Ch.2 Associationism: the new social democracy from below

1. The emergence of a new Centre-Left strategy

The promotion of social capital among the working class and the poor has in recent decades formed a part of all political-economic strategies in the High Income Countries (HICs), from the 'Big Society' of the neoliberal David Cameron to the 'community cohesion' initiatives of the Centre-Right to community-based militant anti-capitalism of the socialist left. But the political-economic strategy within which social capital plays the biggest role, and the one where its promotion is the most widely practised, is associationism. Associationism here denotes a strand within contemporary Centre-Left ideology and practice, which is distinct from – and constructs itself in opposition to – the 'traditional' social democracy whose heyday was the boom of the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas traditional social democracy (TSD) rested on a large role for the nation state in guiding and subsidising industrial development, including through state-owned industries, associationism limits state industrial policy to provision of infrastructure and support services. Whereas TSD was focused on corporations, whether privately or publicly owned, associationism is focused on small and medium enterprises and not-for-profit social enterprises, which achieve economies of scale through networking and cooperation with each other. While TSD promoted collaboration between capital and labour by giving an institutional role to trade unions, associationism envisages workers being empowered by their skill, by participating in the governance of their employing firm, by starting their own business, and by setting up cooperatives and social enterprises. Whereas TSD built public services under the direct control of national and local states and provided them on a universal basis, associationism sees these services as being provided through varied combinations of the state, private sector and civil society, and as being differentiated by social group and locality. TSD sought to redistribute income and social and economic opportunities by national processes overseen by the state working with capital, whereas associationism emphasises the self-activity of individuals, particular social groups and small collectives to improve their economic and social lives. In terms of social divisions, TSD privileged 'class' understood as income differentiation, whereas associationism regards income classes as just one among many equally important 'identities' to be addressed, particularly gender, race/ethnicity and location. Whereas TSD rested on the action of national and local legislators and governments elected for a number of years by an electorate which remained passive between elections, associationism seeks continuous participation in politics through both state-sponsored forms and autonomous fora. Whereas TSD was concerned with national economic, social and political processes, associationism is focused on local cooperation, community and social capital at the local and neighbourhood scales.

How did this shift in Centre-Left ideology and practice come about? From the late 19C in Western Europe and the US, TSD was an increasing challenge to liberal ('free market') politics. In the postwar boom between 1948 and 1973 it became the dominant politics in all HICs irrespective of the party in government, albeit it in very different forms in different countries. High rates of investment, strong growth of output and productivity, and low rates of unemployment, and, as cause and effect, high rates of profit (all unprecedented in capitalism before and since) enabled strong growth of wages. Investment and productivity were supported by substantial state industrial policies (again, of very different forms in different countries), state owned utilities and industries, and counter-cyclical fiscal and monetary policies. State spending on public services, the environment, and in some countries social housing grew massively. Women's participation in waged labour increased rapidly, supported by expanded public services. Tax revenues from both capital and labour increased strongly, and underpinned state progressive income transfers from rich to poor (Armstrong, Glyn and Harrison, 1991). All of these processes enabled deep cooperation

between the classes, 'the postwar consensus'. 'Traditional social democracy' denotes these various enhanced roles of the state, resting on rapid economic growth and class consensus.

But from the 1950s the rate profit fell, undermined by capital accumulation itself; by the early 1970s it had reached such low levels that capital investment slowed dramatically (*ibid.*; Mandel, 1978; Roberts, 2016). In the fifty years since then, the world economy, with the exception of China since the 1990s, has experienced much lower rates of growth of output, productivity and wages and higher rates of unemployment and poverty than in the postwar boom. The new strategy of capital and states, neoliberalism, centred on increasing the share of output appropriated by capital and decreasing the share of labour, and allowing capital to flow from less profitable sectors and territories to (putatively) more profitable ones (Mandel, 1978; Roberts, 2016). Starting in the least profitable countries, the US and Britain, followed by continental Western Europe and, after 1990, by Japan, living standards of the population declined: many large workplaces closed; unemployment increased; wages, conditions and job security declined; public services deteriorated as governments cut spending and privatised parts of provision; ecology and the built environment deteriorated; the quality of essentials including food, water and air declined.

The onset of economic crisis and stagnation was initially met by strong resistance from trade unions in a number of HICs, notably the US, Britain, France, Italy, Portugal and Spain, which in some cases went from resistance to proposing socialist measures, particularly nationalisation of the major enterprises and banks. But by the late 1980s this wave had been defeated by capital and the repressive apparatuses of nation states. The social democratic parties of Europe, Canada, Australia and Japan, as well as the European Communist Parties, were organisationally and ideologically thrown into disarray: their strategy of gradual improvement in working class living standards and democratic rights through collaboration between labour with capital had been decisively repudiated by capital. Social democratic parties in government increasingly adopted neoliberal policies: depression of wages, shift of taxation from capital to labour, cuts to spending on public services, and deflationary monetary policy. Ideologues of neoliberalism (including new recruits in social democratic parties) launched an ideological offensive against postwar social democratic practice and its intellectual underpinnings in Keynesian economics broadly defined and in mainstream sociology. Neoliberal ideologues claimed that social democracy was responsible for the economic crisis: state industrial policy 'feather-bedded' unproductive capital and weakened incentives to innovate; state borrowing squeezed funds for private investment; state benefits undermined the work ethic by developing a 'dependency culture'; taxation distorted markets and undermined incentives for capital to invest and incentives for workers to work hard. (My account of the origins of economic stagnation above indicates the fallacy of this analysis.) Neoliberals proposed, rather, that the major economic decisions on investment, processes, products, trade should be taken by firms and 'entrepreneurs' rather than by the state, since only they know their business in depth (following Hayek); the state should withdraw from industrial intervention; workers should accept the need for firms to be profitable, and the right of managers to manage production; trade unions should be reduced in power or eliminated since they are a monopolistic distortion of the free labour market; workers should no longer rely on unions or state benefits to survive; taxes should be reduced, particularly on capital and 'enterprise'; state spending should be reduced, particularly on public services; and regulation of business should be reduced.

In the face of the neoliberal offensive, both material and ideological, social democratic activists, politicians and academics have developed their strategies in three distinct directions, divergent responses to the difficulties of maintaining social democratic principles in a world dominated by neoliberalism. The first strategy has been to continue to defend TSD and argue for its relevance to the problems of contemporary HICs. Hutton (1995) and Mazzucato (2013) argue for strong state

industrial, R&D and training policies, while Stiglitz, former head of the World Bank, argues for Keynesian fiscal and monetary policies. Most proponents of a Green New Deal use TSD arguments for state intervention to guide the private sector towards green production and to safeguard popular interests in the transition to no carbon. The left of social democratic parties in Western Europe, and the left of the US Democratic Party, argue for a decrease in the power of finance vis a vis productive capital (a traditional theme of Keynesianism), strengthened state intervention in production, renationalisation of utilities and public services, and increased spending on public services (Costello, Michie and Milne, 1989, Varoufakis, 2016; Labour Party, 2019; McDonnell, 2018; Adler and Bechler, 2019). They also called for, variously, stronger protections for workers, improved trade union rights, the representation of workers on company boards, and worker profit sharing schemes. Although these ideas were formally similar to TSD, their class content had shifted to the left: in the postwar boom, TSD ideas were supported by capital, whereas since the 1980s few sections of capital have fully supported them (Gough, 2020). TSD was now against the current. While elements of this programme were found in a weak form in government programmes in Germany and Scandanavia and under Socialist Party governments in France, Spain and Portugal, neoliberalism dominated in those countries, and especially in the US and Britain.

