Cooperativism as pedagogy: Conversation with Gustavo Machado a lecturer and researcher from Facultad de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad de la República

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Cooperativism as pedagogy
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Abstract
This conversation with Gustavo Machado discusses the role of cooperativism as a pedagogical process in Uruguay. Machado emphasizes how cooperatives serve as models for housing production and transformative social learning processes, embedding collective action and mutual aid into daily life. He distinguishes between housing, habitat, and inhabitation, advocating for a broader understanding of living that transcends physical structures and integrates social, cultural, and communal dimensions. Our conversation delves into the political significance of cooperatives in the face of neoliberalism, positioning them as alternatives to market-based housing models. Machado discusses the challenges cooperatives face, such as state regulation and the need for flexibility in adapting to changing life circumstances. He also reflects on his personal experiences growing up in a cooperative during Uruguay's dictatorship, which shaped his political and professional views. The article highlights the intersection of cooperativism with broader social movements, such as gender equality and mental health, and the importance of international dialogue in expanding cooperative housing models across Latin America.

Keywords
Housing, cooperativism, pedagogy, Uruguay, Latin America

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Introduction

Before this conversation was scheduled, Gustavo, his students, Moises and Ana took a housing cooperative tour in a van hired by a delivery cooperative. We visited COVICIVI2, also known as "Casa Lecocq," a heritage building restored by the cooperative's members, in Ciudad Vieja, the historic quarter of Montevideo. This cooperative is one of the few that has successfully adapted mutual aid principles to renovate old buildings without displacing low-income residents, ensuring access to housing for the poorest in central areas. Almost directly across from Casa Lecocq, we visited the UFAMA (Family Union Afro World) CORDON 1 site, an Afro-Uruguayan women-led cooperative currently under construction. We also toured Mesa 3, a large cooperative with almost 281 houses, built in 1971 on the outskirts of the city. This cooperative is an excellent example of the early multi-cooperative projects in Montevideo, a model no longer allowed, which has hindered cooperative collaboration. While these cooperatives were built through mutual aid, we also visited a large complex of 332 houses in several towers, constructed through mutual savings by people with more resources than those participating in the mutual aid model but still unable to access the real estate market. This complex was built by a social enterprise cooperative called Centro Cooperativista Uruguayo and is a well-known emblem of the city.

After a few days of exploring this landscape, we met with Gustavo at his office in the Agencia Nacional de Vivienda (ANV), located in the Ciudad Vieja neighborhood, where he works as a social worker. The ANV is the public office that manages all social and financial aspects of cooperatives, ensuring the best use of resources and overseeing the technical assistance provided by cooperatives, known as IAT. We spoke for an hour and a half about the cooperative system, its limitations, its accumulated achievements, and the knowledge and international issues surrounding cooperativism. After the conversation, we took a short walk to see some other cooperatives nearby. We also observed different forms of social housing,

Figure 1
Cooperative walk with Gustavo in Ciudad Vieja. Photo: Ana Vilenica

such as public hotels for temporary housing and social buildings like union sports clubs. Finally, we visited the traditional workers' neighborhood known as El Cerro, where we saw a memorial for the missing persons during the dictatorship. Gustavo was incredibly generous with the time he spent with us.

Ana: I would first like to ask you about the terminology you have been using. You distinguished among three notions: housing, habitat and inhabitation. Can you tell us how you understand these notions?

Gustavo: Yes, there is a substantial difference. Partially, it is about the strong limit of Uruguayan cooperativism. That is the issue of limiting housing to the physical limits of dwelling. Habitat means thinking more broadly about the entirety of one, including the neighbourhood, services, and links. And also the symbolic aspects that influence the emotions that connect a person to their home. The concept of "habitar" (inhabiting) seemed powerful to me in that sense, not just because, as I always jokingly say, in Spanish, "vivienda" (housing) is like the feminine form of "viviendo" (living). The dwelling was reduced from the artifact to the building. The idea of inhabiting or habitat transcends that to incorporate all the other possibilities of forms of living. And that links us to our relationship with others, to what we have access to and what we don't. That's why it seems to me that it has a power. But it is true that when you talk about a cooperative, it is a housing cooperative; regarding the housing agreement convention, we went back to housing. But it is indeed better to think about habitats. For me, it was very revealing. The cooperatives have the possibility of building more in line with your needs and desires, and this recovers, in a certain radical way, the idea of habitat. Moreover, there is also a collective learning in that same resolution of the need. If I resolve all my needs individually and keep on improving and resolving my needs, and if there is a need as important as collective housing, then there is a power to continue thinking collectively about other needs.

