"We have always been in crisis"
An ethnography of austere livelihoods in Northern Portugal
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Everyday Futures? Resources of Hope
Beyond the Livelihood Crisis

The social revolution cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future.

-Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, 1852
This chapter focuses on an informal solidarity food production and distribution network in Guimarães that became formalized into a cooperative in 2014. I will freely admit that going into the fieldwork of this thesis project, I was expecting to find spaces of solidarity and mutual aid that went beyond both the networks of family and kin and the positionalities outside the confines of age, class, race and gender. I assumed that the shared exposure to downward mobility, exploitation, state-led regulation and structural violence would empathetically bond people together. As I hope has been evident throughout this thesis, however, few if any active social or political movements were present in Guimarães and I was dismayed to find this to be the case. In fact, the organic farming coop was the only 'alternative' response to the crisis of livelihood that I found. The coop was the only group of people that attempted, and sometimes managed, to find a different way of social reproduction.

The case of the coop therefore allowed for the exploration of something that I did not otherwise find during fieldwork: hope and the possibility of contemplating the future as a positive endeavour. In the case of the farming coop, we have a group of people that face the same livelihood crisis as the protagonists of other chapters and the crisis articulates itself through many of the same structural inequalities, exploitations and misrecognitions. However, the affective, social, and political responses that coop members construct and actively sustain differ substantially from the hopelessness, affliction, and absence of a future I have highlighted so far.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was baffled by the apparent incommensurability between the ways that the families of Lara, Elvira and Maria struggled to find meaning beyond everyday hardships and the apparent ease with which others, like the protagonists of this chapter, claimed it. This was baffling because, the protagonists of previous chapters are related by blood to some of the protagonists of this chapter, inhabit the same semi-urban periphery of Guimarães, and, just as the families of Maria, Lara and Elvira, rely in part on agriculture in order to make ends meet. It was also baffling because all of these people were engaged with the livelihood crisis. Yet this engagement seemed to have completely opposite results for the coop versus my other informants, i.e., in the way it made possible the construction of future visions, social reproduction and political projects. Nor did this discrepancy seem to exclusively derive from people's respective class positions.

Here, apparently, was a group of people that, unlike all their peers, colleagues and family members, managed to manipulate the open-endedness of a crisis situation in their favour. Yet they were not the kind of intentional community often described for middle class people who 'return to the land' (Brown, 2002; Luis, 2018; Wallmeier, 2017). Rather, they are people who, in their majority, never left the land in the first place. And yet, despite so many others who never left the soil, they had a forward-looking, nourishing vision that contained both the seeds for hope and a possibility of pulling others into this project. How was this possible? How could so many people be facing the same livelihood crisis and have such disparate economic, social, affective and political responses to it? In foregrounding these questions, this
chapter concretizes both my concern with the resources necessary to make struggle possible, and my assumptions about solidarity.

As Rakopoulos (2014) has fruitfully suggested, local responses to global crisis offer us a view of austerity and economy from below. Anthropological knowledge can benefit from studies of these projects because, in explaining how peoples’ activities are extended beyond food production and distribution, they shed light on the imagination of modes of political, social and economic conduct as well as on how they are different from those currently dominant. Therein, we may uncover not only moralities, values, and meaning-making processes, but also notions of what should be economic relations, public space and shared responsibility. In the context of the crisis of livelihood and the varying responses by local populations, there is an analytical need to apprehend how people make sense of their livelihood and relate their practices to politics and the macro-economy.

Alternative Social Reproduction During Crises

Since the most recent financial crisis, the formation and rise of grassroots cooperatives and other community supported food production and distribution networks during critical periods of capitalist recession have received much study, particularly with regards to the Greek crisis (Arampatzi 2012, Knight, 2015). In the US, these provisioning networks encompass a wide range of blueprints and principles, such as community supported agriculture, with its creation of direct links between urban populations and rural farmers (REF). Meanwhile, in Spain and Italy, the degrowth and slow food movements are underwritten by a will to rethink the economy and ecology of capitalist consumption (Cattnaeo & Gavalda, 2010) and embrace socially and environmentally just food production systems (Petrini, 2007). The French AMAPs (Associations for the Preservation of Peasant Agriculture) encourage advance planning and financial support to local crops (Lamine and Perrot 2008) and have found increasing interest across Portugal (Harper and Afonso, 2016, Luiz and Jorge, 2011, Ginn and Ascensao, 2018). Most recently, this interest has culminated in the formation of AMEPs (Associação de Manutenção de Economia de Proximidade) in Porto and Lisbon, aimed at contributing to a sustainable consumption lifestyle and the establishment of socially close circuits of economic exchange.

The cooperative in Guimarães is run by a group of four farmers who are the primary producers and distributors of local, organically grown food stuffs: vegetables, fruit, cheese, eggs, marmalade, canned items, herbs and bread. They sell their produce at a weekly farmer’s market at rates far below retail prices but also offer “box deals” in return for volunteer work at the farms. Strictly speaking, coop members are defined by a loose affiliation with the farmers in that they are either regular volunteers with individually agreed volunteer hours and remuneration in
kind, or regular customers who have agreed to take a box of produce every week. However, none of these agreements are formalized in any way. In practice therefore, volunteers often end up paying for their boxes when they cannot find the time to volunteer, and customers with standing orders negotiate holiday breaks or their box’s contents to be reduced or increased as they require.

Such loose arrangements differ from the often rigid buying-guarantees implemented in many consumer coops throughout Spain and France (Homs, 2019a). It has been suggested that purchase guarantees are necessary for farmers to be able to meaningfully plan their growing cycle and that the absence of such guarantees leaves producers prone to the whim of unreliable consumers (Grasseni, 2013, Homs, 2019a). However, the coop in Guimarães implements none of these guarantee systems: consumers do not agree to anything in writing and even standing box orders aren’t formalized in any meaningful way.

Organizationally, in the middle of every week, an excel sheet with available produce comes online and consumers with standing orders can check off what they want to receive. Assembled boxes are readied the morning of market day and collected and paid for at market. But again, this arrangement is fluid and members who cannot make it to market day frequently collect their boxes during volunteer times or at the homes of producers. Moreover, on market day, produce is also on sale to the wider public. The market is in downtown Guimarães and accessible to anyone, so that by lunchtime farmers usually sell out of whatever spare produce they had not committed to box orders. Farmers’ vulnerability to capricious coop members is thus reduced by the sheer demand on their produce. At the same time, consumers, too, have little guarantee of the quality of the produce—farmers are not officially certified, do not own a business, and have no procedure for complaints or reclamation.

The coop and its members are therefore accountable to each other in purely moral and social terms. In her recent monograph, Grasseni (2013) has described Northern Italy’s Solidarity Purchase groups (GAS) as “economies of trust”, which are premised on “participatory certification” rather than the application of the abstract evaluations propagated by national and EU legislation (183). Shared trust is produced by emphasizing co-production, which couples trust and solidarity among socially bonded people. Although in Grasseni’s case, some accountability is formalized, I hope to show that a similar argument can be made for the Guimarães cooperative. The Guimarães alternative emerges, just like the GAS, in the context of a wider breakdown of trust in institutions, the economy, and the state and is aimed to re-invent confidence on the basis of mutual aid and collaboration.

The relationship between food producers and consumers is thus fluid, for one because they are trying to reinvent everyday provisioning in participatory and socially just ways by establishing dense social networks. For another, farmers also trade among themselves, and a deep network of favours and personal associations complicate the trading map further. Based on the number of customers and volunteers that either buy food or trade labour for food, my best estimate is that the coop contributes to the food income of approximately 150 households. This is not to say...
that these households live exclusively off the coop’s produce, but rather that they rely on its foodstuffs to differing extents in making ends meet.