Another set of social democratic activists and intellectuals have taken a different path, which we shall call 'post-modern social democracy' (PMSD). PMSD critiques TSD in ways which have many overlaps with and borrowings from the neoliberal critique.[1] They accept Hayek's argument that private enterprises know their own business better than the state can, and the state industrial policy, particularly of a corporatist (Japanese) or dirigiste (French) kind, is 'bureaucratic' and 'inflexible'. A 'flexible', technologically innovative economy requires decentralised decision making and collaboration of labour with capital. PMSD argues that state-run public services (including state-owned broadcasting) tend to be inefficient, bureaucratically managed, and insensitive to the needs of diverse social groups. The trade unions are criticised for their intransigent and futile opposition to technological change and restructuring, for their unwillingness to put forward innovative ideas for improving processes and products; PMSD is hostile to collective action by labour against capital.[2] PMSD argues that the working class is now too fragmented and differentiated to be a coherent analytical category or political actor, and that multiple other social identities (of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, locality) are equally important. Rather than the single collective of the working class, multiple identities and social differences require multiple, overlapping collectives which are often temporary and tactical. The theorists of PMSD argue that both Marxism and TSD have been overly concerned with the 'vertical' power of some social actors over others, particularly the power of capital over labour, leading to a strategy of workers seeking greater power over capital or its abolition. In contrast, PMSD seeks to build people's 'power to' through 'horizontal' collectives, networks and associations (Allen, 1999; 2003; Amin and Thrift, 2002). PMSD argues that the modern state, in all its actions, is insensitive to difference and diversity, paralleling the neoliberal idea that the state cannot respond to individual wants. The PMSD solution is not to simply cut back the state, as neoliberals propose, but to 'decentre' it, open it to, and break down its separation from, civil society, and thus democratise it (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Allen, 2003). The state thus becomes an enabler rather than a dictator, a participant in discussions and experiments rather than a planner. The PMSD strategy thus claims to be based in qualitative changes in capitalist society since the 1970s, the 'New Times': in economics from Fordism to flexibility; in sociology from class to multiple, intersectional identities; and in politics from passive representation to participation and democracy (Hall and Jacques, 1989; Lash and Urry, 1987).[3]

PMSD has been developed in two distinct directions which we shall term 'productivist syndicalism' and 'associationism' respectively. Productivist syndicalism seeks to build the power of skilled

workers within the mainstream economy, particularly in the private sector. This is not through collective resistance to the employer, but on the contrary through collaboration with them. Workers are to use their skills and knowledge to solve problems in the production process, and thus gain 'voice' within the firm. Cooperation replaces 'old fashioned' conflict (Cooke and Morgan, 1998). This strategy is seen as feasible in the present epoch of capitalism and indeed going with the grain of it. The world economy is seen as in transition from a 'Fordist' model to some kind of 'flexible accumulation' or 'flexible specialisation'. Products are no long standardised but varied and fast changing. The production process tends to be more skilled and to require more autonomy for, and reflexivity from, the worker (Piore and Sabel, 1984; Hirst and Zeitlin, 1989; Storper, 1998; Lash and Urry, 1987). The economy is increasingly knowledge-based, in some left accounts because of demands from workers for more fulfilling work (Wainwright, 1994). Corporations no longer control industries, as smaller firms exploit innovations. The Fordist world-spatial division of labour between high level, skilled work in central regions and routine, standardised production in the periphery is giving way to regional agglomeration of each industry. The notion, popular in the 1970s and 1980s, that capitalism systematically deskills work (Braverman, 1974; Gorz, 1978) is turned on its head.[4]

Productivist syndicalism lies within the PMSD strategy in diagnosing a new 'post-Fordist' epoch of capitalism and in rejecting 'Fordist' conflict between capital and labour. Rather than the nation- or industry-wide structures of postwar industrial relations, its politics is enacted in a fragmented way, workplace by workplace and even worker by worker. Like TSD, it promotes technological change and worker skill, but it does so without a substantial role for the state.[5]

Another strand of PMSD, which we term associationism, has eschewed attempts to subject medium and large scale capital to democratic or worker influence, whether through TSD or productivist syndicalism, and instead focuses on the creation of an economy of cooperative and not-for-profit enterprises, community organisations, and common ownership.[6] Alongside these economic forms, it seeks a widening of political democracy at the local scale, sometimes through a democratisation of the existing local state, sometimes through autonomous fora. Its aims are in part material – the creation of waged jobs and the provision of useful goods and services; but it also aims to change social relations – fostering social capital and community, cooperation and solidarity, thus empowering individuals and overcoming their isolation and alienation. Its aspiration is to be a radical alternative to capitalism, 'beyond capitalism', 'post-capitalism', or 'capitalism not as you know it'. Its historical roots stretch back to the utopian socialism of the 19C of Fourier, Owen, Proudhon and others; hundreds of settlements were founded, particularly in North America, which attempted to implement these principles (though most collapsed within a few decades; for a critical review see Harvey, 2000: Ch.8). In the last four decades, a number of terms have been used for this political project: the social economy, the Third Sector, community enterprise, community control, commoning, the solidarity economy, the participatory economy. The project focuses strongly on the local scale – neighbourhoods, towns, districts of cities, rural districts, and is sometimes referred to simply (though misleadingly) as 'localism'. As we describe in the next section, associationist practice has taken many different forms, a pluralism which is seen as a strength. It is pragmatic rather than programmatic, experimental rather than analytical.

We have seen, then, that the long wave of stagnation which began in the 1970s, and the neoliberal strategy of capital in response to it, has produced a number of reformulations of social democratic thought. We have argued that three in particular have been prominent: a restatement of traditional social democracy focused on the national state; productivist syndicalism focused on the workplace; and associationism practised in localities and communities. Both in theory and practice there have been numerous overlaps and combinations of these strategies; but they are distinct in their

respective logics. Of the three, associationism gives the most prominence to the promotion and building of social capital – indeed, this is its central aim. In countries such as Britain associationism has been the most implemented of the three strategies, given that dominant sectors of capital have been uninterested in the TSD strategy (Gough, 2020) and the tradition of authoritarian or 'distant' industrial relations has blocked the development of management-worker cooperation at the enterprise level. The rest of this chapter is therefore concerned with associationism, though linking and comparing it with other strands of social democracy. Section 2 describes the very diverse initiatives and forms which have been developed 'from below' as a response to the material and psychological depredations of neoliberalism. Section 3 looks at some of the academic underpinnings and support for associationism, in addition to the theorists of PMSD already discussed. Section 4 examines the tensions, contradictions and failures in the practice and theory of associationism. The concluding section considers the associationist project as as a whole: why the associationist economy cannot expand to replace capitalism; the moralism and idealism of associationism; and how it incorporates and reproduces neoliberalism. We conclude that associationism fails as a strategy for emancipation because it ignores, and seeks to sidestep, the dynamics of capital accumulation and the conflict between capital and labour.

2. The bottom-up practice of associationism

Associationism has been an ad hoc, fragmented and 'bottom up' response to the long wave of stagnation of the world economy that began in the 1970s. Community groups and activists, social entrepreneurs, groups of workers, and some local governments and local economic agencies have taken small-scale initiatives to create or preserve jobs, provide social services, supply useful goods and services and healthy food to local people, provide low rent and secure housing, and improve the local natural and built environment. For many of the actors, the motivation for these initiatives has not been purely material but also the social relations they seek to construct. Economic stagnation and neoliberalism have fostered (and in turn been reproduced by) a deep individualisation in which each person and household has to 'stand on their own two feet', and an exacerbation of competition for access to jobs, housing and public services. Many people have experienced this regime as isolating and disempowering, producing an epidemic of depression and loneliness (Sennett and Cobb, 1993; Sharzer, 2022). In contrast, associationist initiatives typically involve cooperation and solidarity at a local or neighbourhood scale, and a building of neighbourly and community ties - 'social capital'. They thus promise empowerment and self-esteem, not through neoliberal individual self-promotion and competition, but through building collaborative creativity, altruism and reciprocity, mutual support and friendship.

A social economy of not-for-profit enterprises is developed in variegated forms: worker-owned cooperatives providing goods, services or marketing; community enterprises with waged jobs, workers on trainee allowances or voluntary labour producing commodities; community enterprises contracted by the state to provide public services; enterprises providing environmental clean-ups, home insulation or repairs of consumer durables. For-profit or not-for-profit local enterprises may originate as split-offs of local parts of large organisations, whether of the state or corporations. In addition, conventional privately-owned enterprises such as small firms and self-employment are seen as a potentially empowering alternative to employment by corporations or the state where one controls one's own job, rather than as a means to enrichment (Sharzer, 2012). This private enterprise appears as personally enriching, creative and social to the extent that the product is superior to the mass produced: artisanal brewing, organic farming, craft jewelry, or body- and mind-therapy. Associationists seek to group these enterprises together into community-owned premises, often converted former factories, mills or warehouses, to provide them with cheap rents, enable some joint services, and develop mutual help and friendships.