Ana: You also use other distinct notions. One is the social production of habitat, and the other is the commons. How do you understand the politics of these notions?

Gustavo: I think about it more in terms of a political nature. The idea of the social production of habitat has been constructed as a technology of production that is made by the protagonists and beneficiaries themselves. But it is true that in today's society, all production is social because one always participates with others – others in the market and others like other people. What the term means in reality is that the production is not mercantile. We should say non-market production of housing because social production is a given. For Marx, cooperation with others is the basis of capitalism because the system exists in society.

Ana: The major argument in your book Habitar las experiencia: *Aprendizajes y sociabilidad comunitaria en las cooperativas de Vivienda por ayuda mutua* is about cooperativism as a pedagogy. Could you tell us more about how you see this connection between pedagogy and cooperatives?

Gustavo: People in cooperatives live the educational device itself. They live in the pedagogical space. It is about thinking of learning as a necessity of life itself. One learns by necessity in one's own life. In the case of cooperativism, there is a learning of one way of life and an unlearning of another. The cooperative process is fundamental to the learning process. In Gramscian terms, it is about counter-hegemony - a hegemony in dispute.

The point is that it has to be translated into thought because it's not just about having the experience. We can learn how to learn and how to turn it on. But if I don't understand some of the logic, I won't be able to replicate that knowledge. And I think it's the same with cooperatives. Someone can live in a cooperative and see that with the cooperative, they have a comfortable, spacious home that they can afford. From there, incorporating the idea of cooperativism meant that they were able to achieve this with others who did have knowledge that they didn't. It seems to me that this is part of the task of the movement. On the one hand, it is to generate political and guild content for the movement, incorporating this experience in terms of knowledge and know-how. And then the other is the role of the technicians who advise the cooperative, who accompany the process, who also have to collaborate and contribute to a reflection on the process in order to incorporate this knowledge.

There is a kind of dialogue of knowledge between political knowledge and technical knowledge. Sometimes, in cooperatives, a lack of leadership with a more political vision leads to getting involved in management. Often, the educational aspect is closely tied to the practical, such as how to manage accounts and how to build over time. This is also pedagogical; knowledge is brought into play but does not transcend this experience.

Ana: You grew up in a cooperative. How did this process of learning work for you in your everyday life?

Figure 2
Visit UFAMA CORDON 1 cooperative mutual aid construction site. Photo: Ana Vilenica

Gustavo: I was born in the year 1971. In 1973, the military dictatorship began in Uruguay and lasted until 1984. In 1982/3, I was a pre-adolescent; that's when you start to question things and start to understand the world. At that time, it was terrible because of the dictatorship, but marvellous in terms of social and cultural development. Because of the political limitations of the dictatorship, we couldn't express ourselves as a society. The cooperatives were a kind of underground space. A neighbourhood space where political issues could be raised at a local level. For me, that was a time of political awakening, and the context of the cooperative was fundamental. It linked me to my profession of social work. I was a militant in a predominantly youth movement. I know more from that stage of my life than from studying at university.

What were the most important lessons that we learned living in a cooperative? For example, we learned about the value of neighbourliness and the knowledge of the other, the neighbour. We learned about the value of self-management. That there is a space regulated by the decisions of the participants themselves: a functioning collective, the Assembly, the commissions. There was organising to resolve somethings with others. For me, that is the key.

My father had diabetes. His leg was amputated. The cooperative decided to make access ramps to my parents' house without my family asking for it. They made the ramps so that my father could access his home. The Association of Retired People proposed him for president because they knew he needed to be active. "Machado, we want you to be the president of the Pensioners' Union." Where I live now, and I don't live in a cooperative, if that happened to me, I would have to make arrangements with the departmental government, ask for a ramp to be built, and wait for the paperwork. When my father died, neighbours accompanied my mother. It's because they have lived together for 48 years. That was because of that experience of living together for so long, getting to know each other, and having diversity. My mum goes to the theatre with one group, with another for walks, and with the third on trips. These spaces of daily solidarity are also spaces of learning cooperative values.