In the analysis of alternative provisioning networks in social science, two general trends can be distinguished. Drawing on Polanyi, Lukacs, and Mauss, one strand has attempted to underscore social and economic solidarity networks, especially where they relate directly to immediate social and economic exchange as attempts to re-embed local economic action within a social field (Grasseni, 2013). These projects are then read as opening up a place for struggle in the interstices of the capitalist accumulation and exploitation drive (Amin, 2009; Burke and Shear, 2014). Because they foreground basic human needs over those of the market, neoliberal capitalism and accumulation, this first trend has tended to interpret these developments as positive *sui generis*. The second trend has remained distinctly more critical, drawing on more classical Marxist analysis to show how capital is able to co-opt many attempts at social reproduction into the logics of expanded reproduction and accumulation by dispossession (Galt, 2013; Hadjimichalis, 2014; Rakolpoulos, 2013, Narotzky & Homs, 2019). Attempts at social or solidarity economies might then be viewed, at best, as partial perspectives that misconstrue the objects involved in the capitalist project as counter-hegemonic, resistance alternatives (Narotzky, 2007), and subsequently fail to apprehend these action’s contribution to sustaining the system of accumulation.

In the following, I draw on both of these interpretations to show that in the everyday discourses and practices of those involved in the local food production and distribution network in Guimarães, both visions combine in admittedly contradictory but also often fertile ways. Coop farmers and consumers understand their work as “the good” in both the present and the future. To the farmers, their work goes beyond the immediate social givens, beyond what is concretely available to them in social, economic and political terms. Their work extends into something that must be imaginatively conceived: a desired future for which they are attempting to set a precedent. In order to study what the coop does, and why it works, we then need to be attentive to the pre-existing social, political and economic circumstances that structure their abilities. But we must also, and perhaps more so, highlight the way people act based on orientations that outstrip what is concretely present and available to them. Doing so implies neither dismissing their ideals as utopian or illusionary nor giving them carte blanche to create or sustain structural inequalities. It is not that attempts to develop different forms of social reproduction cannot remain concomitant to capitalist forms of relation and exchange, reflect its institutional order, or be put to work as ideological projects that support exploitation. Rather, it makes a difference whether one’s everyday working life is essentially a continued exposure to expanded reproduction and systemic violence, or is encompassed by rearing the vegetables one will have for dinner. I suggest taking seriously for the time being these everyday actions and the meanings derived from them, and especially the hope implied in them.
From Food to Politics

My involvement with the cooperative falls into a distinct moment in its development, because my arrival coincided with an increase in the frequency of farmers’ markets from bi-weekly to weekly, largely in part due to an increased demand for the farmers produce. In respond to the demand, the coop was in a period of self-definition and a self-ascription of purpose. Looking back over my three-year involvement with them, my arrival there was a seminal one: not only were the best practices developed in the production, distribution and marketization of produce that still stand today, but this concretization of ideas was also accompanied by an unusual amount of discussion, debate, and formalization of ideals and practices.

Before the coop was formalized, there was already an informal solidarity network with a similar set of objectives to those of the current coop. This dates back to 2005, before the financial crisis and austerity, and, at that time, it was conceived of mainly as an anti-intermediary, anti-commercial food production network that aimed to bring producers and consumers together. As the network grew, coming to involve more volunteers and consumers but no new farmers, formalization seemed required in order to manage supply and demand, structure exchange and hopefully generate enough income to remunerate some of the work that had up till that point only been volunteer-based.

As a project, the coop really took off with the onset of austerity. Ligia, one of the farmers explains the turning point: “We suddenly had a very clear link from what we do, from food production and distribution to the big economy… so suddenly solidarity seemed the obvious choice”. In this sense, the financial crisis and austerity that followed it, were an occasion of opportunity for the coop.

The coop’s stated aim is the just production of food and its distribution among spatially-close individuals without the incision of non-productive intermediaries. The method is the creation of a “direct link between people, their needs, wants and waste” and the refusal of “the complacency implicated in capitalist social relations”, as their leaflet states. The desired outcome is an economic network that is more socially and environmentally just and inclusive. It is a network that extends beyond the realms of food and into the wider society, “reclaiming spaces for solidarity that have lately been foreclosed”. During the constitutive phase, discussions on best practice food sharing were virtually always paralleled by visions to create new hegemonic worldviews. These were thought to exist beyond, but not necessarily outside of neoliberal capitalism, because they aimed to highlight a different set of values and moralities that those pushed in the logic of expanded reproduction. “Care for the planet, care for each other, individual and collective well-being, and social and labour rights are all things we can grown alongside the food” (Domingos, FN). Coop members thus actively imagined their purpose as inspired by larger aims than the immediate significance of their material relations, and, as we will come to see below, derived a future vision, meaning and personal worth from this attempt at an alternative.
The particularities of what was rejected or supported varied greatly from farmer to farmer and derived mainly from each one’s lived experiences and personal perceptions. Renato, Ligia, Domingos and Raquel are the four active farmers of the coop who illustrate the coop’ diversity of opinions. Renato’s motivation to be a farmer and practice socially just exchange is the result of a deliberation to simplify his life. This attempt to make his world smaller in order to effect meaningful change within it is also a tendency I found among coop members almost without exception. Renato’s driving force originates from his exposure to the politics of a municipality in which he was employed for many years and how he had to deal with its networks of corruption, clientelism and gossip.

For Raquel, on the other hand, the simple injustices of market-driven redistribution are cause enough. She bases this opinion largely on the history of her family which, like so many in the region, has combined wage labour in the textile industry with agricultural work for subsistence and sale in order to make ends meet. Raquel’s great uncle (her grandmother’s brother) is the now deceased husband of Sra Maria, who we met in chapter one. Raquel’s grandmother was a daughter that was kept “in-house” (compare Brettell, 1989, 1991) by her parents32 and required to bring her husband there. In return, she was exception-ally granted a majority share of the inheritance. This is the land Raquel still farms today. Raquel’s great uncle, the deceased husband of Sra Maria, received the other inheritance share when he married. Sra Maria and Raquel’s farms are thus neighbouring each other.

For Ligia, who has a long history in the anti-fascist movement, it is state repression, the police and injustice that are the primary things to be rejected. Domingos locates his motivation in both personal reasons and political conviction: “it’s about creating just ways for people to be together in different ways, as much as it is about fair pay and fair prices for environmentally just food” (FN Ligia, October 2015). Interestingly enough though, these various positions all result in the same alternative: a cooperative agriculture and food production-distribution network.

Additionally, as a group, they remain caught up in uncertainty and their critical reflections on collective organization both generally and in the case of their own particular attempt. They have a vague idea of what they want the final product of this project to look like: it should be grounded in modes of economic conduct with a model of social interaction structured by fairness and should certainly be different from other currently dominant systems. They also have a concept of how to attain this outcome in the present via environmentally just food production and socially just redistribution. However, their vision of the coop as a project with sig-

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32 Compare chapter 4 on multigenerational households. Well into the 19th century, and again today, households in the Vale do Ave were often multigenerational, comprising at least a stem of three: Newlywed wives frequently moved into their husbands' ancestral homes, and were subsequently expected both to work the husband's family land, care for their elders and bear children. However, due to the extent of male emigration, there is a parallel trend of 'keeping' daughters 'in-house' and requiring them to bring their husbands (Brettell, 1989, 1991). In the cases where they remained at home, daughters were exception-ally granted inheritance rights to land and property; this was an offer taking the place of an other-wise hefty dowry. As a result, there existed both a local history of female peasants' property inheritance, and a close association of women with agricultural work.
nificance extending far beyond the immediate impacts of their economic actions into political and social realms, remains vague.

