was not exactly a "proper" cooperative, as it lacked the membership structures and decision-making practices associated with the model. While Jenny felt that many of the volunteers did feel a sense of ownership of the food co-op, this was not formalized in any way with membership or meetings. Instead, it was a project within the broader structure of the community center (a registered charity). It had its own paid coordinator (Jenny), who was an employee of the center, and relied heavily on volunteers to keep the project running. Like Fareshares, St Hilda's Food Co-op was a nonprofit project; here, however, this financial model had more to do with

affordability and access than anti-capitalism. Instead, the co-op ran on funding, which paid Jenny’s wages, while also covering volunteer training sessions and other expenditure. Anyone could shop at the co-op without having to become a member or make decisions about how it was run.

As she came from a workers’ cooperative background, the principles of cooperation and mutual aid were still a part of Jenny’s own values. She, therefore, attempted to foster a sense of ownership and autonomy among the volunteers by creating situations in which they would support and teach each other various tasks. She also encouraged them to make autonomous decisions about some aspects of the day-to-day running of the food co-op to foster a greater sense of shared time, labor, and care among participants. However, to have a *sense* of ownership, as opposed to full membership with decision-making power, is clearly somewhat different. Here, the volunteer role provided the right to support and education from the center rather than the right to make decisions, or, indeed, the potential obligations or pressures that can come with doing so.

In terms of the volunteers themselves, they came for many different reasons. One of the most common was a need to improve employability by gaining work and (at times) language skills and by accessing various forms of training, such as food hygiene certificates. For some of the Bangladeshi mothers, in particular, this could be a stepping-stone into work after either being out of the job market for some time due to parenting responsibilities or having never been in it in the UK. For others, volunteering had more to do with community, social bonds, and belonging—finding a space to feel a part of something, engaging with a wide range of people, and feeling more connected to the neighborhood.

When I asked Zina (a volunteer who came to the food co-op through a collaboration with a local housing scheme that provided employability and volunteer opportunities to its residents) what a food co-op was, she told me, “when you hear co-op, that’s about the community, isn’t it?” Sandra, another volunteer who was not working

at the time as she had young children, explained that:

because it’s volunteer run it’s a lot friendlier and everyone is within the community, because people who come by are generally people who live around the area. You’re more likely to talk to them because you’re not just staff in a supermarket. I think that’s nice, and it’s nice to see how the co-op is run.

Zina and Sandra described the interactions and forms of exchange taking place at St Hilda’s in terms of sociality and connectedness, and as with Fareshares, these were put into contrast with less personal forms of economic activity, such as buying from the supermarket.

When I asked Jenny to define what the food co-op was, she started by suggesting that it was there for the community, a “community service,” before explaining that she did not actually like the word “service” but could not find a better one to try to explain what the food co-op did. It certainly was not a business, she suggested, as it did not work for profit, but it was very much about community and about volunteers. The notion of a “service” with “service users” (another term that she resisted) sat in opposition to Jenny’s own ideals of a more egalitarian, volunteer-led initiative in which people from different backgrounds (including her and the volunteers involved) worked collaboratively to keep the project running and to support each other as needed. Instead, the notion of service users (which, although used in the voluntary sector, is often associated with public services and welfare provision) works discursively to define the relationship between professional care providers such as Jenny and those who benefit from such support. It reinforces the binary and hierarchy between the two, distilling these relationships down to issues of *need* rather than acknowledging the diversity and complexity of identities and motivations for being involved with the food co-op (McLaughlin 2009).



By attempting to support the local community through access to more affordable fresh fruit and vegetables, which customers paid for, St Hilda's also contrasted with the forms of food aid or charity apparent in projects such as food banks. Rather than offering free food parcels to its customers, the food co-op worked within the "commercial process of shopping," which, as Lambie-Mumford points out, "defines food experiences in the UK today" as the "socially recognized way in which people acquire food for themselves and their families" (2017: 58). As such, it is premised on customers who exercise their own personal choices rather than on the acceptance of aid. It therefore lacks some of the stigma attached to having to accept one's own poverty and need for help (ibid.: 57), or prove deservingness of emergency food aid, which again reinforces the hierarchical relationships of charitable aid and the moral judgments that can go with it.