It seems to me that there is something powerful there in terms of transforming society. The relationship with private property is not something that we all incorporate as something essential. If we don't have property, we are not going to have certainty; we are not going to have a future. The cooperative is collective property, and these things are not a problem. My father passed away, but my mother had the right to live there. It belongs to us without having a title deed. This, together with self-management and organisation, also provide a glimpse of possible ways of organising a society—an alternative to capitalism.

Ana: You are working at the Agencia Nacional de Vivienda. What does that mean for you? What is the politics of this institution? What is your role in developing cooperativism in this place?

Figure 3
Visit to cooperative TEBELPA 2. Photo: Ana Vilenica

Gustavo: It's interesting to occupy those different places. It's true that once you are inside, the perspective changes and one can see some processes more globally while also losing sight of the processes in cooperatives. A cooperative becomes a number of families and not that family in particular. Perhaps the most significant limit I see on this side is the impossibility of influencing some of the more collective processes. That, in reality, is the excessive instrumentality, the triumph of instrumental reason. This is where the cooperative seems more like a means than an end.

The state has regulated cooperatives a lot. They are regulated to avoid deviations in the commercial use of cooperative loans. Unfortunately, this regulation ended up being the organisational axis of the cooperatives. And that is a problem. For me, this is an important problem. I'm trying to fight it here. At the last meeting, I spoke a bit about this. There is sometimes an understanding that we must ask the state to change things when, in reality, the movements themselves have to propose changes. The change has to come from the cooperative movement itself. We expect the state to anticipate problems, and it does not always do so in the way that cooperatives would benefit from.

It seems to me that the place of the social movement is very important for the state to transform how cooperatives are regulated. I think the progressive and left-wing governments were shaping a different relationship between the cooperative movement and the state. As there were more coincidences, there was less space. What worries me a lot is how to transform the very instrumental character that cooperatives now have.

Moisés: This is also reflected in the statistics. We tried to figure out the numbers related to cooperatives in Uruguay and realised that they were not very distinct. There is confusion because the state doesn't see the political differences among them. In statistic everything is mixed in one category. It does not recognise the nuances.

Gustavo: A major problem is that the state does not have the habit of producing information for research. There is no practice of making administrative data public so that it can be accessed. And then we have a second problem, which is that the body promoting cooperativism and which has to have the information, Inacoop –the National Institute of Cooperativism– regulates all forms of cooperatives except housing cooperatives and social cooperatives. Housing because they are regulated by the Ministry of Housing, and social cooperatives because they are regulated by the Ministry of Social Development. So that's why Inacoop has a lot of information about the cooperatives in general but only a little bit about housing.

You saw the little Excel sheet. I made an effort to systematise some data that are not precise, because in reality they are data of a different nature. But, well, it's an approximation. We don't have data on private or public production of housing. The information is closely linked to electoral politics. We have an important document, which is the five-year housing plan. This is a policy that is planned for five years; each government plans for five years, and then each five-year plan evaluates the previous one. That's why there are five-year plans, but what happens? A lot of people report

Figure 4
Visit to Mesa 3.
Photo: Ana Vilenica

cooperatives that start in a particular period. Then the previous period counts them as under construction, for example, and the next one counts them again as built. So, if you add it all up, there would be 100,000 cooperative housing units. In reality, there are many fewer, but each government counts and re-counts them. So this is a problem that we have to take into consideration. We have to have the data when they began and in what year the work began as a criterion, so I didn't count the cooperative twice; that's how I put the data together. But yes, it is difficult.

Moisés: We have an impression, by looking from the outside, probably due to glorious history of cooperativism in Uruguay, that there is at least 30% of cooperative housing in the country, but then it's much less.

Gustavo: But yes, there is 30% cooperative housing in some cities. It's not in the country as a whole. It is much less. In that chart, it came to something like 4%. But yes, it is a problem. Even the form of ownership is blurred. We also don't know who the owners of the big houses or large chunks of land are.

Ana: What are the challenges of inhabiting different perspectives as a teacher trying to spread knowledge about the cooperative and someone working in the institution trying to do something about that at different levels?