Despite this uncertainty of their future, these farmers glean a sense of purpose from their pursuits that virtually all other people I worked with are acutely lacking in. What makes farmers different? In both cases, people live off the land, but apparently with quite contradictory results. The meaning that these farmers possess and others seem to lack, is, to me, most directly related with the connotation of farming and living off the land with something that belongs in the past. Hailing from a time when the farm was the only locus of a household’s subsistence, living off the land is reminiscent of the physical suffering and hardships people endured before and during the onset of industrialization. As a result, having to rely on farming to make ends meet is today still seen as a symbol of poverty, dirt and backwardness; perhaps it is even seen as a symbol of returning to a harsh way of life believed to have been long overcome. Coop members however see this distinctly differently: they understand their work as partly inspired by a political and social vision—the attempt to create a different and better way of being together in the present. But they are also distinctly aware that current technological advancements have altered even ecological farming in such a way that it requires only a small fraction of the physical suffering that it used to in the past. They use modern irrigation and fertilizing technologies; rely on the internet and data processing to manage food orders, market stalls and shared production outcomes; and have generally, it seems, managed to reclaim the growing of food as a source of pride rather than shame.

This is why, despite the doubt, concerns and multiple meanings that farmers associate with the coop, the one thing that they all, and most their affiliates, can agree on, is that what they do constitutes an act of ‘resistance’. Most commonly, they use the term with reference to the immediacy of social relations. These are seen to foster the kind of relations among people that once used to be the common everyday help between neighbours. This everyday help is generally perceived as having disappeared, especially in the city centre, with the onset of increased tourism and gentrification. In reinitiating these relations, farmers view themselves as resisting the logic of an economic system premised on individuality. But they are also, crucially viewed in this way by their volunteers, peers and the wider community.

Moreover, reclaiming farming from the association with dirt and poverty and re-signifying it as “the good” came to symbolize the capacity to survive of the local population—their ability to withstand crisis—and is therefore a symbol of pride. “The good” was here used in the sense of a political ideal of autonomy and the desired future outcome that was already made possible in the present through socially just distribution. As we will come to see, the future vision propagated by the coop’s daily practices thus came to be the key marker of its local political and social significance.

These visions of resistance and autonomy are rife with contradictions, however, and some these contradictions will form the skeleton on which the rest of this chapter is fleshed out. While farmers envision the coop as a viable alternative for food production and distribution in the present and future, they also derive an income from it. Certainly, the origins of the project were just as much informed by the attempt to make
ends meet as they were by visions to create a more just society. This raises important questions about farmer’s social and political positionality, problematized by the reference to “suffering” in the next section, while also pointing to the limitations of their approach in challenging or transforming the status quo, explored below. However, suggesting that farmers should provide food for free is also idiosyncratic and, in fact, the cooperative is one way in which farmers have been able to remunerate in cash and repay in goods for the work of what had previously been free family labour. Food production and distribution as an attempt to rescale political action and find a different way of social reproduction, as well as the complicated enmeshment of this project with the livelihood crisis, warrants closer examination in the final section. Throughout, I focus on the farmer’s self-conception of creating a viable and inclusive future project in order to discover what this tells us about their ability to recast the crisis of livelihood as an opportunity that is able to pull a wider population in.

The Conditions of Possibility for Struggle: Privilege and Strategic Discourses of Suffering

In order to pre-empt the often romanticized celebration of solidarity economy projects that forget the economic, social and political conditions that have facilitated their emergence, this section considers the positions of class, race, gender and status of coop farmers and theorizes these as the background conditions of possibility for their struggle. Simply put, the point is to show that who the farmers are defines the reason for what they do that works for them. Subsequently, this analysis will call into question the possibility of replicating this project in different contexts.

It is a cold and dewy November morning when I arrive, several hours ahead of everyone else, to one of Domingos’ two farms to interview him about his life story, and to volunteer a few hours of my time. He takes me past an old rickety farmhouse structure with a scaffold holding up its roof on one side in the back. This is the house in which Domingos’ mother worked as a domestic servant before meeting and marrying his father, a well-known pulwood cutter and timber trader who had become a widower with small children at the age of 45. They met at the Magusto, an annual event honouring the beginning of chestnut season that, by coincidence, is also the event we will be celebrating with the coop today. They married the following summer when his mother was 20 years old, and Domingos was born two years later. Upon the demise of the farming family for whom Domingos’ mother had worked, his father bought the farm and put it in his son’s name, so that he too could inherit property and not merely the children from his first marriage.33

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33 so called „doações“ (bequeathments) made at the time of death were often a way in which peasant households recognized illegitimate or children from later marriages as legal heirs—a wise action in a region characterized by high rates of illegitimacy and maternal death (Brettell, 1991).
After collecting walnuts to sell at the next Saturday market and chestnuts to be cooked during today’s Magusto celebration, Domingos and I sit wrapped around cups of hot tea in the farm’s espigueiro which is the only structure with a functioning roof. Domingos recounts how, since this property became officially his at the age of 18, he has used it as collateral for various business ventures: first, as a textile management and distribution company similar to the petty entrepreneur’s middle man above, and then, after the bust of the garment sector in the early 2000s, as an ecological vegetable farm with eco-tourism apartments located nearby:

I didn’t get much from my father in terms of assets—a farm with a few fruit trees, and a farmhouse unfit for habitation. What I did get however, was an early and stringent education in business and managing finances […] I don’t abide by his imperative on profit maximization… But it was him who taught me how to build up, slowly slowly, a business from very little, such as an organic farm and eco tourism with only a tiny, worthless farm that no bank would want to repossess for security.

Domingos thus inherited from his father a certain start-up capital that, although he considers it materially negligible, still set him apart from other young men his age. It permitted starting a business directly after finishing secondary school, without the need to first seek waged employment as a means to accumulate collateral. The generational transfer of property here emerges as an important demarcation in the production and sustenance of wealth in a manner very similar to that highlighted for familial care. What is more, Domingos also inherited social capital in that his father was a well-regarded, seasonal
employer around town, whose kin warranted respect. Although Domingos was not his first-born son and immediate heir, he benefited from his father’s reputation as a fair-minded businessman and, as we shall see, was able to use this reputation to his advantage.

Domingos’ skills and knowledge in business management, both inherited and accumulated during his professional career, constitute a crucial factor in the coop’s daily functioning and long-term operational planning. During strategy discussions, for practical problems or during emergencies, coop members turned to Domingos for guidance and plans of action. When during 2016 the annual rainfalls failed to arrive until December, and all the coop members ran out of water in their reservoirs and wells, it was Domingos who negotiated the permits necessary to tap into the local rivers and groundwater. He also devised a water management strategy that, introduced step by step over the next three years, would allow the collection and storage of enough winter rainwater to survive an additional two months of draught. Part of the reason Domingos is the coop’s go-to person when it comes to problem solving likely lies in his calm, confident character which many members perceive as a resource of seemingly unwavering optimism. But Domingos is resourceful in more than one way.

Back on the farm, a light rain is falling and in the packed espigueiro, most people are huddled around the fireplace, where chestnuts are roasting on the coals. A noisy discussion is underway between Domingos and two men his age, fuelled it would seem by both indignation and the água ardente\(^{34}\) that has long since replaced tea as the main beverage of

\(^{34}\) água ardente: lit. "burning water", referring to contraband, illicitly distilled alcohol (moonshine) widely produced from seasonal fruit, most often peaches or plums in people’s homes and farms
choice. One of the men is a customer of the coop and an old business acquaintance from Domingos’ time in the textile business, the other is a fieldhand occasionally hired on Domingos’ farms. Their heated debate started when Domingos proposed that the customer show more solidarity for the coop by using his *conhecimentos*\(^{35}\) (connections) with the municipal market authority to arrange a stall for the coop there, from which they could sell their produce. He went on to propose that such a stall would be a win-win situation because the field hand needed more work than Domingos could provide at his farm and was willing to manage the market stall for remuneration in produce as opposed to cash.

