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Crossed perspectives on grey zones and ambivalences in bike delivery platform cooperatives: the case of Mensakas as a member of the CoopCycle Federation and platform cooperative

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Abstract: The article examines the case of a Barcelona-based cooperative that is a member of the platform cooperative CoopCycle, specialised in bike delivery. Welcoming the invitation from labour scholars to adopt the concept of grey zone as a methodological and theoretical tool, we start from our empirical observations in the field, and intersect our critical perspectives in geography, organisation studies, and sociology to explore existing grey zones in the platform cooperative movement. Building on this concept, we highlight grey zones in economic and labour relations as well as in the circulation of knowledge happening within the cooperative. Based on a longitudinal ethnographic study, this article describes how this counterplatform is based on permanent compromises that generate grey zones between solidarity and competition, between paid and unpaid work, and among reinventing, integrating or hybridising managerial knowledge. It shows how the implementation of platform cooperatives is supported and constrained by the different relationships between the alternative and its economic and institutional context. This paper pleads for both a grounded and longitudinal approach to alternative organisations such as platform cooperative; this insider-focused approach suggests researchers to cross disciplines and exchange views with practitioners and policy makers in order to build shared and situated knowledge.

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Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, a wide range of economic sectors has been significantly transformed by the rise of digital platforms. The term platform economy broadly refers to business models in which digital platforms function as intermediaries between service providers and users (Srnicek, 2017). Building on this, Poell et al. (2019) define the process of platformisation as “the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms” (p. 5). A specific subset of the platform economy is the gig economy, which refers to emerging forms of digital labour where workers, classified as freelancers or independent workers, provide services mediated through opaque algorithmic systems (Srnc et al., 2024). Beyond the well-documented case of Uber’s disruption of the transport sector, platformisation has also transformed industries such as food delivery, domestic cleaning, and care work. A growing body of critical literature has analysed these dynamics, consistently pointing to the novel forms of labour exploitation embedded in these business models.

In response to these exploitative businesses, the platform cooperative movement emerged over the past decade as a key alternative. Seeking to escape the “Uberization” of their sectors, an increasing number of workers organised strikes and developed new forms of resistance; against this backdrop, a few of them took back the

long cooperative tradition (Rafélis de Broves et al., 2024). This is how, mostly in the global North, platform cooperativism developed as an exit strategy (Hirschman, 1971) for workers washed out by platform capitalism. The bike delivery sector, in particular, suffered a strong uberisation, prompting multiple forms of resistance. For instance, a key example is the CoopCycle Federation, which pools members' resources and collectively develops its own digital technology. Founded in 2017, the Federation, named after its software, included fifty-seven cooperatives and democratically governed collectives as of August 2025 (according to their Annual General Meeting [AGM] that we attended). These groups deliver hot meals and/or provide first- and last-mile services for local commerce and subcontracts. As part of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), these new cooperatives perfectly embody the concept of a Digital Solidarity Economy, defending workers' rights and promoting workplace democracy, while developing their own platform for entrepreneurial activity. This orientation is particularly evident in CoopCycle's technological and licensing choices. The Federations' Coopyleft license ensures that its digital platform can be shared only with cooperatives and collectives that align with its values and commit to collaborative co-design.

Yet, platform cooperatives operate under intense market pressures and must constantly negotiate compromises that challenge their organisational principles. Therefore, this article asks to what extent such compromises, made to ensure survival within the capitalist system, undermine or contradict the principles these initiatives seek to uphold. We argue that such compromises and contradictions, as observed in the field, can be understood as 'grey zones', characteristics of the SSE within hybrid capitalist economic systems (Wright, 2013) in which they are embedded. Over the past twenty-five years, labour scholarship advanced the notion of *grey zones* to capture blurred employment and labour regimes in mega-platforms like Uber. Here, we adopt and adapt this concept to a different object of study. Based on an empirical observation, we suggest that platform cooperatives are not only part of the SSE but also permeate the capitalist economy, embodying intrinsic ambivalences as they balance the need for economic viability with transformative goals. This framing contributed to existing debates on the challenges, tensions and paradoxes faced by this emergent movement and its ongoing experimentations (Bunders et al., 2022; Mannan and Pek, 2024; Bunders and de Moor, 2024). In particular, we adopt this concept to highlight new theoretical ambivalences; crucially, we are able to do so because of our methodological approach that goes beyond interviewing leadership figures to uncover the lived ambivalences shaping cooperative practices.