Gustavo: In my opinion, the movement must continue to challenge itself in the possibility of reinvention. I mentioned the concern regarding instrumentality. We need help because the cooperative's aim seems to be to reach housing. I think the movement must continue to recreate itself so that the cooperatives stay alive. To maintain the life of the cooperative throughout the process. This is the biggest challenge in terms of the cooperative movement. The cooperative movement arose in a way when it began to build in the central areas; it recycled old buildings and recycled heritage buildings in order to be able to inhabit the central areas of the city. Then, it decided to build in elevation with mutual aid, which is an important challenge for mutual aid because it needs higher qualifications. But I think it has to continue within a process. It seems to me that in academic terms, the most significant process that needs to take place should be in relation to other forms of inhabiting. We have some cooperatives that are very much linked to a reduced concept of housing. Although they have a community hall, a hall for social and cultural activities, etc., they need to be linked more to work. Co-operatives also need to have space for people to develop work experience. They need to be flexible in terms of being able to accompany the life cycle of individuals. For example, the historical cooperatives that were built on two floors with stairs are no longer habitable for many people.

As I was telling you about my father, we had to make a bedroom on the ground floor to be able to stay in the cooperative because he could no longer go upstairs to the bedroom. I think we need to have more flexibility; we need to promote more flexibility in the cooperatives so that they can be inhabited with different living situations. I think the challenge is precisely to grow and not get fat, which is what has happened to me. I have grown to the side. This doesn't mean that public policy on cooperativism shouldn't be massive, but that by being massive it should not lose the counter-hegemonic, cooperative

perspective. Therefore, we need to pay attention to singularities to give space to pilot experiences and new forms. This is precisely how to modify this demand for regulation to create a regulation that works more like a beacon. In other words, up to here and up to here, but not structuring beacons as borders. Inside these spaces, we can have flexibility. Now, there is a very strong regulation. There was a very big concern because there were times when we had the cooperative modalities made of owners. They were taking public loans dedicated to cooperatives. And then there were speculators. It was another way of building hidden companies. So, there was a lot of regulation to avoid that, to avoid deviations. But this regulation stifles or restricts the process precisely because it does everything as it was asked to approve the loan. So, when the regulation says that everything must be squared, everyone is going to make all the items that are squared, there is no other option. So, if you don't put boundaries inside, it can hold a triangle, a circle, or a square. It seems to me to be something like that. The regulation should be able to do that. I think it's important.

It seems to me that it is necessary to give rise to a certain humility in the cooperative system. When someone comes from Serbia, Spain, Mexico, or Brazil, there is pride in the cooperatives in Uruguay. We feel that Uruguayan cooperatives are the best in the world. But this pride means that sometimes we don't see the possibility of learning from other experiences. And I think there is something missing. Something can be learned from the experience of cooperatives. For example, the issue of cooperatives in scattered plots of land, where you don't have just one building, one cooperative, is a particular one. I have learnt about this from other countries, from other experiences where they started from different plots of land. But we must continue to learn from other cooperative experiences and not think that everything has already been invented in Uruguay and that there is nothing more to do. I think that is a significant challenge.

Figure 5
Visit to TEBELPA 2.
Photo: Ana Vilenica

Moisés: In talking to other people in the cooperative movement, we came across the opinion that the federation didn't have a process of change of generations. The leaders are of an older generation, so to speak. Their impression was that these people also come with another mindset. How do you see this kind of criticism?

Gustavo: This is also very Uruguayan. Uruguay is like that. It really is. If someone were 25 or 30 years old and said I want to be president of Uruguay, or I want to be a legislator, people would say no, that's too young. In the cooperative system, the social movements, the syndicalist movement, the leaders are elderly. The last two presidents were over 70 years old. Tabaré Vázquez was already 82 years old in his second mandate, and Mujica was too, right? So that's Uruguay. So, we not only have an ageing population, but in our culture people respect and look up to elders and their wealth of experience.

Indeed, the cooperative system is not friendly to other forms of living. Let's say, for example, in a co-operative, if someone decides to do two years, a postgraduate course, to go abroad, they would not be able to stay in a co-operative; they would have to resign if they are a full member, not if they are part of a family unit. The cooperative was never thought of for someone who moves around the world, who goes to investigate Argentina and who goes to investigate other places. No, you have to live there. So, of course, co-operatives have these rigidities that mean that young people cannot be there for a while, and then they are not, but they also have less of a leading role. This is not the case with young people from the popular sectors, who are more closely linked to the cooperative model, because their life projects are more limited to an experience in the more traditional places. But for the middle and upper middle sectors, cooperativism is not attractive for that reason, because in reality it is a closed society. It does not foresee this possibility of movement and flexibility.