Collective forms of provision for social reproduction are developed, such as housing cooperatives, co-housing (a dozen or more households living in a block with collective facilities and sharing of care work), collective households larger than the nuclear family (communes), child care and school-run clubs, and mutual therapy associations. Unconventional housing arrangements are difficult in expensive big cities; many are squats or are in remote rural areas. Rural communes may also be units of production in farming, crafts or environmental education. They then embody all the ideals of associationism, bridging the divide between income-earning and social reproduction through collectivity. Voluntary organisations, often with paid coordinators, and self-help groups are developed to provide services such as child care, gardens, park maintenance or support to schools and hospitals; the latter merge with long standing organisations such as Parent-Teacher Associations and hospital visitors. Local churches are often involved given that they are traditional dispensers of charity (a role celebrated by some left commentators: Byrne, 1999; Wills, 2016).

Many initiatives involve food, such as small scale organic farming (including deep green agriculture such as permaculture which requires much labour with low productivity in money terms), retailers who source locally, food purchase and sale cooperatives which cut out intermediaries, community vegetable gardens whether official or 'guerilla', 'free gathering' of fruit growing on public or private land, community or state-owned allotments, and food banks providing donated or recycled food. Another major focus is the environment, such as community gardens, tree-planting, rewilding of derelict spaces, plant and seed swaps, and litter-picking. Some local campaigns aim for a wholesale greening of the locality; in Britain, local activists in Transition Towns aim rapidly to reduce carbon emissions across the town or city.[7]

Associationists seek to keep money within the community or locality through encouraging local purchasing by residents and local sales by businesses. Local currencies may be organised, in which local enterprises may (partially) pay their employees and which are accepted for payment by local consumer services, thus expanding the local money supply (North, 2007). In Local Exchange and Trading Schemes people use their skills to do jobs for each other, accounted in labour hours which the scheme ‘banks’ – the exchange of decommodified work (Lee, 1996). Locally-based credit unions provide basic bank accounts for the poor, encourage them to save, and provide small loans at low rates of interest to by-pass the loan sharks (Fuller and Jonas, 2002; McKillop and Wilson, 2011).

Despite associationalists’ scepticism towards the state, local government has been important in the growth of the sector. Some local state assets have been transferred to community ownership, and some services previously run by the local state (nurseries, schools, social care, park maintenance, swimming pools) have been transferred to not-for-profit community organisations either to run autonomously or on contract; the latter are regarded as a better alternative to contracting to the private sector. In recent years, some left local authorities in Britain (following from widespread practice in the 1980s) have attempted to channel their purchasing of print, school equipment, and so on either to local cooperatives or at least to local firms. This ‘new municipalism’ has also set up locally-controlled energy enterprises, whether for generation (solar, wind) (Henley, 2020), home insulation, or energy retailing; because of the capital requirements these are generally owned by the local state, but are nevertheless regarded as part of the associationalist mix because of their small scale compared with the majors (Hatcher, 2020).

Many of these initiatives have been started by individuals or small groups, or by ‘social entrepreneurs’ (Leadbetter, 1997), and have remained isolated. But associationism aims to grow and multiply these initiatives through varied forms of local socialisation - locally-based networks,

support organisations, and cross-subsidies and synergies between social enterprises. A model has been the Mondragon network of cooperative enterprises in the Basque country which now comprises dozens of (mainly) cooperative enterprises, including a bank, with multiple interlinkages. Development Trusts and Community Land Trusts are set up using public or charitable funding or transfers from the public sector to acquire land, build affordable housing, buy out slum landlords, and build or acquire small commercial units. Over decades, these property trusts can potentially earn substantial income which is ploughed back into the trust. They may achieve viability by using unpaid or training-wage labour, drawing on local good will. State power and resources may be needed to enable community control. The state may buy land and premises to enable communities to wrest control from the private sector, as in the purchase of expensive land for social housing at Coin Street in London in the 1980s following a community campaign (Brindley *et al.*, 1992: Ch.5). In the Dudley Street neighbourhood of Boston a community coalition was able to make the Redevelopment Agency apply legislation intended for the hotel industry to allow it to buy out slum landlords (Medoff and Sklar, 1994). However necessary the state involvement, however, associationalists wish the *ownership* of the social economy to be community based. Thus in the Boston case funds were obtained to enable the social housing to be vested with the community. Community ownership can enable the accumulation of capital for investment in new enterprises, as has been done by the South Shore Bank in the black ghetto of south Chicago (Taub, 1994), thereby making the sector more autonomous and innovative. Both community enterprises and small firms may be fostered by local support agencies funded either by the state or by corporations' 'social responsibility' initiatives; support for such entrepreneurship is often provided specifically to working class and BME people, women and other oppressed groups.

The development of associationism has been strongly uneven between nations and regions in the HICs, depending on their political cultures. The Mondragon federation in the Basque country started in the 1950s as a way of dealing with extreme poverty and lack of political freedom under the Franco dictatorship, building on Catholic paternal philanthropy and Basque nationalism. The extensive network of social enterprises in the province of Quebec, supported by a favourable legal framework, has arisen from its strong social democratic traditions and the solidarity of French-Quebecois nationalism *vis a vis* the Canadian state. From the 1980s, at a time of rising Scottish nationalism, the state in Scotland encouraged the social economy, which by 2001 comprised 2,700 enterprises employing 25,500 people with value added of £200m per annum (Gordon, 2002). Strikingly, in all three cases, associationism was developed through solidarity in the face of a widely-acknowledged external oppressor. In contrast, in other regions and countries, associationist initiatives have been weakly linked with each other and weakly politically supported, as Amin *et al.* (2002) showed for England.

Associationists are strong supporters of Universal Basic Income (UBI), a minimum income paid by the state to every citizen. In the last twenty years or so, it has become a favourite policy particularly, though not only, of the Centre-Left (Standing, 2017). A commonly cited motivation for UBI is to eliminate poverty by by-passing the state benefits system with its means testing, exceptions and 'bureaucratic' barriers. But it is also promoted as a way of supporting people who wish to develop their skills and aptitudes in ways that are not, or not initially, marketable, or who wish to construct alternative or conventional enterprises, or as a means of subsidising work in social enterprises which are not fully commercial; associationists support UBI particularly for the latter reasons. A central problem of UBI is that, if it is sufficiently large to provide a decent standard of living (comparable to the median wage), and especially if it is genuinely universal rather than means-tested or administered through the tax system, then the cost is enormous. This means that it cannot be funded by local states, as the localist ideology of associationism favours, since in no country does the local state have sufficient tax base. There have been 'experiments' in a number of

countries with locally-paid UBI, but the level of payment is wholly inadequate for associationist aims. Associationists are therefore compelled to look to the nation state, or large regional government, for an adequate system of UBI.

These economic and social initiatives often give rise to, or are allied to, particular *political* initiatives in the conventional sense, especially at the local scale. The practices of the state, whether national or local, are perceived as at best as insensitive and crude, and at worst as authoritarian and tyrannous. These traits have of course always between present in the capitalist state, but they have intensified under neoliberalism. People have responded by attempting to create forms of political decision making at the neighbourhood and local scales which involve direct rather than representative democracy, and which encourage participation from people who have not previously been involved in conventional politics (party membership, elections, local representatives and office holders). In a large part, these political initiatives are a modification of established local government rather than its abolition or supersession: public consultations on particular policies and government initiatives; neighbourhood forums to advise on policies affecting the neighbourhood and possibly make policy on them; state-funded development agencies with substantial representation from community groups; and participatory budgeting in which popular assemblies decide on priorities for state spending (Sintomer *et al.*, 2008). Less common are autonomous political fora set up by community activists as alternatives to the local state; these may discuss particular problems such as housing, transport or the environment, or they may seek to develop a new 'vision' or popular plan for the neighbourhood or district in all its aspects (see for example Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987: Chs 12 and 14).[8]

The ideology of the associationist movement is strongly localist. Negatively, it sees globalised big business and nation states as having failed; positively, it proposes that by building collaborations, social capital and community at the scale of the neighbourhood or locality basic needs can be met, or at least addressed, and ordinary people can overcome their isolation and feel empowered. These collaborations depend on face-to-face meetings, acquaintance and trust, which are impossible to construct at larger spatial scales. Accordingly, associationist activists support decentralisation of economy and state in the name of local control and even local autonomy. Localism and decentralisation are indeed items of faith for most associationist practioners and theorists (Eisenschitz and Gough, 1993: Ch.1).