Initially, the customer flatly refused, citing official channels for such demands. However, after some lengthy arm twisting and several mentions of deals Domingos cut the customer’s smaller firm during his time as export manager, and several favours owed to his late father, he agreed to try. Only a week later, Domingos was happy to inform the coop that his efforts had paid off and the coop was now allowed a stall inside the municipal market building during the weekly market day. In this instance, Domingos relied on his personal network from the time he ran a successful enterprise as well as on his father’s clout, to advance the coop’s agenda.

Unlike other members of the coop and, indeed, many of the people I worked with, Domingos has at his disposal a good amount of social and cultural capital deriving from both his family background and previous career. During the *Magusto*, Domingos mobilized this network of both weak and strong social ties to aid the coop. His personal sphere of influence over people to which he is tied both in semi-formal labour relations (i.e. the fieldhand), or via loose networks of trust and favours (i.e., the customer), come to be transferred to the coop as assets that can be turned to in times of need. That Domingos is able to oblige non-coop members to help the coop out underlines the size of his personal clout. The wider social network of friendship and acquaintance, *conhecimentos*, here emerges as crucial in determining the politics of responsibility, accountability and ethics in a provisioning system (Lomnitz & Scheinbaum, 2012).

Although, as I highlighted above, farmers hail from a variety of different professional and social backgrounds that divergently motivate their participation in the coop, a common feature, besides their desire for an alternative, is their relatively comfortable middle class family background. Tracing their family histories and life trajectories, it becomes quickly obvious that, with the exception of Raquel, none of the producers come from what might be termed a traditional farming background. Renato is the only child of two pharmacists, who, although they were the first in their family to go finish secondary school and college, are definitely not member of the working class anymore., Ligia’s mother is a divorced public servant living in a shared house with her sister, an unmarried primary school teacher. While Ligia’s father was in fact employed in a textile factory, he left the family very early, and her mother has always encouraged Ligia to finish high school and go to college. Only Raquel comes from a farming family.

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\(^{35}\) *conhecimentos*, lit. connections with people: a term used almost exclusively to refer to a person’s vertically oriented social networks that can be activated or manipulated to achieve a certain aim
As we have already seen, Domingos had inherited the assets to build two businesses, whereas Renato and Ligia are set apart by their education. Both are university graduates, having entered tertiary education at a time when it was free of charge and state-administered funding were widely available (Lopes, 2017). They were thus able to take advantage of a very particular, short lived moment in the extension of the Portuguese welfare state. That they were able to do so was due mainly to their families, and their ability to make legible the educational and social reforms occurring at the time, so that their children would benefit from them. In this ability to understand and subsequently use institutional reforms to their advantage, the families of Ligia and Nuno stand apart from most the working class households discussed so far. A similar pattern is true for Raquel, who was the first woman in her family to achieve a higher level of education than the compulsory minimum. Born in 1974, she did not get to choose her own degree or field. But the fact that she was not simply married off after completing the legally required minimum of school years—as had happened to her two older sisters—was understood by Raquel and her mother as a major achievement.

I was also surprised to find that most coop members maintain a lifestyle, or at least an expectation of a lifestyle that is congruent with middle class status, despite the relatively small financial returns that the coop yields. This positionality is perhaps most clearly visible in the consumption habits and expectations of comfort that many coop farmers continue to hold. As classical studies of consumerism have highlighted, the role of class and status in consumption is not so much a question of content, as a matter of the conspicuous nature of this consumption. Correspondingly and in spite of their stated attempts to escape the confines of materially dominated constructions of identity, coop farmers are often preoccupied with seemingly trivial questions of style, consumption displays, or even fashion. Between Ligia and Renato, especially, it was often a contentious issue where to go for dinner and lunch, whether it be to the well-known Mangare Restaurant in the town centre, where more formal dress would be necessary and they could be seen by others, or to the university cafeteria where rubber boots are a welcome attire. A similar discussion took place with regard to where to shop for clothing, wine and all the other things they cannot (yet) self-provision.

Albeit with varied intensity, all coop farmers use goods to represent their self-conception, underlining that they relate to objects in a not merely instrumental but symbolic mode. Despite their expressed will to dissociate from capitalism, they routinely engage in an expression of their practical lives not only by what they need for existence but in some sense as a symbolic reflection of their perceived place in the world. Despite their ‘return to nature’ stance, culture seems occasionally to win out. In the case of some, this may be because consumption and the material displays associated with middle class status continue to be important signifiers in their personal cosmologies, as with Ligia’s choice of where to shop and eat. In the case of Domingos, a possible explanation may lie in that way public displays of status make possible the mobilization of networks in which Domingos is “someone”, whereby the continuation of this mobilization hinges on keeping up appearances.
Notably, when confronted with this analysis and the problematics arising from it, farmers never tried to deny or downplay their privilege. Raquel gives us some sense of the way a farmer’s relative privilege becomes a topic in strategy discussions:

the way I look at it, I know I am well off. But I also work super hard, so hard. Every night I fall into bed, my back aching, my head spinning with all the things I need to remember tomorrow. Like any other farmer I wake up at night worrying about the weather, the drought, the crops, the animals because that is still my livelihood. When the weather is bad, I work harder. Like a peasant, I wake up at 5, I am at work 12 hours of the day. But yes, I am privileged. But to me, that is not a reason not do this. […] The thing is, I can afford to do what others cannot, to break my back to grow organic food and sell it for fair prices. Because if it fails, I won’t starve because my family has money. And in the meantime, I think to myself that the real question should not be if I am well off, but how we can use what we are able to do to extend this privilege… to eat organic food, to make just and fair prices, how we can extend it to others. And we do do that.

Privilege is not denied and downplayed but countered by reference to their ability to use it for the better by doing what those who live day to day are not able to do: construct an alternative that may be able expand the circle of privilege and care to include more people than those already well off. In support of this statement, it should be noted that all produce sold by the coop at market is considerably cheaper than the equivalent of a non-organic variety in one of the big supermarket chains, and about the same price as the varieties sold by not-organic farmers at the municipal market. Herein, this coop differs from many comparable community-supported agriculture projects. Although they offer their produce at below retail prices, coop farmers still earn more than they would if they sold to large industrial distribution networks. This factor is crucial in determining the sense of fairness and inclusion among farmers and consumers. At the same time, these prices also assure that the organic alternative is just as accessible and affordable as other food stuffs in the region, meaning it is available for the many.

However, while coop farmers are certainly required to engage in back-breaking labour in order to sustain their livelihood, I would also suggest that the comparison with ordinary farmers, or, at a more extreme angle with peasants, is a mere ideological construction. It is quite common for all the coop farmers to highlight their relative deprivation: the poverty wages gleaned from selling produce, their farms barely breaking even, or the absence of worthwhile profit. Certainly, coop farmers are marginal in some ways: except for Domingos, they practice organic farming without certification, because they lack the funds to cover the costs for bureaucratic certification; they own small to medium pieces of land, sometimes with the ownership titles unclear; or rear regionally traditional breeds of animals or fruit trees. But insisting on their relative deprivation while also conspicuously consuming seems a contradiction in terms. What then, prompts such statements?

“Deciding to be an organic farmer is basically condemning yourself to a life of hard work and poverty” is Renato’s often repeated lament and a statement most coop farm-
ers echo. The phrase is intriguing for two main reasons. First, because it highlights a choice that is available to coop farmers between wage labour, coop farming or other income generating strategies; a choice that has not traditionally been available to peasant farmers. Secondly, the phrase also works to place coop farmers at the receiving end of both physical and structural hardship. Notably and as I hope to have made clear throughout this section however, while embracing the physical suffering of farming, coop members do not think of themselves as disenfranchised.