There are people who prefer not to engage, so there is also one reason more. There is a problem of dispute in terms of hegemony that sometimes does not coincide. Sometimes, that same mentality gets into the cooperative system and stays for a while. Then they leave because it either transforms the cooperative into something very instrumental, as I was saying, or they end up leaving because they don't accept the system.

It's a place of veterans. In their day, they were young leaders, but many of them were exiled during the dictatorship. Many veterans could not be politically active. So, in Uruguay, a young generation occupied the leadership positions when the dictatorship ended.

Ana: We also heard another criticism, which has to do with the cooperative being a place of the heterosexual familial model of life. The basic unit is a heterosexual family with children. However, we also saw single moms coming together to build their own cooperatives. We also noticed some patriarchal elements within the cooperative movement. For example, the titular was always a man. How do you see these forms in cooperative organizing, and how are they changing, perhaps?

Gustavo: First of all, this is actually changing. There are more and more women in the cooperatives, but there are also going to be more women in the movement. The law on

ownership allows the adults in the family group to have joint owners. This is going to generate important changes in the short term. But it is true. Our own Housing Law says that the family has the right to housing, right? In other words, it is challenging, at least in the short term, for the cooperative system to be considered, for instance, as a student cooperative. Although there are some degree courses in the rest of Uruguay, most of them are in Montevideo, so many young people migrate to Montevideo to study.

There could be student cooperatives that would allow students to stay as long as they are students, and another student will come to occupy that cooperative place. But it's hard to imagine this. On Monday, we are going to go and meet a cooperative that is emerging, which is for people with mental health problems, who are patients from a public mental health hospital and who have had an experience of cohousing, a housing in common but regulated by the State. They have formed a cooperative to live together. So, of course, they asked for some exceptions to the regulations for co-operatives, for example, to have one-bedroom housing, which the regulations do not provide for, and then to maintain the profile for people with mental health problems.

These experiences will help us move away from the concept of family housing as they multiply, but I think it will be a very slow process because we have a very strong association with family housing. There is also a lot of patriarchal and conservative thinking in cooperatives that we still have. But women have managed to change much of this. It has not been the same place with the new generations. In other words, it's not really designed for young people at all, but neither is it designed for old people, let's say. Being more dependent, having difficulty accessing housing, etcetera is a situation. We are trying to work on this in Zone 3. The good thing about the cooperative system is that if you collectively start to resolve certain things in a cooperative, that has the potential to multiply.

Figure 6
Cooperative walk with Gustavo in Ciudad Vieja. Photo: Ana Vilenica

Ana: We witnessed an attempt to address some of these issues. For instance, we visited the workshop with social work students the other day.

Gustavo: There are several things here. One is how the movement itself generated the pilots, and the other issue is how this permeates public policy to change it. In Uruguay, in our vision, the state is present, and the resolution is found through public policy. When it is institutionalised, it becomes possible to replicate it.

Perhaps it generates a line of credit for innovative proposals, and perhaps these innovative proposals are the ones that make it possible to develop policy. I see the same thing in other countries. The experience in Spain is proving to be very rich. Each experience implies a different route and a different roadmap, right? Who finances it, and how is it done? How do you access the land? You have to do it from scratch in Uruguay, right? In other words, the roadmap is clear, but that roadmap limits a cooperative to this modality. We need to open up a space for innovation to enter instead of saying that it's not possible. To achieve that, the experience needs to be embodied in people. I can have an idea, and it can be a very good one, but if there isn't a group of students who say we want to set up a student cooperative, it is not going to happen.

Ana: You mentioned Uruguayan experience to steam from an international endeavour. How do you see this complex network at work here?

Gustavo: We must try to do this. It is to think about how other forms of organisation permeate, other forms of non-union organisation, other forms of housing, other forms of ecovillages, similar to other things emerging worldwide. Uruguay, also because of its geopolitical location and being so small in scale, we don't have a dialogue about these experiences. The opposite example is football, right? We have a cooperative system that communicates little with cooperativism from other parts of the world. In a figurative sense, we have a good system, much like we have a strong pool of football players; we also have a good pool of cooperative members. But this pool does not dialogue with the world; it does dialogue to share its experience, not to listen to the experiences of others.

It happened to me the last time I was in Spain, that day we met Moisés. I was telling the Spanish cooperatives about Uruguayan system, how cooperativism was organised, they came at the end and said to me, "we always thought we were FUCVAM but we are not, we are FECOVI, that is because in reality we are not mutual aid groups, we are pre-savings groups". Of course, Uruguay's pre-savings cooperatives are more similar. So yes, it is important to bring into dialogue the diversity of Uruguay, but also the diversity of the world.