This sketch of associationism suggests the enormous diversity and eclecticism of forms of the movement, in contrast, for example, to the unified nature of neoliberalism (united around the subordination of labour to capital, the freedom of capital, and raising the rate of profit). And this diversity speaks of a number of potential tensions in the project. Associationism encompasses both community-owned, not for profit enterprises, cooperative-owned enterprises operating in the market, and conventional private firms. It includes both waged work and unpaid ‘voluntary work’. Some projects are for production of goods and services, other for trade (e.g. LETS), other for money and demand (local currencies, credit unions). Some initiatives depend on capital or revenue subsidies from the (local) state, while others seek to take services out of the ‘dead hand’ of the state and thus dissolve the state into civil society. Some political forms of associationism are reforms of the state, or rely on state organisation, while others wish to build an autonomous civil society. There are tensions between pure localism and lobbying national and regional governments. While most associationists abide by the existing laws, others violate private property through squatting, guerilla gardening or free gathering. But the theoreticians of associationism such as Hodgson (1984) and Schemlzer *et al.* (2022) argue that it is precisely this diversity that gives associationism its strength, since it corresponds to the real complexity and diversity of the contemporary capitalist economy. Aspects of the latter include the diversity of production technologies and products, the

different minimum efficient scales of different branches of production, the different kinds of knowledge and skill needed in these different branches, the different customers and geographies of sale, and the complex mixes of types of labour involved in social reproduction (unpaid domestic work, purchase of commodities, public services). Diverse mixes of paid and unpaid work, types and size of enterprise, trade links and finance are therefore needed to attain reasonable efficiency; there is no simple institutional blue print. This is a dynamic process, requiring constant social and institutional innovation and experiment. At the level of politics, this requires pragmatism - attention to what can feasibly be achieved in the given situation with the resources and participants involved, rather than the application of economic-political principles. Some authors have conceived this pragmatism as a principle in itself of associationism (Wills, 2016).

3. Theories of associationism

While associationism has arisen principally as a practical response to neoliberal austerity through the actions of community activists, social entrepreneurs and local politicians, it has been extensively supported and theorised by academics and public intellectuals. I have already touched on some of the academic arguments for PMSD in general. On associationism specifically, there are a number of writers whose work provides an intellectual backdrop, and others who have presented a full associationist programme. I now briefly examine how these theorists have fed into associationism, and indicate some problems of these theories; some further problems will emerge in my critique of associationism in section 4. My critique is from the standpoint of the Marxist theory of capitalism: the requirement on workers (that is, the 90% who rely on wages for their survival) to sell their labour power to capital, the extraction of surplus value through capitalist control of the labour process, the reinvestment of accumulated surplus value to further expand it, and the multiple contradictions of these processes (Mandel, 1968; Harrison, 1978; Gough and Das, 2017). I shall refer to this theory as 'Capitalist Value Relations'.

Proudhon, as the most influential utopian socialist of the 19C, has been an important reference point for associationists. He supported small scale artisanal capitalism as liberatory for workers and small owners, but argued that it was exploited and limited by bank finance. As Marx pointed out, he ignored the tendency of capital to centralise and concentrate, and he occluded the exploitation of workers by capital – for Proudhon exploitation was an attribute of rentiers not of capitalism as such. The enthusiasm for small producers freed from rentiers is fundamental to associationism. Later in the 19C, Henry George made a similar argument: the central problem of capitalism was not capital accumulation or the exploitation of workers by capital but rather the parasitism of the landowners.

The title of E.F.Schumacher's influential book, *Small is Beautiful*: *a study of economics as if people mattered* (1974), could be the motto of associationism. Schumacher criticises capitalism for its dominance by profit-seeking, leading to lack of consideration for the creativity and well-being of workers, the quality of products, and the negative impacts on ecology. In social democratic fashion, he proposes a pragmatic balance between profitability and social benefit, between efficiency and well-being, and between private and public sector. His distinctive argument, however, is that these balances cannot be achieved through large production units or the big state; only small scale enterprise can negotiate the detailed trade-offs, and only at this scale can workers and consumers influence the enterprise. Technologies of production should therefore be appropriate for the small enterprise, 'intermediate technologies' which, as a civil servant, Schumacher promoted in the Third World. Large corporations are not open to social influence because they are run in the interests of anonymous rentier shareholders. Schumacher, like Proudhon, ignores the deep tendency towards concentration of capital, and ignores the discipline of labour by capital even within small firms.

The later work of Andre Gorz, particularly *Goodbye to the Working Class* (1982) and *Critique of Economic Reason* (1988), is a plea for associationism as the sphere of autonomous and creative 'free time', sharply distinct from the tyranny of work in capitalist production. Gorz's early work anatomised the capitalist control of the labour process, deskilling, and the disempowerment of workers (1978; cf Braverman, 1974; Gordon *et al*., 1982). Implicit was the possibility of workers' self-management at the enterprise level or at the level of the whole economy, socialism. But the defeats of trade unions by capital in the 1970s and 1980s (section 2) led to Gorz abandoning socialism as an aim. His later work justifies this by emphasising even more starkly the disempowerment of workers within capitalist waged employment, both in the 'high productivity sector' of high mechanisation/ automation where workers are the slave of the machine, and the 'low productivity sector' of consumer services where precarious work renders workers as 'servants'. In neither sector can workers influence the production process, let alone control it.[9] The traditional socialist aim of worker's non-alienated labour and creativity therefore need to be realised in the realm of free time. All citizens should be paid the same wage or state transfer payment irrespective of their employment or lack of it, a version of UBI. The amount of free time should be increased by a progressive diminution of the waged-working day, week or year, enabled by increases in productivity through automation; capitalist production of commodities is already sufficient for everyone's needs and there is no need to increase it. The realm of free time can then flourish: hobbies, sports, play and cultural production; artisanal work; not-for-profit enterprises of low productivity; domestic and caring work, no longer a stressful burden but now a creative and valued activity. A further twist to Gorz's argument is to deplore the growth of consumer services, whether private or public sector, on the grounds that they substitute for, and therefore decrease, domestic and caring work in the home, which for Gorz is a realm of freedom. Gorz has an extraordinarily rosy view of this work, which goes against fifty years of feminist scholarship and practice. But it arises naturally from his view of non-waged work as a realm of self-determination and self-realisation.

Gorz's later work shares all the key aspects of theorists of associationism. It illustrates how the defeats of the workers' movement in early neoliberal period led to left intellectuals abandoning the goal of socialism. It neglects the essential dynamics of capital accumulation: capital will not agree to an ever-diminishing working week, nor to the transfer of income to the 'low productivity sector' or to non-waged workers. There is no agent who could force capital to accept these arrangements, since he denies that workers within production have any power. Gorz abstains from changing the relations of production, and instead seeks a change the distribution of money-income.

The writing of the US socio-economist Elinor Ostrom on the commons, for which she received the Nobel prize in economics, have been another important inspiration for associationists. Ostrom has done extensive empirical research on small farmers and fishers, mainly in the Majority World, investigating how they have organised governance systems to prevent free riders in forests and seas from depleting the commons – 'the tragedy of the commons'. Her 'socio-ecological systems' framework (1990) sets out rules for successfully managing these commons: boundaries around who can participate; mechanisms for making collective choices; monitoring; sanctions on violators; scalar hierarchy of organisations; recognition of these organisations by the state. She argues that these need to be underpinned by appropriate social relations - effective communication, trust and reciprocity. Associationism in the HICs does not generally engage with extensive territorial commons. But it has seen Ostrom's work as a guide to dealing with common property of community organisations and the local state, and for governing networks of cooperative enterprises across a locality. Ostrom's formal, rule-based systems have probably seldom been achieved in the HICs; but the mostly face-to-face communication, trust and reciprocity she argues for are exactly the social relations – the social capital - to which associationists aspire.[10] Note that Ostrom's choice of research subjects, small independent producers, means that she does not have to consider the

accumulation of capital nor capital-labour relations and their potential to disrupt cooperation and consensus.