Accordingly, this article examines these Digital Solidarity Economies as spaces of self-management (within coops), funds redistribution (within public authorities), and intercooperation (among coops and other SSE actors) (Polanyi, 1944). We focus on how these organisations attempt to recompose economic and labour relations and the managerial tools that underpin such recomposition. The grey zones concept guides our analysis, highlighting three main topics where ambivalences emerge in bike delivery platform cooperatives: economic relations, labour, and knowledge rejection, appropriation, and hybridisation. This conceptual lens enables a critical but constructive examination of these initiatives by assessing how they deal with these blurred boundaries, and beyond a pure focus on employment status.

Empirically, we draw on a multiscalar analysis of Mensakas, a Barcelona-based delivery workers' cooperative and member of CoopCycle. These two levels – Federation and local cooperative – have distinct dynamics. Mensakas joined Coopcycle after attempting to create its own platform. The cooperative then became one of the key players of the federation while playing a leading role at the local level, particularly the second-degree cooperative Som Ecologista. Coopcycle is also a “cooperative of cooperatives” backed by an association of the same name, committed to gig economy delivery workers: with 57 cooperatives and association members in 2025, this structure appears as a key element of inter-cooperation that goes beyond simply providing software. Mensakas, as a local alternative and a member of CoopCycle's federation, confronts compromises between political principles and their economic practices, thus generating grey zones.

By analysing grey zones across the three domains mentioned above, we identify ambivalences common to Digital Solidarity Economies and the broader SSE. Our argument is based on a qualitative and extended study conducted at both the Federation and cooperative levels, through the Mensakas case study. We also write from the grey zone of an interdisciplinary collaboration, as further discussed in the methodological section. While acknowledging the situatedness of the cooperative movement, which cannot be separated from its specific context, our multiscalar and multidisciplinary analysis highlights recurrent patterns across the movement. Thus, an insider-focused approach is essential, not to idealise the transformative potential of these cooperatives, and to examine how these collective entities attempt to democratically navigate ambivalences within them. Following Kasparian (2022), this entails understanding how each cooperative contends with institutional, legal, or physical constraints that make them economically precarious.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on the grey

zone concept and platform cooperativism, and introduces the case study. The third section outlines the methodology on which the paper is built. The fourth one presents our empirical findings, spotlighting grey zones around economic connections, labour relations, and knowledge hybridisation. In conclusion, we summarise our argument, open up for further discussions, and advocate for the extensive use of the grey zone concept. This, we argue, helps make visible both the possibilities and contradictions of the movement, avoiding its romanticisation but also resisting a deterministic critique based on its current limitations (Bretos et al., 2024).

Expanding the concept of ‘grey zones’: towards an application to platform cooperativism

The concept of grey zones first appeared in legal studies at the beginning of the century to highlight the murkiness between employment and self-employment. By highlighting the autonomy within subordination in the former, and the fidelity within independence in the latter, Alain Supiot (2000) underscored the dilution of the subordination link that characterises both categories. More than fifteen years later, Christian Azaïs and colleagues (2017) revisited the concept in relation to the rise of digital platforms. Building on Supiot’s objective, they sought to move beyond the binary distinctions that traditionally shaped working conditions, challenging the sharp separation between employees and independent workers.

Since then, the concept has been used to examine the gaps between new forms of employment and work relationships (Boulin and Kesselman, 2018). In this regard, Bureau and Dieuaide (2018) advocate for its use to overcome fixed binarism. For them, by employing this concept, “the game remains open” (p. 265), allowing for multi-dimensional analysis. Along similar lines to the work proposed here, Bureau and Corsani (2018) adapted the concept to cases of collective action organised through non-hierarchical forms of coordination aimed at pooling both work and knowledge. They used the concept as a descriptive tool to expose capitalism’s grey zones. In our work, we extend this approach to explore not only capitalism’s but also platform cooperativism’s grey zones.