Issues of charitable feeding also came up here and raised various questions about the value of food and of different forms of aid. While St Hilda's offered aid by providing support to volunteers and affordable fresh fruit and vegetables to the local neighborhood, it was also regularly singled out as an aid recipient by a range of actors including its own suppliers, supermarkets, and food charities that donate food surplus to a range of community food schemes. Although St Hilda's had no intention of becoming a food bank, such donations could still make sense within its logics. The community center was also working hard to balance its books, so free produce for the Older People's Project's lunch club or other projects in the building was well received. It could still cause "awkwardnesses," however, when the nature of the transaction was called into question.

When I first started with St Hilda's, one of their vegetable suppliers, Community Food Enterprise (CFE), would regularly bring us food donations, such as tinned soups with short shelf lives or day-old supermarket breads, as they had connections with various food surplus initiatives. These were usually sold at around 10 pence per

tin or loaf, and always went down well with the customers. Shoppers from the Older People's Project were particularly enthusiastic, as many of them enjoyed soup, soft white bread, and a good bargain—and it definitely was a bargain rather than charity from their perspective. Over time, other produce started to arrive, such as sacks of onions and potatoes. Jenny often gave the chef in the Older People's Project first dibs on these. The rest was then sold at the food co-op for very low prices, such as 25 pence per kilo, making each onion worth one penny or less. This elicited surprise from some of the customers as their goods were weighed up and the prices rung through at the till, and for others there was, again, the sense of getting a good bargain.

One week, two large boxes of oversized courgettes (zucchini) arrived with CFE's delivery. As Karim, the driver, was unloading the food co-op's order for the week, he explained to me that CFE had picked the courgettes up from a nearby farm as part of a gleaning initiative, whereby leftover crops were collected from commercial farmers if they could not be sold to supermarkets. Some of these were then redistributed to the community food projects that CFE worked with. After I had relayed this information to Jenny, she started to think about how we should price them, feeling very aware that we had received the giant courgettes for free. In the end she decided that we should let customers decide how much they wanted to pay for them.

When the weather was good enough for the stall to be outside, as it was on this day, we tended to have a little more footfall, and this included some of the more affluent residents of the area. I noticed that Jenny did not always mention the option to donate when pointing the courgettes out to our regular customers. Instead, she asked if they wanted a few before placing them in their shopping bags, and these seemed to be received happily. With those who appeared more affluent, we all tended to mention the donation. This proved awkward for many of the customers, as they were unsure how much to give. They were keen to check the numbers with us even though we did not have a fixed price in mind either and

did not feel particularly comfortable suggesting one. In the end, many opted for around a pound, which in relation to the general cost of items on the stall was a lot of money.

If the need for a fixed price at Fareshares and the rigidity that this could create was the cause of many awkwardnesses there, here it was the deviation from the equivalence of goods and money, which also challenged the equivalence of the people involved with the exchange (Graeber 2011: 108). The introduction of these free foods called into question the nature of the exchange for those told about the option to make a donation—who was in need, who was helping whom, and what constituted a fair price for these goods. While we, as food co-op coordinators and volunteers, were unsure what to charge for something that had been donated to us, those told they could pay what they wanted did not know whether to respond to the offer of oversized courgettes as customers receiving a bargain, service users making the most of what was on offer, or patrons offering donations to a project generating revenue for the community center. This uncertainty over the forms of accounting of people and things involved in the exchange (*ibid.*: 89) led to discomfort for all involved.