Ana: There is, from what we have learned, an ongoing project to install the FUCVAM model in different Latin American countries. What do you think about that?

Gustavo: What was promoted was just a directionality from Uruguay towards South America, Central America. That was important, I think, because it also had to do with the fact that any transfer of experience always implies, that the Uruguayan form has to be considered in relation to a different experience, a different climate, civil wars, rural

contexts. The Uruguayan movement was urban; the rural context implied something different. It seems to me that there is something interesting about how each country developed the cooperative system. At the same time, I think that the cleverness of the proposal of transferring the experience is that, in reality, it was thought that we not only had to have a single cooperative experience but that this experience had to allow us to fight for law and funding, for legislation that allowed us to replicate this experience and for state funding to ensure the right to housing. It seems to me that this was the right thing to do.

In the Latin American Secretariat for Popular Housing (Secretaría Latinoamericana de la Vivienda y el Hábitat Popular SELVIHP), there was an important discussion around the fact that it only accepted collectively owned cooperatives. But some countries do not have collective ownership. So, in reality, these are countries' important experiences, but this orientation makes you lose sight of the most important thing, which is the potentiality. The regional organising, the transfer of experiences, the dialogue, the unity are the most important in terms of the popular movements. Such distinctions, saying we are the good ones and those are not, do not allow for more dialogue.

Moisés: We noticed that sometimes there is no clear idea about political autonomy. It might not be possible or complicated, for example.

Gustavo: Two important things that also make a difference and complicate dialogue. We have a union movement that is very autonomous from the state, which also allows for a different kind of dialogue. This only happens in places where you don't have to talk to union bureaucracy or with unions closely linked to the state. Here is autonomy in relation to the state. We do depend on the state in terms of funding. But there is a vision of dialogue with the state in which we are the actors and not a subordinate entity that has to accept everything as it is. In other countries, it is sometimes more complicated.

Figure 7
Cooperative walk with Gustavo in Ciudad Vieja. Photo: Ana Vilenica

Ana: Who comes to live in cooperatives in Uruguay? Are these the people who could not buy their own property? Are these people who are also interested in this particular lifestyle? Are there people who might be living in the hotels for people experiencing poverty or other people in undesired situations who come to cooperate, and how does this complexity work together?

Gustavo: Sometimes we think a lot about opposition and sometimes we have to look at the fact that the new people bring a refresh, a new life, new leaders, a renewal of some of the group. So that's where it varies. There is also a difference between those from the construction experience and those who come after construction. There lies an important problem. In the case of collectively owned cooperatives, they retain the right to decide who enters the cooperative. So, there has to be a clear explanation of the projects. And then, on the other hand, we have to look for funding mechanisms so that other people can enter, not just those who have money because that's where it's going now.

If my contract with the cooperative comes from the fact that I bought it, that complicates things. The initial contract says that the person who joins acquires a share in a cooperative that was left by a former cooperative member. They join with their share, but then the contract looks like it says that they themselves bought the share. What happens? Here, the terms look like they can be exchanged one for the other, but in reality, they change the logic of the initial contract of the cooperative, right? Then this changes the coexistence, and it's very difficult afterwards, isn't it?

There are housing cooperatives in a very privileged area of Montevideo, Punta Gorda, which is a neighbourhood on the coast of Montevideo towards the east. The temptation of the market has changed these cooperatives. Housing in that neighbourhood is worth a lot; the cooperatives also charge very high prices. In their neighbour, there was a boy with a cooperative mindset. A marathon runner with a lot of international recognition. He entered the cooperative with $200,000, although the social part of the cooperative is worth 50,000 or 60,000. They made a fictitious agreement for that value and then they sort of settle the difference between the member who leaves and the member who comes for that difference. He lived there without any problems, right? But last year, he was invited to train in the United States and he was going to the United States for two years with his family and he was thinking of leaving the house empty. And the cooperative said no, you can't leave. And he said I bought it. I put 200,000 $. Well, you didn't buy; you joined the cooperative. The market value is not that. Of course, there was a misunderstanding; he thought he had the right to leave the house closed and empty for two years or to offer it to anyone who wanted to live there. So, he said no. Ultimately, he ended up giving up the cooperative and buying another home. The rules are already set like that. And well, this is a modified process, isn't it? We have to learn from what is happening and not complain about it because it is very operational. Maybe the new members bring problems. Sometimes, they come with big cars. This happens, that happens, but well, they are already in the cooperatives, and the cooperative still needs to renew its population.