In content as in function, claiming the hardships and suffering of “being a farmer” is highly reminiscent of claims to authenticity made by various marginalized groups in their quests for recognition. Coulthard (2014) and Simpson (2014) for example have shown how designations such as ‘native’ and ‘indigenous’, albeit previously understood as insulting due to their proliferation by colonial settler states, can come to be embraced as categories of self-definition by the groups they describe. This is especially the case when these categories allow for the advancement of claims to these very settler states and their institutions. In the defence of native political autonomy and the continuation of traditional forms of provisioning, the liberal state’s own categories come to be used as assets for claim-staking. Without embracing these categories as their own, Coulthard summarizes, the language of indigeneity as suffering and dispossession are nevertheless used in strategically chosen encounters. This is the case, because these permit the advancement of demands that would otherwise likely be dismissed (Coulthard, 2014: 29). Performing suffering and victimhood are then not equivalent to being defined by them.

I would suggest that a similar mechanism is at work in the coop farmer’s attempts to represent the habitus and imagery of the hardship and deprivation commonly associated with the peasant life. Born out of the need to portray a strategic image of self that is structured by ‘authentic suffering,’ self-representing as disenfranchised peasants, more often than not works to the advantage of coop farmers. The successful encapsulation of such imagery is sustained by the popular recognition of peasanthood as a particular and socially known type of suffering that existed in the past. These observations do not do away with the hardships coop farmers face in their livelihood, but allow us to complicate their self-representation. That their work is incredibly hard and can be compared with historically-rooted associations of farming with dirt and poverty thus facilitates the finesse of farmers’ self-conception in distinction with other forms of autonomy endeavours—a fact that will become highly relevant in the upcoming section on recognition, emotional and affective labour.

Partial Visions of Transformation and Resistance

Appreciating the class positions and privileges that facilitate the conditions of possibility for coop farmers to actualize their alternative might also be reconceived as speaking to a larger, highly modern trap of life within contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Examining exclusively distribution-centred cooperatives in post-crisis Athens, Rakopoulos (2014)
has suggested that labour is the missing link between, on the one side, politically-motivated theoretical discussions of solidarity and autonomy and, on the other side, cooperativism as a practice to achieve them. Similarly to other parts of Europe, recent literature on the social and solidarity economy in Portugal has embraced “social entrepreneurship” as a “machine for growth without being bound to the state” (Borbosa & Fereira, 2015: 63) and applauded the “resilience” of coop forms of organization (Perante, 2014; Barthel, Parker and Ernston, 2013). A similar argument can be made about the coop, insofar as the way farmers understand their labour and their environmentally and socially just distribution mechanisms as the core features enabling solidarity relations in the present.

What this celebratory analysis ceases to mention however is that the will to an alternative reifies the very response to systemic crisis that institutional clout ostensibly demands: the production of self-reliant, allegedly ‘autonomous’ individuals who can be trusted to organize for their own survival without addressing demands to the state. Coop farmers certainly embrace hard, back breaking work and narrate their will to do so as the core feature that enables this very alternative. But, much like overburdened households, they do not see their actions as contributing to the upholding of an entire system.

If work is hard in normal times, it becomes even more demanding in times of difficulty. When Raquel experienced a crisis at her farm due to some blunder by a field hand and requested Renato’s assistance, he and Ligia would go and help out there for 3 additional hours a day for 10 days in a row. Their workday was thus 16 hours long. Mutual aid and co-dependency in the form of support to fellow coop members marks both a crucial feature in the coop’s ability to cope with hardship and a considerable burden to individual members. Overburdening is not purely a crisis or mutual aid response however.

Renato estimates that in addition to the average ten hours a day he spends at his own farm, he also commits three to six hours per week to manage the coop and its activities. Every week, two coop members are in charge of the management. This includes using an online system to reserve the necessary space for the farmers’ market, oversee the incoming orders from local restaurants and print order slips for the assembly of vegetable boxes to be picked up by consumers at market. The task is unpopular because the operating system is prone to crash and long nights in front of the computer after an already exhausting day at the farm are often the result. For Ligia, the youngest and newest members of the coop, the strain is especially noticeable:

My body took months to get used to the exertion. My back still aches every single day and probably by the time I am 40, I will have a hernia or two… but then, it doesn’t end there. At night, I still have to sit and fight with the technology, when already I am tired, nervous, in pain.

For Ligia, as for everyone, the task of being an organic farmer is exacerbated by the daily running of the coop and the demands on time, mood and mutual support that the ties to other farmers in the coop demand. These are daily, rather than exceptional moments in which the functioning of the coop rests on members’ ability to overexert their physical and emotional capacities beyond that which they consider reasonable. Because
the coop is willing and able to absorb difficulties, hardship or dips in the production or the market at the expense of their own income and reproduction—ultimately even at the expense of their bodies and sanity—they are able to internalize risk (Homs, 2019b).

Like the downwardly mobile households of the previous chapters, coop survival, just as family survival, hinges on the ability to routinely strain the body and mind, staying alert in an assiduous manner. The willingness and capacity to intensify self-exploitation as a way to continue or perhaps even to further surplus value production then emerges as the core feature enabling the coop's success and sustenance—its 'resilience'.

At the same time of course, in sustaining the project, members also sustain their own livelihood and future vision. But in doing so, they are finding their lives, their health and well-being consumed by the coop. Despite the scepticism and questioning the requirements of supply and demand therefore, coop farmers continue to operate within that very same logic. Many of the structural problems I displayed for downwardly mobile, over-inhabited households in general and petty entrepreneurs in particular also hold in regard to the farming members of the coop. What is more, while farmers rely on anti-market and anti-intermediary rhetoric to situate their work and life at the centre of socio-economic and political transformation, they still sell their produce and their lives remain absorbed by what is essentially work. As with household members overworking to make ends meet, coop farmers too are finding their work and autonomy project at the centre of their lives. The contradiction between the personal dedication to a political ideal and the absorption of life by the attempt to realise this ideal is not solved.
Moreover, as with the petty entrepreneurs, sustaining one's own livelihood project not only takes a direct emotional and physical toll but also happens to be highly useful for the state as it withdraws ever further from the responsibilities of social reproduction. The coop's conviction that what they do is "a good alternative for resistance" albeit one firmly located in running the coop as a company, works to highlight this problematic. Like Elvira, coop members are challenged by the micro managerial tasks necessary to keep production and distribution running. Like the other households, the unpredictability of the future and inability to meaningfully plan one's own time has tangible pathological effects on mental health, while self-exploitation directly impacts physical well-being. All this while remaining self-reliant because independent of state assistance. In sum, coop members suffer many of the same afflictions already highlighted in the previous chapters.

What is more, the affective dispositions necessary to maintain the project in dependence on others not only produce anxiety, depression and stress but also place a demand on the farmers' mood and demeanour. As Domingo's case exemplifies, the success of the coop is contingent not merely on the use of physical exertion to bridge the gap between what is attempted and what is achieved but also hinges on a wide array of emotional and affective labours. Of course, in order to make their project viable, farmers have to engage in back-breaking labour, but, independent of how much of this they do, their success still depends on the successful maintenance and mobilization of their social and affective bonds with each other. The practice of seeking and maintaining conhecimentos, as well as the successful transfer of personal networks to the coop as assets, requires certain behavioural norms to be met and affective labours to be performed.

This dependence on productive and affective labour in almost equal measure is part of a larger European, capital-centric trend and its institutional initiatives that have pushed working people to express emotional attachment to what they do for a living (Hochschild, 1983; Muehlebach 2011). This "neoliberal conflation" (Danzelot, 2008: 253) of affective and productive labour is visible for most who suffer the livelihood crisis but becomes significantly more profound when comparing the experiences of coop farmers with that of petty entrepreneurs. Farmers, in spite of their afflictions, at least claim to freely choose and enjoy their livelihood, whereas the petty entrepreneurs must perform conviction and "love for what they do" in order to attain credit, secure orders and in general maintain the conditions of possibility for their petty production. Whether it is in the politeness that keeps paying tenants happy, the willingness to flirt with potential clients, or the maintenance of networks of trust and favour, it appears that the conditions of possibility for social reproduction under "actually existing neoliberalism" increasingly depend on the subjects' ability and willingness to perform affective labour and emotional devotion.