The introduction of these goods also created a valuation and differentiation of different customers. While the food co-op framed itself as “an enterprise where friendships are built across diverse cultural and social backgrounds” (St Hilda’s East Community Centre n.d.), with a desire to be inclusive and accessible to all, it also had a clear idea of who its services were tailored toward and a strong awareness of the ways in which the demographics of the area were changing. This was reflected in Jenny’s understanding of the customers most in need of the community center’s services, which in this case came in the form of free courgettes. As a consequence, she shifted between modalities of exchange (Graeber 2011: 113), each with its own logics and moral principles. Jenny’s actions in relation to whom to give the courgettes to for free sat within the food co-op’s commitment

to its funders around food poverty and access to affordable fresh fruit and vegetables. Yet they also involved the often “dominant logics” of service provision in relation to identifying deservingness (Koch and James 2020: 3). The following week, Jenny decided to drop the donation entirely and just give the vegetables away, which became the standard practice for all donated vegetables from this point onward. This highlights the awkwardness between the more equitable and solidaritarian notions of mutual aid to which Jenny felt a connection and the model of exchange (rather than donation) and open access on which the project was founded. As such, it revealed the diverse and, at times, competing logics by which the project ran, as well as the ways in which encountering differing levels of need can create awkwardnesses between potentially contradictory logics and equally complex personal values.

### **Avoiding awkwardnesses**

Not long afterward, supermarkets started to invite the food co-op to take their surplus food as part of their corporate social responsibility schemes. When this first happened, Jenny had to think carefully about whether to accept the offers, as this could lead the food co-op into a very different territory in terms the models of aid and exchange it employed. While deciding, she spoke to the advice worker at the center to get the latter’s thoughts on the arrangement. The advice worker seemed to think these offers could be a good thing, provided they were not a resource that people came to rely on. Jenny could also see the potential benefit to the center and the food co-op’s participants. Equally, the co-op still fell within the constellation of food insecurity alleviation schemes in terms of its aims and the kinds of funding it sought, which at this time engaged specifically with food poverty.

Jenny’s first pickup provided a bumper selection of tins, bags of grains, and other packaged items. While some of these went directly

to the chef of the Older People's Project's lunch club, others were portioned off for the center's advice project, which ran at the same time as the food co-op. The rest went onto a table in the food co-op, with a sign that read "FREE for local community. Please Help yourself" [*sic*], therefore sticking to the idea of equal rights of access. Many people who shopped at the food co-op did take a tin or two irrespective of their means, and again, they seemed to see this as a perk rather than "aid" or "charity." Some of the members of the Older People's Project were particularly pleased to get some freebies. The free table, therefore, acted as a common resource within the community center, extending its mutual ties through communal sharing (Gudeman 2008), while avoiding any awkwardnesses born of unequal needs.

Implementing a free table helped to avoid the stigma of deservingness and diverse levels of need, as well as a significant deviation from the project's operational logics caused by singling people out. As such, it pushed back against the increasingly dominant model of food aid that has taken hold in the UK since 2010 by framing the foods it stocked as either goods for sale or perks that anyone visiting the food co-op was entitled to take. Nonetheless, not long after the arrangement had started, Jenny told me that on occasion, if she knew someone was particularly struggling financially, she had invited them to go into the store cupboard to take what they wanted from the selection of supermarket goods. This meant they did not have to face the stigma of others seeing that they were in need—which could have arisen if Jenny had offered them goods more publicly—or the risk of appearing to take more than their fair share of a common resource if it was on the free table. In doing so, she simultaneously employed two different logics of apportionment (Gudeman 2008: 39)—one alluding to universalist values of equal access and the other to the identification of greater need. This again highlighted the complex negotiation at play within her role between the more egalitarian ideals of a volunteer-led project coordinator, the professionalized re-

sponsibilities (and hierarchies) of service provision, and personal humanitarian desires to help others.