Moisés: We have two questions now. Latin America has a vibrant exchange of ideologies. Mexican cooperativism, Argentinian cooperativism, and Uruguayan cooperativism Brazilian cooperativism tend to share anarchist roots, be it liberation theology or social Catholicism. There are also Communist unions. But there are cultural differences; there are national differences and economic differences. And we would like to ask you now what the importance of housing cooperatives is in a situation that is shared by all countries. There is an economic crisis, a political crisis of a very strong right-wing, an environmental crisis of degradation and the limit of resources, and a civilisational crisis. There is also a crisis of always looking at oneself and forgetting this social part that sustains civilisations. So, what role do social forms of social property and social forms of habitat production, such as cooperative housing, have in terms of combating or limiting this process?

Gustavo: It seems to me that, first of all, there is something fundamental I forgot and you mentioned. It is important that the Uruguayan population composition is almost entirely of migratory origin. European. That meant that we turned our backs on Latin America, let's say. Argentina also looked more toward Europe than America. So, the dialogues were cut off. And there is also the fact that sometimes the dominant classes behave similarly in these things because resembling the dominant class implies resembling the dominant people in the hegemonic centres. We have more to do with Europe than the US or Latin America. What you were asking me is the key. There are two important problems. One has to do with the rise in consumption and the other with private ownership. Those are two key factors that complicate the planet in terms of sustainability and the societies themselves. For me, the cooperative system as a whole, not only in terms of housing, breaks these two logics, which is an important part of it. That's why it's one of the best answers. One could think that the first transformations could only come from a revolution, and in reality, this politics is getting further and further away from societies. Because, in reality, individualism makes collective solutions more and more difficult. So, it seems to me much more viable to think that the transformation will be a process of more significant expansion of social solidarity, of community strategies that are expanding, rather than a radical transformation all at once. It seems to me that the struggle is more an idea, as Gramsci said, of a war of positions, of gaining ground with a social economy over the mercantile economy.

I think it's very important, and I believe that, as we said at the beginning, cooperatives have great potential because housing covers the entirety of our lives. If we are building *cooperative territories*, they have a different weight than other areas of the social economy, which has some aspects of its own. And well, tomorrow, the prices of the consumer cooperative will no longer work for me, and I'll start shopping elsewhere, and I'll stop buying food for consumption, and I'll change my home. Living in that place implies a different number of aspects. There is a lot of transformative potential in the co-operatives and a lot of possibility of expanding the terrain regarding the Gramscian war of positions. But at the same time, the biggest challenge is that the forms remain cooperative. The risk

is that the significant development that goes internally generating mixtures ends up being dominant.

If one puts their house on the real estate market, the cooperative house, there is where it starts to lose internal hegemony. When it loses internal hegemony, it goes outwards. We have to be careful to build our project with a firm political conviction. That is also part of the challenge. That makes the idea of transformation more distant. I think that all ideas of social transformation have to be rooted in everyday life. This idea was that religion had promised the paradise of the Kingdom of God, as did socialism and communism. To come to a socialist society, the transition also has to be socialist.

How do we deal with what happened in Eastern European countries? It's happening to Cuba now. It was heroic but has an important limit: It remains a party democracy. It seems to me that the possibility of transforming to socialism from cooperatives is very valuable, above all transforming into a non-profit economy.

Moisés: The second question also has to do a bit with these epistemological questions. You were beginning to address them towards the end on how to deal with something as complex as housing, which seems to be a very small nucleus of the territorial complexity that the planet has. In this minimal framework, many economic, environmental, societal, and political contradictions are concentrated. So what are the new methodological and epistemological challenges ahead in social science that are needed to understand this complexity?

Gustavo: I think the system is transforming. Is it transforming in terms of sharpening these neoliberalisation processes, or is it transforming into processes towards more collective, more collectivist forms? The need for transformation is self-evident. It looks like the strategy against barbarism could be authoritarianism or the extension of the radicalisation of democracy. The way to go is also to radicalise the idea of living—housing as the place where the need for life and social reproduction is resolved.