I want to suggest that, within this framework, it might be possible to read coop farmers insistence on their hardships and suffering as equivalent to those of peasants. Farmers perform discursive, emotional and affective labour in their self-representation to others by calling on historically rooted associations of farming with dirtiness, poverty and...
deprivation to connote their suffering. Although far from structuring the living reality of coop farmers, this self-representation works to establish them as fitting within the registers of victimhood available to the liberal state institutions. Discursively positioning themselves as “suffering” then emerges as a strategic manoeuvre resulting in a recognition that many others were unable to claim. Unlike for example Maria’s misrecognition as an ignorant and selfish tax-avoider who needed to be disciplined into obedient officiality, farmers find their livelihood struggle widely accepted as genuinely harsh.

As much as it is for coop farmers today, peasants the world over have been shown to perform a particular mode of suffering, drudgery and self-exploitation that actively places them outside of, and in distinction to modernity (Campbell, 1964; Scott, 1985; Galt, 2013). This positionality is not only still recognized today but, as with the native groups that Coulthard and Simpson discuss, also permits the advancement of claims. Farmers’ positioning to be recognized in a similar way is thus the axle on the two-tiered wagon of recognition: For one thing, it provides both validity to the farmer’s self-representation as suffering, making it credible as distinctly different from their real class and social positions. Thereby, it furnishes their political project with the moral values of hard-work and self-deprivation, rendering it valid in ways that would be unviable without such moralizations.

For another, and more problematically, positioning as suffering cannot be divorced from the identity politics implied in its strategy. The deliberate strategizing for recognition coincides with a larger European trend in the shift from a politics of egalitarian redistribution to a politics of identity (Fraser, 2000, 2003). This shift has been shown to be highly problematic, not least of all due to its deep imbrications with exclusionary measures inherent in definitions of identity and difference (Federici, 2014, 2016). Coop farmers may imagine their work to be transformative for all in the long run but they remain content to work towards establishing an alternative that works for them in the short term. Their recourse to identity politics thus ends up producing the very types of discriminations and exclusion they are trying to actively position themselves against. Given the coop’s embracing and accessible nature, it is hard to imagine it reproducing mechanisms of exclusion, and I mention this critique here mainly to caution against its possible future developments. However, positioning in order to be recognized as a suffering peasant when one is not strictly speaking a peasant, nor suffering in the “outside of history” manner associated with the peasantry (Wolf, 1982), is problematic also because such claims may serve to detract attention and possibly even funds from what might be more pressing matters, causes, or victims. Were the coop farmers’ backgrounds and class positions to be revealed, it would be all too easy to imagine a hollowing-out of claims for suffering victimhood in general, implying consequences far beyond the coop.

When I confronted farmers with my deconstruction of how the cooperative was working and the limitation in its transformative potential, they most often responded with references to the spaces for experimentation and hopes of setting examples for others from which larger scale alternatives could grow. While they often felt disillusioned
or even defeated by the harsh realities of their endeavour, these struggles did not seem reason enough for abandoning their project or questioning its fundamental principles.

The popular analogy that “many islands can make a continent” was cited to underline that the relative size and impact of a single project are not the only relevant factors in evaluating the attempt to build an alternative. Instead, notions of what happens at “the margins” or at the “boundary with capitalism” were brought up to highlight that while their project was not outside capitalism, they saw themselves critiquing and thereby hopefully weakening a few of its core pillars by mobilizing alternate visions from within it. In much the same way that questions of their privilege were handled by claiming to use privilege to extend the project to more people, so too their complacency became displaced by reference to the “larger good” hoped-for in their practices.

How then, if at all, can we conceive of the coop’s transformative potential? Based on their determination to continue and the public opinions about the importance of the coop, it might be possible, as I highlighted above, to conceive of the core motivating factor that indeed lies within resistance. This is not resistance in the traditional, policy or politically transformative sense envisioned by Marxists and anarchists. Instead, and although farmers use a different vocabulary to describe the notion, I would suggest that the most suited conceptualization may lie in Scott’s (1985) notion of the everyday resistance of the weak and marginalized. This mode of resistance is constituted in small, everyday acts and strategies devised to circumvent the relations of power and domination that people suffer from on a daily basis. While not challenging the status quo of these power relations, acts of everyday resistance still allow its practitioners to be a little better off in emotional, affective and economic terms than they would be without them.

In opposition to the Scottian claim of everyday resistance, Narotzky (1997) has posited that counter-hegemonic (or non-hegemonic) groups in society are generally tolerated by the hegemony so long as they remain concomitant to the dominant power relations of the market and “remain completely subject to hegemonic basic requirements” (Narotzky, 1997). Given that the coop continues to rely on state-issued currency (unlike some recent alternatives such as those developed in response to the Greek crisis), embraces both market and money as “necessary evils” and occasionally even takes pride in being able to run a coop like a successful company from which income is derived, it would be easy to conclude that the fundamental postulates of capitalism are not threatened by this project. The coop is however increasingly subjected to state-led regulation that seeks to enclose, control, sanction and possibly even criminalize its operations.

As in the illegal vegetables episode that I discussed in the context of the crackdown on tax evasion and informal production, the organic farmers are also subject to sanctioning. During the last summer of my stay in Guimarães, Domingos suddenly stopped selling his jams and chutneys because he had received a tip-off about an upcoming inspection by the health and safety board. Equally, that spring, Raquel decided against keeping more goats since she didn’t have the necessary industrial
style facilities to make cheese so that it would legally qualify to be sold. Since early 2017, the weekly farmers market had been moved from the public square to a church courtyard, where access was more easily controlled and visibility reduced. Much as the benign, traditional ways of livelihood-making subjected to regulation in an attempt to curb informality (compare raid at the municipal market), the coop has to contend with a statist gaze, too. Applying this insight to Narotzky’s observation, it appears as though within the austerity conjuncture, even theoretically non-threatening activities are subject to the same attacks that were formerly reserved for those practices that could not be be reconfigured, quantified and incorporated into the dominant logic of commercialization. A question that remains is whether these attacks could be an indication that the coop is in fact viewed as threatening? The thought is worth entertaining, not least because of the wide popular support the coop has received. I return to this question in the next section.

With regard to the transformative potential of the coop, the limitations of this project appear obvious. We must however remember that despite the seemingly easy dismissal of this project, it continues to question, contest and ruminate upon the postulates of neoliberal capitalism; moreover, it continues to plan for a way of working beyond them, even if the ideas are often more radically militant than the current organizational set-up can allow to be put into practice. Here, I want to bring back and take seriously the notion of a margin or boundary to capitalism that farmers evoke in reference to their mode of critique. Highly reminiscent of the “boundary struggles” Fraser (2014) describes in her analysis of contestations engendered by capitalism as a social order, the boundary seems to me a revealing description of positionality. Insofar as we want to follow Fraser’s argument that capitalism’s subjects wishing to criticize the social order often draw on this order’s own complex normativity, coop farmers indeed continue to operate along much the same affective, emotional logics they wish to transcend. On the other hand, however, these subservient actions are not reducible to, or even wholly defined by, function to these logics and dynamics. This is the case because boundaries—by Fraser’s own definition—“harbour distinctive ontologies of social practice and non-economic normative ideals […] pregnant with critical political possibility” (69).