The Analytical Marxist Eric Olin Wright (2014) has given an argument for an associational economy, as part of his reconsideration of socialist economics placed within the long tradition of Marxist and Keynesian writing and practice. This work is based in Wright's earlier work on class (2009), which shifts the focus from the exploitation of all workers by capital and analyses the distribution of value among different sections of wage earners, arguing that managers, technicians and skilled workers are able to appropriate a part of surplus value and thus effectively exploit other workers, thus developing hybrid or contradictory class locations. On this basis, Wright argues against the traditional Marxist (revolutionary socialist) aim of wholly publicly owned economy, on the grounds that it is inevitably dominated, in more or less dictatorial fashion, by a managerial and technical elite. Instead, he argues for two strategies within capitalism: a 'symbiotic' strategy, what I have referred to as Traditional Social Democracy; and an 'interstitial' strategy of social, community and not-for-profit enterprises, participatory budgeting and UBI, which I call associationism. Wright's nomenclature suggests the positioning of these strategies in relation to the mainstream capitalist economy, the symbiotic strategy fully engaged in it, the interstitial strategy operating in its margins. The two strategies together constitute a heterogeneous and pluralist economy, mixing capitalism, the state and popular democracy; the aim is for the democratic elements, that is, the influence of the working class, to grow: a return to the class consensus of the postwar boom.[11]

Perhaps the most influential intellectual input into associationism in the last 30 years has been the work of Julie Graham and Kathy Gibson, sometimes writing as J.K.Gibson-Graham. Gibson-Graham, together with Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, have developed a post-structuralist, post-modern and 'anti-essentialist' political economy. They reject the Marxist account of capitalism as centred on the extraction of surplus value by *control of workers in their labour within the workplace*; rather, capitalism consists of systems of *redistribution of output/income* between capital, workers and other social actors. They reject the Marxist view that capital is compelled to expand itself without limit through the exploitation of labour, accumulation of surplus value, and its reinvestment in production. For Gibson-Graham, capitalism is not a totality centred on Value Relations but rather a plethora of diverse types of production and relations of distribution: productive and unproductive labour; class and non-class relations; capitalist and petty commodity production; unpaid domestic work; feudal/serf relations. These each exist as a *sui generis*, separate practice; they interact externally (contingently) with each other rather than internally (necessarily) as parts of the capitalist whole; none is more important than the others. Each individual can play a variety of roles not only over their lifetime but at the same moment: worker, exploiter, shareholder, independent producer, trader, servant/mistress, landlord/tenant, care giver/receiver, thief/victim of theft. Drawing on postmodern discourse theory, Gibson-Graham argue that the economic practices in which the individual is involved do not determine their moral-political nature; rather, individuals can freely construct their own narrative, aims and evaluations which are as important as the material practices.[12] Within this framework, Gibson-Graham argue that a community-collectivist (associationist) economy with progressive aims can grow and flourish. Since any economic practice can be conducted without any substantial constraint from any other, community enterprise can flourish without the constraint of Value Relations. If individuals have multiple economic roles, they can chose which ones to practice and not to practice. If the moral-political value of those relations is (at least partly) a subjective matter, then they can choose to validate practices which others might regard as oppressive such as unpaid domestic and caring work. Value Relations are then no longer an objective imposition on every individual and enterprise, by merely an *ideology* which can be rejected as a choice; hence agency is unleashed. Thus an associational economy of cooperative, creative and sharing work can flourish without the constraint of Value Relations.[13]

In the last twenty years or so, a large literature on 'de-growth' has emerged, motivated in the first place by the climate emergency, pollution and waste, and the destruction of ecosystems. For some authors, this has provided another support for an associational economy (Schmelzer *et al.*, 2022: 212-244). De-growth denotes, at minimum, a reduction in material inputs to, and outputs of, production (cf Schumacher). It is often argued to mean, additionally, a reduction in conventionally-measured GDP, that is, the monetary value of capitalist output (cf Gorz). In another variant, the production of goods and non-essential consumer services should decrease, but the provision of caring services (health, education, social care, individual care) should increase, whether or not these are produced by waged labour or by unpaid voluntary labour (contra Gorz). Associationism's focus on environmental improvement addresses the problem of resource depletion and pollution. To the extent that an associational economy is associated with reduced money incomes (low wages or trainee state-transfers in cooperatives, UBI, unpaid voluntary work), it leads to lower consumption of goods and inessential services. Associationism's focus on caring work, whether waged (through contracts from the state), through petty-commodity production (e.g. therapists) or unwaged (the voluntary sector) contributes to the shift to caring work. The de-growth literature, however, tends to sidestep the problem that the central aim of capital is the expansion its value through the expanded use of labour power and production of commodities (cf the comments on Gorz above).

The specifically political aspect of associationism has been underpinned by Jurgen Habermas and, on a different theoretical basis, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Habermas in his later writings (2014) developed an ideal type of political deliberation and policy-making which he termed 'communicative rationality', based on Enlightenment notions of knowledge and truth. Political deliberation needs to take place in fora which involve members or representatives of all relevant interests or 'stakeholders', and which have the time and resources for a full sharing of knowledge and empirics of the issues to be discussed. Each participant should present rational arguments for their policy stance, setting out not only how outcomes follow from policies but also the moral criteria on which these outcomes should be judged (Kantian reality and morality respectively). Other participants can challenge both aspects of these arguments on the basis of careful listening. On this basis, there can be discursive convergence on a consensus, encompassing both agreement on the likely outcomes of policy and how those outcomes are to be morally evaluated. This consensus then puts pressure on all social actors to conform to collective wishes, whatever their private interests; in this way, local governance can potentially examine, debate and control all and any aspects of society. This politics has been taken up by other scholars: Fung and Wright (2003) term it 'empowered participatory democracy'; Healey (1997) has written extensively on the application of communicative rationality to urban planning and politics. A corollary of this approach, emphasised by Wills (2016), is hostility to political parties: they embody entrenched and fixed *class* positions, and they insist on antagonism and opposition rather than arriving at a consensus.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) come to a similar political prescription but through post-structuralism and Gramscian politics. They reject Marxist value relations and the existence of two antagonistic classes; individuals can have multiple class and non-class positions (cf Wright and Gibson-Graham); and social identity is not rooted in economic interests but is discursively constructed (cf Gibson-Graham). But Laclau and Mouffe still wish for progressive collective political projects. Rejecting working class struggle, they find such projects in a certain reading of Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci argued that politics proceeds through projects within which coalitions of particular fractions of classes (capital, petty bourgeois, workers, peasants) agree a common political strategy which struggles for material and ideological hegemony (dominance). Laclau and Mouffe argue that these conflicting or contrary material interests, since they are themselves

discursively constructed, can be united through discourse. In particular, a 'democratic' counter-hegemonic project can be discursively constructed. Mouffe (2000) argues that different, or even antagonistic, views can, and should, be reconciled through 'agonistic' deliberation, which acknowledges the differences and conflicts in initial position, but achieves consensus on progressive policies and strategies. Thus, as in Habermas's approach, inclusive and sustained deliberation can achieve a consensus, which can potentially become hegemonic, that is, be implemented in practice. This approach can lend weight to the associationist project. A counter-hegemonic project for pluralist democracy could take the form of TSD, productivist syndicalism, or assocationism. Agonistic deliberation supports the kind of politics favoured by associationists – pluralist, diverse, but aiming at consensus.

These academic supports for associationism, like those for PMSD considered in the previous section, are highly diverse in their philosophical method and social field addressed. But they share a central feature: they ignore, or positively deny, Capitalist Value Relations. In the next two sections we shall see that this lacuna leads to multiple practical and ideological problems for associationism.

4. The problems and limits of associationism

Associationalist strategy promises to address the ills of neoliberalism and build solidaristic social relations strongly enclosed within localities while skirting round the power of capital; it thereby appears both progressive and feasible, accounting for its popularity with many community activists and left scholars. But the strategy suffers from severe limitations and contradictions. I shall consider both the immediate problems and failures of the practice of associationism considered in section 2, and the problems of its theoretical underpinnings discussed in section 3. I consider three broad aspects of associationism: economic enterprises and organisations; the relation of these to the state; and methods of political decision making.

Associationist enterprise in the capitalist sea

We consider in turn the distinct problems of three types of associationist enterprise: cooperatives using wage labour; organisations using unpaid labour; and small firms and self employment.

(i) Cooperatives and not-for-profits operating in the market

Cooperative enterprises using waged labour and producing commodities to sell in final markets are under intense pressures from the surrounding capitalist economy. This is because they are usually competing against capitalist enterprises, while they lack capital for investment in premises, equipment, training and managerial functions. This lack of capital is a necessary feature of cooperatives because of their ownership by workers. These commercial pressures, the expression of Value Relations, have a number of negative consequences. First, cooperative enterprises often become financially unviable and collapse (Amin *et al.*, 2002). In the long term in aggregate, this results in failure to produce minimum scale of agglomerations of cooperatives and thus synergies. Collapse can occur even for the largest cooperatives. The Cooperative Bank in Britain, at one time the fifth biggest retail bank and the only major cooperatively owned bank, collapsed after acquiring the Britannia Building Society in an attempt to expand its branch network and thus compete more effectively against the big four. The problem of lack of capital might seem to be overcome by enterprises owned by local government, which can draw on their revenue or borrowing power to set up not-for-profit commercial enterprises of larger scale than workers' cooperatives. But because they are competing with still-larger capitalist enterprises, these too may collapse (Hatcher, 2021).