## Conclusions

Political-economic change has long been a catalyst for food cooperative activities, and at the heart of these practices is the desire to build some form of supportive community, while making food more affordable and accessible to selves and others. The models that food cooperatives adhere to and their relationship to self-help and mutual aid can vary substantially, however, depending on the history, institutional ethos, practices, and the values of those involved. Although an ideal typical cooperative model is premised on egalitarianism, solidarity, and respect (Kasmir 1996: 125), ideal types are just that—ideal. Nonetheless, engagement with such models can be beneficial in analyzing and understanding the lived reality of cooperative forms and practices (Nash and Hopkins 1976: 13), elucidating their complexity and mutability, as well as the distinctions between cooperative ideology and praxis, which often become evident through ethnographic engagement (Rakopoulos 2020).

Kasmir (1996) demonstrates a key example of this in her classic study of the Basque workers' cooperatives of Mondragon, arguing that cooperatives have long engendered forms of social stratification despite ideals of egalitarianism. How these processes work is, inevitably, context-specific, reflecting and at times reinforcing wider social, political, and economic structures and forms of hierarchy rather than necessarily succeeding in sitting outside of them. As Rakopoulos (2017: 5) points out, cooperatives are not only immersed in their localities, they are also constituted by their participants' experiences, and these are shaped both within and outside of the cooperative. These diverse values, agendas, and moralities add to the complexities and contradictions of the cooperative, as well as its relationship to aid and exchange.

At both Fareshares and St Hilda's, the dynamic between a desire for egalitarianism, the meaning and value attached to the goods in each project, and the flexibility of the organizational model in relation to price and need all contributed to the creation and avoidance of awkwardnesses. At Fareshares, the social and ideological values of the collective determined the exchange value of the food itself. To deviate from a fixed price risked destabilizing aspects of the food co-op's performative work as an anti-capitalist project premised on mutual aid and also had the potential to impact on its financial sustainability. But by sticking closely to this model, some people's needs were recognized more, while others were excluded. This was an awareness that sat particularly uncomfortably in moments of encounter in which such disparities had to be addressed, therefore leading to “piecemeal fixes” (Forbess 2020). At St Hilda's, the arrival of surplus food also challenged the project's organizational practices, while raising questions about the appropriate valuation and apportionment of goods. Again, this caused tensions between notions of equal access and rights to the foods on offer and an organizational ethos and project funding that focused on people on lower incomes. This led to different valuations of foods and people, and accompanying forms of moral accounting.

In contexts of austerity, where needs and access to basic necessities can become all the more unequal, there is much space for the kinds of awkwardnesses elaborated here, in which values relating to mutual aid and egalitarianism are put into tensions with evident inequalities of need. As grassroots projects and third-sector organizations come to fill in the gaps left by the withdrawal of welfare, the personal attitudes and values of those in key positions can “make a mark on the ways the organizations are structured and function” (Vargas-Cetina 2005: 230). Many within such organizations have deeply held beliefs about equality and inclusion (Koch and James 2020: 12), yet they find themselves navigating situations and structures that make it hard to find ideal solutions to issues of in-

creasing inequality. Within the distribution of (often-limited) resources, ranging from food to housing, advice, care, or other forms of aid and support, grassroots and third-sector organizations are forced to negotiate between the immediacy of need and complex (and at times contradictory) organizational models, ideologies, and personal values (see, for example, Forbess 2020; Garza 2020; Koch and James 2020; Theodossopoulos 2016). Inevitably, it can be difficult to find a “moral balance” between these competing values, logics, and needs (Garza 2020: 3), therefore leading to blurred boundaries between different forms of aid, and the values and hierarchies inherent within them.

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## Notes

1. Marx was more ambivalent, however. While he saw the potential of cooperatives to build the new out of the old, he also felt that they reproduced some of the issues of the old system (Rakopoulos 2014: 202).
2. Pronouns K/K's.
3. Even some of the member-volunteers that I spoke to could not afford to buy many of the higher-value items, such as olive or coconut oils.
4. Here I allude to the older meaning of the term as attempting to “remake the world so it better serves humanity” (Calhoun 2008, in Redfield 2012: 457), as opposed to simply offering aid that accepts the status quo of inequality.

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