It follows that the messy, contradictory moralities, practices and ideals of coop farmers, while an integral part and parcel of the capitalist order, have a character of their own. This is essential to their operation because, especially in times of crisis, already existing cracks in the entire system become self-evident so that boundary struggles can be turned against specific core elements or practices of accumulation. If not an alternative to capitalism, it thus appears paramount to interrogate what the coop did produce, both for its own farmers as well as its workers, volunteers, consumers and affiliates. The next section considers the creation of a meaningful and worthwhile livelihood project for farmers and a future vision for all.
Producing and Distributing Resources of Hope

Bringing back the widely held conviction that the coop constitutes an attempt at resistance begs the question: what is the nature of such resistance? Based on the delineation of the farmers’ positionality, the strategic use of the language of victimhood (in spite of their relative privilege) and, above all, their partial vision regarding transformative potential, it would be easy to dismiss the cooperative as just another good-faith attempt that turns out to disguise very real structural inequalities. If we understand the desired outcome of the coop to be an alternative form of social reproduction, and back-breaking, 12 hours a day labour is the road to get there, then what sets such attempts apart from the autonomy projects of petty entrepreneurs, or self-medication in order to keep on working? What such a summary misses however, is the messy, often contradictory and sometimes necessarily complacent-to-capitalism temporality implicated in trying to live hoped-for futures in the present (Springer, 2012). What sets coop farmers apart from the livelihood projects discussed in other chapters is twofold: the hope that they cultivate daily and the opportunities that they extend to others.

The members of the cooperative can in many senses be said to live just as volatile and stressful day-to-day lives as the protagonists who appeared in earlier chapters: the petty entrepreneurs, runners of home-based businesses and day labourers. However, their being caught up in the immediacy of daily provisioning does not seem to foreclose the possibility to see hope and envision a future. The ability to contemplate, even plan for the future as a positive fact—an advancement to be embraced and anticipated—is perhaps the most distinctive factor in the coop’s difference from the protagonists of other chapters. For most of the members of the younger generation that I worked with, the future is an indistinct blur, the contours of which remain concealed by the struggles of the everyday. In the few instances I was able to get them to consider a temporality besides the present, the only thing they thought to mention was the expectation eventually to inherit their parental property in order to be able to continue living in the house, grow some food and have a meagre income via petty rent. The most “future” I ever got out of any of them was essentially a replication of the present they inhabited: a repetition, that is, of the livelihood crisis. They seemed to assume that there was nothing to gain or any hope for meaningful change in the future.

Notably, quite the contrary appears to be the case for coop farmers, as they directly link their present work to a desired future outcome and perform a variety of emotional, affective and physical labours to achieve this end. For coop members, the present is still the site of material deprivation, physical and psychological affliction, but they hope to overcome it in the future. And this future vision makes “living in the present” (Day, Steward and Papataxiaris, 1999: 7) a source of joy and satisfaction. Derived from the inversion of the mainstream linear conception of time that places the future in a durational sequence (Bloch, 1977), coop members are neither “stuck” in the sequential reproduction of present and future as the ever same dispossessions, nor are they defined by nostalgic attempts to return to a previous golden age. Instead, the struggles of
the everyday are the future and the present. They go so far as to attempt practices they would like to see in the future already today, most notably the ethical production and socially fair distribution of food stuffs and produce.

In his recent work on a future oriented politics, Ghassan Hage invites us to question the resources necessary for producing and distributing hope (2016: 465). Drawing on Bourdieu and Williams, Hage proposes and I agree with him, that while hope as a future-oriented objective can theoretically exist society-wide, it may well be unequally distributed among that society. This inequality is a direct result of relations of extraction and exploitation (466-467). In order to understand why one group may have hope while another may not, we must question “the extent to which a certain available hope for someone is built on the sucking of the very possibility for hope from someone else” (2016: 466). In case of the coop, their class positions are certainly part of their ability to produce and sustain a hopeful future vision. Also, as the example of Domingo’s life story and his capitalizing on his father’s clout underlines, their class positions result to some extent built on relations of exploitation.
The coops ability to narrate the crisis of livelihood as an opportunity for an alternative form of social reproduction is then, a result of both the relations of exploitation that make their class position and this class position’s access to resources of hope. However, the coop also received wide support from many people who are neither obliged to return favours, nor, in fact, in any position of political or economic power. Instead, the coop appears to have pulled in and mobilized a considerable amount of people from a variety of backgrounds. Above, I have suggested that part of the reason for this can be found in the coops active attempt to reinitiate the forms of neighbourhood solidarity and mutual aid that once were commonplace. An example of this is the practice of rewarding “free labour” during harvest with part of the produce that was harvested, which has existed especially for the wine and corn harvest36 in this region for many years. It is a small step from this time-tested and well known tradition of rewarding labour in kind to rewarding volunteers with vegetables boxes. In fact, many coop volunteers describe their work in this way.

The other factor that makes the coop appealing for volunteers lies in its reclaiming of farming from its historical association with backwardness. As Francisco, a former factory worker summarized,

Farming with these guys is fun! It feels nothing like the drudgery I remember from being a little boy, when I was forced to spend my after school time in the fields with my parents. Plus here, I actually produce something useful. I get food to take home to my wife, and I feel much less useless than I did when I first entered early retirement.

We see here that it is not only farmers but also volunteers that derive meaning and identity from the coop’s activities. Being able to extend this opportunity to others, who are definitely not privileged in the way some farmers are, was thus part of the coop’s traction in Guimarães, and it’s common understanding as “an alternative”. Applied to Hage’s analysis, we might then conclude that the hope the coop produces is not, in any directly visible way, extracted from anyone else’s access to hope. Rather, the coop actively works to distribute the resources that make hope possible, and they attempt to do so in a socially and environmentally just way.

What is more, as Francisco observed, farming produces tangible results. These immediate results (Woodburn, 1979,82)—often discursively placed in direct opposition to the alienation of wage labour—make living off the land an attractive activity and livelihood project. This is even more the case because the moral value attached to “hard work”, that is, the legacy of industrial wage labour (Muehlebach, 2012) can be reclaimed in a positive manner. Farming and selling produce at fair prices also pro-

36 one example of this shared labour are the vindimas: yearly grape harvests during which whole villages assemble to harvest the grapevines and subsequently produce the wine. Although wine farmers have been known to offer cash in return for harvest labour, in the Vale do Ave assisting in the vindimas is considered a question of honour, and the bottles of wine offered in return for this help are, but an extra incentive.
vides the type of public representation and acknowledgement of one’s work that contributes to family survival similar to that which the family wage provided. As coop farmers find identity, belonging and a future vision in growing and sharing food, their ideological commitment to a more just future is made tangible by everyday practices. For, in their ability to make the everyday meaningful, both a future vision, daily motivation and a feeling of being part of something “bigger than themselves” (Renato) are gleaned. Farming and sharing food here emerge as actively chosen responses to crisis and therefore reveal themselves as far removed from the association with enterprises of the poor and dispossessed that used to be farming’s structuring theme.

The daily practice of food production thus emerges as the ritual in which the image of a future world is made convincing (Bloch, 1977). In addition to a grand narrative of society-wide advancement towards a more just world, future planning also takes a tangible form. This conflation appears to have rendered possible a meaningful future both with vision and everyday practice, and farmers revel in understanding it as a powerful tool for opposition to the logics propagated by institutions in service to the neoliberal agenda. The hardships of the present are not denied, but rather, in this ritualistically recast view, they are embraced as the necessary collapse of everyday experience with future (Springer, 2012).

This interpretation of the coop returns me to a critique that I posed at the beginning of this chapter regarding the two possible interpretations of social and solidarity economies. At this point, they are perhaps best epitomized in a question: Did then, the coop and its alternative emerge *sui generis*, as, if you will, a teleological choice; or is it, indeed, the result of a processual integration into the domination of market-driven forms of social relations and reproduction? In my view, the increasing encroachment of state regulation certainly encouraged this alternative, and made it seem appealing where other provisioning avenues were not. However, the coop members want to foster and are, in fact, successfully extending their alternative and its hope to others. This and the fact that the coop existed with a very similar set of practices and objectives since before the onset of austerity, underline to me its emergence in real terms. In other words, the coop is generated by opposition to the state-led demands of austerity *and*, at the same time, by an institutionally sustained ideological push towards self-reliance.