In the 2010s, a number of British local authorities set up energy retail enterprises to provide better prices to their local citizens. But when world oil and gas prices rose in the second year of the pandemic, these local energy retailers lacked both the hedge of forward contracts and the cash reserves possessed by the big six capitalist corporations and collapsed. Some local authorities set up formally separate enterprises to build social or low rent housing; but these were squeezed by rising land prices and building costs; the two largest such enterprises (Croydon and Slough) collapsed, bankrupting their respective local authorities.[14]

Second, lack of capital means that cooperatives often rely on self-exploitation - low pay, long hours, high work intensity. This prevents them achieving their promise of providing good, empowering jobs (see further Chapter 7). A corollary is that workers in these enterprises tend to leave for better jobs once the initial enthusiasm for the association has dimmed.

Third, commercial success of community enterprises typically rely on using individuals' managerial and commercial skills; in capitalist society these are the preserve of the middle class. Indeed, we have seen the emergence of the professional 'social entrepreneur' who designs and initiates community enterprises and organises their often-multiple funding sources. In consequence, localities with a large density of the middle class tend to have a larger and more dynamic Third Sector, while (former) industrial cities and towns have a weaker sector which is much more dependent on (unstable) state patronage (Amin *et al.*, 2002; Wills, 2016). But this contradicts the aim of associationism to empower poor localities.

Fourth, where community businesses are commercially successful, the surrounding capitalist environment produces pressures on them to become capitalist enterprises or be subsumed by them. Larger community enterprises often employ senior managers who are paid high salaries. Shares in successful worker coops become tradeable. Or, like the Mondragon cooperative complex, they may set up subsidiaries which are simple profit maximising enterprises employing non-cooperators.

Fifth, associational enterprises are excluded from most sections of the contemporary world economy by insufficient capital to attain minimum economies of scale and scope. This is obviously true, for example, of mining, oil and gas; vehicle, aerospace, pharmaceutical and electronics manufacturing; software and internet infrastructure; goods transport and logistics; and infrastructure of utilities. Even funding from cooperative banks or from state-owned banks serving cooperatives is wholly insufficient to enter such sectors; they will continue to be the preserve of transnational capital, billionaire investors and nation states.

(ii) Voluntary labour

Community enterprises using wholly or mainly unpaid 'voluntary' labour suffer from different problems. When they start up they can call on people's moral commitment to their socially- or ecologically-beneficial aims. But after a year or two the hard unpaid work typically results in declining participation. The capitalist norm of a wage in exchange for routine and repetitive labour cannot easily be over-ridden by moral will-power and idealism. To the extent that they employ people with physical or learning disabilities in order to provide them with activity that will empower them, the organisation may lack the resources to operate efficiently; this contrasts with state-run production for people with disabilities, which have the funding to provide support and a good working environment and which do not need to have high productivity. Moreover, where these enterprises operate successfully, for example in community shops or cafes employing unpaid university students, they undermine the commercial viability of private sector competitors and put downward pressure on the wages of the latters' employees.

(iii) Private firms and self-employment

Associationism supports small for-profit firms and self-employed artisans and practitioners which produce 'high quality' goods and services. But setting up such enterprises is overwhelmingly done by university graduates with the necessary money- and cultural-capital; small firms set up by working class people are overwhelmingly in building trades and car repairs (men) and hair and beauty salons (women), which do not meet the associationist view of socially useful. Moreover, the high quality goods and services are high price; the enterprises producing them need to be located in higher income areas to find customers. These two circumstances again mean that these enterprises benefit the middle class more than the working class and, *a fortiori*, the poor. Moreover, small for-profit firms have two further problems arising from their capitalist essence. First, they are subject to over-accumulation, where the formation of a new firm results in the bankruptcy of an existing firm because of the given limited market (Eisenschitz and Gough, 1993: 50-54). (This is true also of the cooperative commercial enterprises discussed above.) Secondly, small firms in general have inferior wages, security and conditions of employment, and labour processes compared to large firms, in part because they are much less likely to be unionised (Rainnie, 1985; Sharzer, 2012).

Across these different forms of enterprise, then, capitalist pressures (the need for capital; competition in final markets; over-accumulation; norms of wage labour) severely constrain, or nullify, the idealistic aims of associationism. Note that these capitalist pressures are not simply external impositions: they are internal to the enterprises themselves.

(iv) Communes

As I have noted, communes, whether for co-living only or, especially, including income-producing work, are an ideal form of associationism. But their embedding in capitalist Value Relations produces deep tensions. Differences in initial ownership of property and in incomes of cooperators produce multiple tensions in who pays for what. Incomes are typically low, leading members to leave for better job opportunities elsewhere, particularly in rural communes. Differences in preparedness to do household and caring work create resentments. In a highly unequal society, equality and collectivity are hard to achieve in a small social unit (for a graphic fictional portrayal, see Ducastel and Martineau, 2008). These tensions often result in break up.

The relations between the associational economy and the state

We saw in section 2 that the associational economy, despite its ideological framing as bottom-up or 'power-to', is deeply affected by the state, both local and national. Community and cooperative enterprises providing social care are usually contractors to local government; they therefore depend on local government budgets and the extent of the discretionary powers of local government in contracting. Community initiatives are often dependent on a sympathetic local authority to provide or compulsorily purchase land and property. The local-state owned enterprises often regarded as part of the associational economy (section 2) are dependent on both the funding and the political strategy of the local government. All associational enterprises are subject to national (or in federal countries, regional) laws and taxation rules which can either facilitate or impede their functioning; this is true of production and housing cooperatives, cooperative banks and credit unions, local moneys, Local Exchange and Trading Schemes, and community rights to buy. UBI is dependent on the funds and the taxation systems of national and regional states. The latter fund or guarantee some important supports of the associational economy such as banks which lend to unconventional enterprises and advice services provided to them.

This dependence on the state should not be surprising. The contemporary state in the HICs, despite neoliberal ideology and practice, is integral to the functioning of the capitalist economy: laws of property, contract and labour markets; taxation; subsidies; industrial policy. The state is a 'moment' in capital accumulation and the relation of capital to labour. This is an implication of Value Relations as they have developed historically. Thus the associational economy is necessarily profoundly affected by the state, for good or ill.

This dependence presents a profound problem for associationist ideology and practice. Associationist ideology emphasises 'power to' and generalised social capital, and minimises 'power over' whether it be the power of the state or the power of capital exercised through the state (section 3). If associationists acknowledged the importance of the state to their aims, they would be moving into the terrain of Traditional Social Democracy, which they see as 'rigid' and 'bureaucratic' (section 1). They would also have to acknowledge that political parties matter: a supportive role of the state towards the associational economy is far more likely to come from a social democratic or socialist government (local or national) than from one of the Right; for example, we have suggested that the supportive attitude of the Quebec and Scottish governments towards associationism is a product of the respective social democratic traditions of those territories. The implication is that the associationist movement needs to involve itself in class politics: the struggle for the interests of the working class where they conflict with the power of capital. But associationism has no interest in organisations such as trade unions or left political parties which seek to unite parts or all of the working class against capital; nor is it interested in collective movements against sexism, racism and environmental destruction which oppose the perpetuation of those ills by capital and the state. Associationists are thereby compelled to accept, or to hope for, whatever policies towards the associational economy local, regional and national governments currently have.

The political organisation of associationism: decentralisation and deliberative democracy

We saw in section 2 that associationists aim for particular forms of political decision making: inclusive of all classes; deliberative; non-adversarial; aiming to reach consensus; and minimising the role of the (local) state and representative-elected legislatures. Where associationism seeks to work through the state, it privileges local or decentralised levels of the state against the national as inherently more democratic and participatory.

But this approach is problematic since it abstracts from social and economic interests and processes. Transparent communications between social actors which Habermas recommends cannot argue away the conflicts of interest between them, which are rooted in relations of power. The arguments of groups which are socio-economically powerful will tend to win. This is partly because they have more resources to construct and publicise those arguments. It is also because their arguments run with the grain of socio-economic relations: the interests of capital and the petty bourgeoisie, the inviolability of private property, and the equity and efficiency of free markets, are the *common sense* of capitalist societies (Marx, 1972 ed.). Moreover, owners of property do not have to agree to to transfer it to others, whereas workers have to exert collective social pressure to achieve gains. Suppose, for example, that the subject of deliberation is that a neighbourhood community association wishes to purchase land from a capitalist owner who does not wish to sell. The landowner wishes to develop a higher-profit use for the land; indeed, as a capitalist they *must* seek the maximum expansion of its value. The landowner therefore cannot be discursively *convinced* by the community's argument that community ownership would reap greater social benefits. The deliberative forum does not have the power to compel the sale to the community since, in this instance, the local state does not have the necessary compulsory purchase powers: in capitalist

societies private ownership is the enforced norm. Thus a Habermasian consensus cannot be arrived at, and if it were, it cannot be implemented, because negated by Value Relations.