Regarding social theory, the concept of social reproduction, where housing has such a central aspect, is fundamental. But it doesn't solve everything at the same time. So it seems to me that there is some possibility of thinking that there is something to be constructed that is not instituted, let's say. To think about it with the values and criteria of what already exists. It's kind of difficult to do that exercise. So, for me, there is always a value in the fact that all the experiences arose from instituting something, saying no, well, cooperatives didn't exist until someone said, why don't we use this tool for this? And then, how is it possible to think about how other things are instituted? And that seems to me to be the key. That limiting barbarism is precisely the opposition to barbarism and no more barbarism, on behalf of an authoritarian state of another Leviathan. It seems to me that it is crucial to think about this. What is the limit of barbarism with a more significant expansion in terms of democratic forms, participation, and equality? It seems to me that the issue is clear. It is how much can be expressed in terms of movement and not be trapped in its own finality. There is something important there. It has to do with the system of the definition in the system itself.

Moisés: In disciplinary terms, how do we embrace all this complexity?

Gustavo: Of course, it assumes dialogue with other forms of knowledge that are not only academic. Artistic and political forms. For me, it is obvious. For example, the gender struggles are clear illustration of how things transform from everyday life to the most societal forms, such as the concept of patriarchy, which is part of social organisation. You think about it in everyday life, but you also think about the world system. We must think about this power for all forms of inequality and oppression. The thing is that what we have achieved is quite incredible, but how do we manage to understand gender inequality in terms of a problem? We, society, of course. But we don't see the same for other forms of oppression. Indeed, the struggle of the subaltern sectors in the economy of those who live from their work is sometimes to live like the bourgeoisie. That's also difficult. It seems to me that there is a problem that we are having in terms of society. How can we show that other forms of economic and social organisation allow us to live well without exploiting others? Gender inequality is more apparent as a position on a way of being. That doesn't happen with the economic struggle. I think that's where it is. And we lack definitions of projects to be able to think about this transformation. Where are we going? We are minimising the consequences of capitalism. We have no other proposal. I don't know why. It is possible that thinking outside the system itself is the key to seeing how not to do it. It's against ownership and cooperation. Everybody united for everything. The key is a horizontality in the organisation. That is the modality for things. The issue is how that permeates the desire for better things and life. It seems easy to start with this, but it's not.

What is the moment of the limit of a society that can no longer afford to live like this? No? When people accepted that slavery was a limit because the liberation of slavery was not only for the enslaved people because surely it was going to cost them much more, a

Figure 8
Cooperative ride with Gustavo. Photo: Ana Vilenica

society that did not admit slavery emerged. Conditions of inequality are the key, as well as the idea about them. However, this situation may not be explained by these factors; it could be explained by the fact that people do not make an effort and instead individualize the explanations for structural problems.

Ana: If the conditions are too harsh for people, they try to go somewhere else. They look for better conditions elsewhere.

Gustavo: But where they go is where there is still more capitalism, with better living standards, right?

Ana: From a maximum of capitalism, where you don't have any limits, they go to places where there is still some possibility of living under the radar or in the system with a little bit of social welfare. If they manage to cross the border, they have some conditions to live. No, they don't go to Serbia to live. No one wants to stay in Serbia because this place has the maximum scale of capitalist extraction.

Gustavo: If the welfare of those places where people emigrate is produced by exploitation in other countries. So, the contradiction is not seen there. Isn't it?

Ana: People who migrate from particular places contribute to the reproduction of the other place. You know, they send some remittances to their parents, but they extract the investment in free education in their home country, for example. Most of the doctors in Serbia go to Germany to work. In Serbia, people are dying because there are not enough doctors. Host countries should pay for this.

Gustavo: What is the population of Serbia?

Ana: Less than 7 million.

Gustavo: Uruguay has half its population inside the country but almost the same number living abroad.

Ana: Are there migrant cooperatives in Uruguay, or are there places for them? What is the politics of FUCVAM on this?

Gustavo: Few, very few. But there are. There is an experience of building a cooperative of Peruvian migrants and a cooperative of Venezuelan migrants, but they are grouped in the same cooperative. It is called Venerou because it has Venezuelans and República Oriental del Uruguay. What happens is that, apart from some migration from Cuba and the Dominican Republic, people make a stopover in Uruguay and then go to other countries.

I am not busy today. Would you like to walk with me through Ciudad Vieja to see some cooperatives?

Ana: Yes!

Moisés: Let's do it!

About this Conversation participants

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