At the danger of labouring the point, allow me to repeat that it in my view it appears essential that we take into consideration the importance of everyday practices in the meaning-making, identity and teleological visions of ordinary people. Perhaps the clearest example of the meaning and identity derived from hope lies in coop farmers’ frequent comparisons between their current work growing food versus the kinds of jobs that they would otherwise be doing. In as much as Eliana and her sisters opt for returning to the home rather than accept being pushed into low-wage, zero hour, service sector jobs, so too Renato compares farming with their previous employment experiences. After being terminated at the city hall for being too vocal in his misgivings regarding the corruption there, Renato spent 12 months employed at an architectural office in Porto, where he had to commute to each day. He summarizes his experience:
if there can be a future in all this, in this world we have created, it doesn’t lie in wage labour and the models of collective vindictive politics we have come to associate with industrial capitalism. I earned good money there in Porto, and was out of the house about as many hours as I am today. But I was depressed, deeply depressed.

My recording is silent as Renato casts around for words to describe his sentiments. “If there is an alternative, it lies in creating hope”, he finally blurts out. “What is hope, then, Renato?”, I ask. “Hope is what gets me up every morning”. There was another long silence, then:

Hope is… the idea that I am doing something that will be valuable for more people than me, now and later. Something that may put a strain on me, but that is not ultimately destructive to anybody or anything. Hope is being part of a group of people, being able to get up in the morning and showing others that if I can do this, they can, too… Hope is being happy to get my hands in the soil, come rain, come snow, come sunshine. Hope is seeing my daughter enjoy the soil as much as I do. Even though she lives far away with her mother.

Unlike the protagonists of other chapters, farmers understand their self-exploitation as resistance and narrate it as such, precisely because they see in it the possibility for beginning to live a future ideal in the present. Despite their use of registers associated with suffering and victimhood, the strain of their livelihood is experienced as emancipatory, albeit ambivalently so (Zigon, 2009), because it is imbued with the hope of a possible better future. Comparing the way that Lara (chapter 3) suffers from “dangling in space” as a result of the uncertainty and unpredictability of her crisis, we see that the daily practices of farming and the sharing of food seem to anchor farmers in their world.

It is my suggestion that it is precisely this permeation of the livelihood project with a forward looking, hopeful temporality (Narotzky & Besnier, 2017, Miyazaki, 2004) that laces together the seemingly impossible “attempt at an alternative” with the reality of the farmers’ living situation (Springer, 2012). Farmers are just as much “choosing subjects” as petty entrepreneurs—their choice mandated from above and borne out of hardship. But their choice is made in a positive way all the same. As much as Maria’s granddaughter Maria José opts for the informal economy instead of permitting herself to be pushed into low-wage labour, so too the coop farmers resist the obedient officiality that austerity as state intervention arguably intends, insisting on their ties to the land and others.

The banality of this hope and its rootedness in the everyday also makes hope’s extraction from other people unlikely. One reason the coop was widely understood as an exemplary sight of future alternatives already existing in the present I certainly found in this its inclusive character, that is, its ability to extend the possibility of hope to others. These were future alternatives that were open and embracing to all and, for this simple fact, were seen as constituting a political project.

I have left myself very little space to explore this political theme, but I have probably already said it enough in this chapter to have made the argument in advance. I will just
highlight a few observations that allow me to make a notion of “the political” explicit. In the course of a few years, the coop grew substantially both in numbers of participants who came to volunteer as well as in customers and a wide array of other affiliates. Recall that it offered the possibility to farm and cheaply access organic food for anyone willing to work. It also provided workshops—i.e., from yoga to composting, or seed planting to knitting—on the farm premises that were open to members and non-members alike. More often than not, these gatherings at the farms resulted in far-reaching discussions on more topics than can be covered here and the people engaging in them did not stop talking after the end of the events. In attracting people from various social classes and groups that otherwise had little or no direct contact with one another, the coop gatherings and events also proved to be a bridging link in the building of unlikely allegiances, for example, in the opposition to the relocation of the social canteen that I described in the previous chapter.

Possible Future(s)

In summary, then, coop farmers are able to manipulate the open-endedness of the crisis situation to their advantage because their relative privilege allows them to resist being pulled into the logics of expanded reproduction and dispossession for long enough to devise an alternative form of social reproduction. The resources of hope that they are actively producing are thus, a direct result of their ability to resist state-led regulation and attempts at extraction for a period of time long enough to envision a future and begin enacting this future in the present. This future vision in turn becomes the driving factor of their pursuit of livelihood and they also attempt to make this alternative form of social reproduction available to others who are comparatively less privileged. Granted, this pulling of others into the narrative of “crisis as opportunity” is unlikely to abate the livelihood crisis for a long period of time. But from the vantage point of this “alternative”, coop farmers and members are then able to see the crisis of livelihood in a different way as well as their role and the role of others in it. They see that, contrary to the narratives of austerity as being without any alternative and neoliberalism as the new “common sense” (Ho & Cavanhaugh, 2019), other socially and environmentally just forms of making a living are possible.

With their future vision of a more socially and environmentally just food production and distribution system, and the fact that it already exists, they inspired and included a variety of Guimarães citizens. In the coop, I found solidarity and mutual aid not only among the kin and family networks where I had come to expect it but also in a group of people composed of unlikely alliances. Coop farmers, workers, volunteers, consumers and affiliates weren’t just unrelated by blood or marriage, but unbounded also in terms of class, upbringing, and culture. Even the relatively self-contained districts of the city are transcended by affiliation with the coop. While the
farmers certainly stem from backgrounds of relative privilege, it cannot be ignored that they have managed to extend this project beyond the distrust, suspicion and even enmity with which non-kin, socially distant strangers are usually treated. All these people were drawn together by the appeal of the future project proposed by the coop and by its convincing rootedness in daily practice.

It is for this reason that the coop was so widely described as a form of resistance. While not confronting hegemonic power head-on, the coop's practical vision of an alternative mode of social reproduction made it an appealing project for the many. Theirs is an attempt that is far from linear and characterized by set-backs both in coop member's abilities to make a living as well as small, partial and contingent upon a wide variety of factors outside its immediate control. Yet these shortcomings are, I would suggest, part of the coop's success. The coop and its members do not try to be anything other than what they are: a small, local, fragmentary organization entirely dependent on and held together by the hard work of a few people who share a vision and a practice. Their determination to actualize this vision provides them with both a teleological vision and personal worth. But it also, more often than not, ends up complicating their lives rather than putting them on a linear path towards betterment. Instead of building a new order or dismantling the livelihood crisis, a small space of exception is constructed and maintained, always in negotiation with the outside world.

Yet despite these limitations and the coop's inability or unwillingness to openly attack the status quo, they nonetheless manage to evade some of the totalizing logics of neoliberalism. They may remain subservient to capital-centric modes of production, and are certainly situated firmly within a modern conception of individuality, but they have ceased to be defined by them. Members of the coop do not continue to accept or embrace the depressed structure of feeling, material deprivation and exploitative labour relations in an attempt to negotiate the livelihood crisis. Instead, they carve out for themselves a small, contained, and certainly privileged space of possibility for hope that is rooted in socially and environmentally just production and distribution. This is a very benign, everyday kind of hope. While not able to alter the status of the national austerity or the livelihood crisis, the coop does end up transforming something: They are striking back in everyday ways that are available to them while honouring the responsibilities they feel towards each other.

Members of the coop have not superseded the livelihood crisis. In fact, they suffer many of the same afflictions as members of the households I discuss throughout this thesis. But they negate both institutional demand and neoliberal imperative and counter them with actions that, while not autonomous, are certainly agentive. They show that a different mode of social reproduction is not just possible, but probable; and that such a way can be informed by ideals beyond the immediacy of the livelihood crisis—by social and environmental justice. The coop thus constitutes welcoming space beyond the menacing and depressed structures of feeling that have been such a common theme of austerity reception EU-wide.