The agonistic approach of Mouffe might be thought to avoid this criticism, since it acknowledges that there are contrary material interests involved in political deliberation. But Value Relations mean that there are contrary class interests which cannot be reconciled (though they can arrive at a temporary truce such as in industrial disputes). Moreover, Laclau and Mouffe's denial that there is a working class which has certain common interests, including the abolition or supersession of capitalism, thereby declares non-existent the only social force which can feasibly achieve an egalitarian or socialist society against the power of capital. Laclau and Mouffe see the construction of (would-be) hegemonic projects in philosophically-idealist terms as the development of 'alternative visions' – a popular trope in academic associationist writing. But alternative visions do not in themselves achieve any substantial socio-economic outcomes. Most people engage in politics in order to achieve concrete social or economic gains; if these are not achieved, then they withdraw from political engagement. (Significantly, the same is not true of the professional intelligentsia, who are inclined to engage in political debate because it is *interesting*; this layer is the social base of the Gramscian strategy.) It is through successful struggles starting from their own immediate, perceived interests that ordinary people develop and change their ideas, begin to see through the mystifications of capitalist social relations, and see that things really could be radically different. This is why Marxist politics is based in praxis rather than the development of pure ideology, as we explore in Chapter 8. But associationists are uninterested in militant collective organisations which oppose power.

The demand of associationists for the decentralisation of the state, from national to local and from core to dispersed, is equally problematic. Local government is not *ipso facto* more democratic than the national, and fragmented governance is not more democratic that the core state. This is because of the state's relation to capital accumulation. Decentralisation exacerbates competition between groups of Workers and between sections of residents in different localities, neighbourhoods and workplaces. Decentralised government cannot plan at larger spatial scales, and dispersed governance cannot plan across different aspects of society (for example job, housing, transport, public services); they therefore have less purchase over capital's investment decisions. Thus close-by, decentralised forms of governance and participation can fail to empower because they cannot achieve influence, let alone control, over the major resources of the society controlled by capital.

The failures of associationism

There are, then, deep problems with the practice and ideas of associationism across all three of its aspects considered here. The economics of community and cooperative enterprises, 'good' small firms and self-employment run up against contradictions and conflicts of Value Relations. The relations between associationist enterprises and the state is problematic because of the strong dependence of the former on the latter while associationism eschews the only method – unified class struggle – which could influence the state to support the associationist economy. Associationism's preferred methods of political deliberation treat political discourse as a realm in itself, abstracted from the compulsion of capital accumulation, material class interests and class conflict. The promotion of social capital and association is thus not a plausible strategy for overcoming poverty, nor for combatting the ill-effects of neoliberalism on the population as a whole.

In the next and final section I assess the potential and limits of the associationist movement as a whole.

5. The limits of associationism

How large could the associationist economy grow? To what extent could it replace capitalism as conventionally defined? The academic proponents of associationism considered above have given quite different answers to this question. The most cautious approach is that of Wright (2014). As we have seen, he argues for a combination of associationism ('interstitial strategy') and TSD ('symbiotic strategy'). Wright sees the interstitial strategy as inherently hemmed in and limited to a small size by capitalism; but its merit is to demonstrate in practice an *ideological* alternative to capitalism, to 'prefigure' alternative futures. The main part of his strategy is therefore to create a regulated capitalism. Wright does not pretend that this combination abolishes capitalism or creates socialism (an outcome which he anyway sees as unfeasible or undesirable). Rather, he proposes that the 'democratic' elements of popular control can grow. Wright is aware of limitations in this strategy. He thinks that the middle class will play a larger role in these strategies than manual or unskilled workers (cf section 4), so the benefits for the latter, and a fortiori for the poor, are limited. He also concedes that the democratic elements are unlikely to become dominant or the 'core' of the economy because of the continuing weight of capital; so this is not an 'alternative to capitalism' of his book's title, but at best a softened capitalism. But then, the 'prefigurative' role of associationism can bear no fruit: cooperative management, popular planning and engagement, priority to social reproduction and women's equality cannot spread to the whole society, and are therefore *not* 'prefigurative'. Thus despite Wright's analytical approach, his strategy is enmeshed in contradictions: it seeks a dynamic of increasing popular democracy, but states that this can only go so far; it promises cooperation, collectivity and full public participation, but refuses the only society in which these could be generalised and deepened, socialism, and instead delivers capitalism in the style of the postwar boom (see further Das, 2017: 145-149). Moreover, by proposing soft capitalism as the maximum that can be attained, he has no answer to what happens in a crisis of profitability such as the present period, when capital moves to demolish the previous gains which the working class has made (cf section 1).

A very different approach is that of Gorz (1989) and Schmelzer *et al.*(2022) who propose to grow the associational economy by forcibly squeezing the capitalist economy. Gorz sees the associationist economy growing through the increase in free time resulting from a steady reduction in the waged-working week, sustained by a UBI funded from the mainstream economy. But an ever-decreasing working week runs directly counter to the basic dynamic of capitalism, to expand surplus value production through expanded exploitation of labour power. It could only be achieved by the collective power of the whole working class, particularly workers in production;[15] but Gorz rejects the possibility of such a movement because he sees the working class within waged production as completely subordinated to capital. Schmelzer *et al.* envisage limiting or eliminating large capital through draconian regulations and social targets to force their reduction or closure, and by declaring that enterprises of a certain size are held in common or publicly owned (2022: 220-222). But capital would not accept its own abolition: this requires the taking of power by the collective working class, but the authors see de-growth as arising from multiple, diverse and fragmented initiatives 'from below'. Thus Gorz and Schmelzer *et al. w*ish for an ever-expanding associational economy from increasing restriction of the capitalist economy, but reject or evade the only means by which this could be achieved.

The most optimistic and ambitious proponents of associationism are Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006). Since they understand capitalism as a system of distribution rather than of capital accumulation and exploitation, the dynamics of capitalism towards indefinite expansion of capital and domination of workers within production can be forgotten, or rejected as mere ideology. There are then no limits

to new forms of enterprise and collaboration which redistribute output in progressive ways. The implication is that the associationism can expand without limit given the political will. This optimism relies on ignoring the multiple barriers posed by Value Relations to the expansion of the associationist economy that I noted in section 4: that most of the contemporary economy in HICs has economies of scale and scope that community enterprises and workers' cooperatives cannot possibly achieve; that many successful for-profit community enterprises become normal capitalist firms; that workers leave community employment because of low or non-existent wages arising, *inter alia*, from their lack of capital; that expansion of the associational economy depends on state regulation and funding which are only obtainable through collective working class struggle which Gibson-Graham reject. Moreover, even if associationism was successful in becoming the dominant form of the economy and society, its achievement would be extremely limited from the standpoint of human liberation. They state their aim in their book's title, 'The End of Capitalism (As We Know It)'. The ambiguity of this aim points to the fact that the associationism they advocate *is still capitalism*, in the sense of accumulation of capital by individual enterprises (for-profits) in competition with each other, and the employment of wage labour (albeit some at very low or zero wages); there is no planning of investment, production, products and wages by the collective producers (that is, the end of capitalism). This society would therefore still be subject to all the crisis tendencies characteristic of capitalism: over-accumulation and devalorisation, social and spatial uneven development, discipline of employers of workers, wage depression and poverty. Gibson-Graham present their theorisations as a 'feminist' reworking of political economy. But their associationist model lacks the key practices which can achieve greater equality for women under capitalism: opening of male-dominated sectors to women; equal pay for equal work; raising wages and conditions in female-dominated sectors; free high-quality nurseries and free care for the elderly, infirm; affordable housing for all households. To improve these things requires class struggle in industries, across the economy, and in the state, which Gibson-Graham eschews; to achieve them fully requires a collectively planned economy which they, like Wright, reject.

We see, then, that the proponents of associationism do not have a strategy for superseding capitalism. This failure is both a result and a cause of its *philosophical idealism* (see note 3). I have discussed how Habermas, Laclau and Mouffe envisage political debate as existing in its own sphere of ideas untrammelled by materially-based social relations, interests and resources. In this exalted sphere, it is possible to reached a consensus. In a Hegelian move, this consensus idea can then be implemented unproblematically in the material realm. Similarly, the central notion of PMSD, the power of horizontal association ('power to'), abstracts from from the real power of capital over labour and the material underpinnings of women's and racial/ethnic the real. Gibson-Graham's view of Value Relations as mere ideology is an idealist manoeuvre. The presentation of associationism as prefigurative of a better future can occlude the question of material feasibility.

The practical form of this philosophical idealism is *political moralism*. We have seen in sections 2 and 4 how associationist practice relies heavily on moral exhortation: if a cooperative is squeezed by the market, cooperators should cut their wages or intensify their work because cooperation is a political good; volunteers should stay in a voluntary organisation despite boredom, exhaustion and lack of income because it is working for the social good; participants in setting up a shared housing scheme should endure years of planning meetings in unpaid time and disruption of their existing financial and/or housing arrangements. This moralism can also appear in associationist demands on the state: proponents of UBI do not seriously engage with the material objections to it (overall cost to the state; its repudiation of a social commensuration of the value of work; or a benefit too low to live on) because they regard it as an obvious moral good that all should have the opportunity to live their lives free from supervision by employer or state. This moralism, then, is an idealist response

to the material problems and failures of associationist practice which arise from Capitalist Value Relations.

We saw in section 1 how PMSD, and associationism in particular, arose as a response to the defeats of labour by the capital's neoliberal offensive. But by eschewing working class struggle against capital, associationism is in a weak position to advance working class interests. Rather, it internalises many features of neoliberalism: creation your own employment, whether in cooperative or private enterprise; competing in final markets; intensification of work. By taking on work previously done by the state on a contract basis or through voluntary work, it has smoothed the decline of state services.[16] But in our view, associationism and the building of social capital are not fated to play a marginal role or a soft wing of neoliberalism. In Chapter 3 we discuss the building of social capital of and for working class struggle. In Chapter 6 we explore how associationists can align with, support, and be supported by trade union and other working class struggle against capital. In Chapter 7 we discuss how the appeal and advantages for popular involvement of local scale organisation can be deployed in local collective working class resistance.

Notes

1. Leading proponents of PMSD in Britain have been Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, their inappropriately-named journal *Marxism Today*, and the highly-influential volume they edited, *New Times* (1989); the public intellectuals Charlie Leadbetter and David Held; the prolific writings of Geof Mulgan (for example 1991) and the think-tank he founded, Demos; social-economists such as Geof Hodgson (1984) and the journal *Economy and Society*. The geographer Doreen Massey, particularly in her post-modern phase (Massey, 2005), and the geography journal *Space and Society* has also been influential in developing PMSD. For a poetic argument for PMSD see Beilharz (1994). For critiques of PSDM, see Meiskins Wood (1986) and Calinicos (1989).

2. After the defeat of the British miners' strike in 1985, the editor of *Marxism Today* placed a poster on his door which read 'We defeated the miners'.

3. Some PMSD writing has its philosophical roots in positivist social science, particularly Weberianism; this includes the economic-and political-institutionalists and most socio-economists. But most PMSD writing has its philosophical roots in post-structuralism and postmodernism. Post-structuralism developed from the 1980s as a critique of Althusserian structuralist Marxism (the main intellectual approach of the European Communist Parties) which argued, correctly, that Althusser's theory was unable to account for empirically important features of social structures. However, they did not locate this problem in Althusser's lack of dialectics. Rather, some post-structuralists such as Hirst concluded that abstract structures and processes as such should simply be abandoned in favour of empirical description. Postmodernists express the same point in their rejection of all 'grand narratives'. Other post-structuralists such as Wright, Resnik, Woolf and Gibson-Graham acknowledge the existence of structures but located the empirical in 'over-determination' where structures relate externally rather than dialectically through internal relations. This results in an arbitrariness and eclecticism of explanation which is no explanation, and thus empiricism (see Das, 2017: 125-7). Other post-structuralists, particularly neo-Gramscians such as Hall, Laclau, Mouffe, (later) Massey and Jessop, rejected structures other than the ideological-political, converging with Foucault's power-knowledge as the fundamental social structure. These authors have given PMSD a strong strand of philosophical idealism and moralism, in which political ideas exist detached from, and putatively dominating, material social processes.

4. In the Regulationist theorisation of Jessop (1993), a new, post-Fordist epoch is similarly conceptualised as a 'Schumpeterian workfare state' within which technical innovation is the key driving force of capitalism and the state refrains from industrial intervention.

5. For a critique of the thesis of a new epoch of 'flexible production', see Gough (1992; 1996a; 1996b). Eisenschitz and Gough (1996) show the ineffectiveness of the productive syndicalist strategy in its own terms, and argue that its effect is to increase divisions within the working class.

6. Our use of the term 'associationism' as distinct from productive syndicalism might be confusing, in that Cooke and Morgan's discussion of the latter strategy names it 'the associational economy'. 'Association' in their work appears as the association of workers within an enterprise with each other, and the association of those workers with management.

7. In the last two decades, the largest scale and most ambitious initiatives in production of an associationist type have been in fundamental software and the internet; these include Open Source software as an alternative to Microsoft and Apple, Wikepedia, and projects to develop non-corporate social media. They rely on the unpaid work of software professions, motivated by social good, through international collaborations. Open Source software is now a major part of global basic software. There are nevertheless problems in this form of work (see for example Moore and Taylor, 2009) which are similar to the problems of associationist voluntary work discussed below. We do not consider this form of associationism in this chapter because it is not rooted in localities and does not seek to develop 'social capital'. Another international movement which might be termed associationist is Fair Trade, a not-for-profit which organises better prices for small producers in the Majority World with large purchasers in the HICs.

8. The ideal form of state decision making for associationists is the citizens' assembly. Citizens chosen at random meet for weeks or months, advised by experts, to make recommendations on a particular question. 'Polarised' debate between political parties is avoided, participants are encouraged to listen to each other, and issues can be considered in depth. Citizens' assemblies were used in recent times before the Irish referendum on abortion and the Chilean referendum on a new constitution. But we do not know of any examples at a local scale, probably, in part, because of the large cost to the state.

9. Many people who have not read Gorz assume that 'farewell to the working class' argues a 'bourgeoisification' thesis, that 'we are all middle class now' and content in our working lives, explaining the decline in trade union membership. Gorz's argument is precisely the opposite: that waged workers are completely proletarianised, deskilled and disempowered.

10. The themes of trust and reciprocity are also central to the productive syndicalism variant of PMSD (section 2). Flexible specialist industrial districts achieve their high productivity and innovation through trusting and accommodating relations between the SMEs in their mutual contracting, their eschewing of cost-cutting strategies, and their willing contribution to collective services; and relations between firms and their (skilled) workers are based on trust and flexible cooperation (Piore and Sabel, 1984; Hirst and Zeitlin, 1989; Storper, 1998).

11. For a detailed exposition and critique of Wright's theory of class and his strategy for democratic capitalism, see Das, 2017: Chs 2 and 4.

12. The view that social interests are discursively constructed has been developed in an extreme form by Judith Butler. Social identities and actions are 'performative', that is, freely chosen without material constraint or determination.

13. For a detailed exposition and critique of Resnick, Wolff and Gibson-Graham, see Das, 2017: Chs 3 and 4.

14. A number of other British local authorities became large scale commercial property developers, not for social benefit but to increase their revenue in the face of central government cuts, or simply to accumulate. But these were caught by oversupply of commercial space, exacerbated by the pandemic. This bankrupted the respective local authorities because they did not have the massive cash reserves of the major property companies.

15. It is possible to imagine an enforced shorter working week in a situation of 'dual power', that is, where the working class is able to dictate some important actions to capital. But this situation is inherently unstable and short lived; for the beneficial actions to be maintained, the working class has to expropriate capital.

16. In 2002 in Britain, Planet Patrol, a not-for-profit organisation, organised thousands of volunteers to monitor the water quality of rivers. This achieved the associationist aim of collective work and educating people in ecology. But it was only necessary because the private water companies are effectively unregulated, and the Environment Agency has been subject to repeated cuts in staffing since 2010 and is unable to carry out the monitoring of water quality. The Planet Patrol initiative thus achieves the Conservative prime minister David Cameron's 'Big Society' strategy, of voluntary work substituting for state employment.

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