Our study welcomes the more recent invitation by Carelli, Dieuaide, and Kesselmann (2022) to embrace the concept as an open-ended framework that mobilises and intersects diverse theories and methodologies to make invisible grey zones visible. We therefore build on this literature and adopt the concept as an analytical framework not limited to issues of labour rights, but one that helps grasp concrete practices framed in terms of ambivalence, tensions or paradoxes (Bunders and De Moor, 2024).

In everyday language, grey zones denote situations of relational ambiguity, while in the social sciences, they describe the legal blurring between salaried and self-employed work. However, the notion also captures “a process of shifting boundaries and reshaping interactions between different categories of actors in labour relations” (Rafélis de Broves, 2022). Thus, grey zones have a polysemic nature: they refer not only to spaces where labour rights have become ineffective but also to new entrepreneurial strategies that contribute to both the erosion (Wright, 2019) and the reproduction (Shanahan, 2024) of the capitalist system. They also help shed empirical light on Sandoval’s (2020) notion of “entrepreneurial activism”. Building on these contributions, our research investigates the existence of grey zones within the platform cooperative movement. This concept allows us to move beyond the conventional binary that positions cooperative enterprises simply as alternatives to capitalist experiences. While this is certainly the case, our analysis highlights additional grey zones that deserve closer attention and resist straightforward classification.

Cooperative enterprises, as part of the SSE, are rooted in democratic values and aim to achieve both economic and social sustainability (Fuster Morell et al., 2021). Since the late 19th century, cooperativism has played a crucial role in shaping national, regional and local economies (Draperi, 2012; 2017), such as the pioneering Rochdale model in England, the Emilia-Romagna region in Italy, Catalonia and the Basque Country in Spain, or the worker recovered enterprises movement in Argentina (Ruggeri, 2017; Kasparian, 2021). Within this broader tradition, the platform cooperative movement has emerged as a tangible alternative to the multifaceted landscape of platform capitalisms (Steinberg et al., 2025). These alternative digital platforms are organised under “fairer ownership and governance conditions” and they assume a different role to digital technologies (Kasparian, 2025, p. 249). In Trebor Scholz’s (2016) foundational vision, the movement was conceived as a response to the exploitative dynamics of the gig economy, proposing worker-owned digital platforms. Since that first theorisation, platform cooperativism has evolved, expanding its reach across various sectors, including short-term rentals and data commons (Schneider, 2018; Scholz, 2023; Fink, 2024).

This growing field has drawn increasing scholarly attention, helping to clarify its distinctive features; generally, platform cooperatives are distinguished by democratic governance structures and the use of non-extractive digital technologies (Fuster Morell et al., 2021). Recent work has also explored the challenges related to participation (Mannan and Pek, 2024), the risk of co-optation (Sandoval, 2020), the more democratic and desirable technological orientation (Fortuny-Sicart et al.,

2024), and the constant paradoxes and tensions it faces (Bunders and De Moor, 2024). Additionally, scholars have highlighted the need to explore the economic viability of these platforms (Ghirlanda and Kirov, 2024) and the need to contextualise their development (Kasparian, 2022; Grohman and Qiu, 2020), as both aspects are critical to their evolution. As highlighted by Cañada, Izcara and Zapata (2024), research on cooperative platforms can benefit from critically engaging with the tensions already documented in the literature (Bunders & de Moor, 2024; Mannan & Pek, 2024; Rafélis de Broves 2022) when approached through a localised and multidisciplinary lens.

So far, the term grey zones has been used in Uber studies to criticise strategies of labour appropriation and extractivism, but not for platform cooperativism. Yet these “counter-platforms” (Benvegnù et al., 2021), which combine economic and political activity (Quijoux, 2018), also face ambivalences and tensions that are characteristics of alternatives, and also generate grey zones or even degenerate into practices such as labour exploitation, wage cuts, and hierarchical management. This blind spot probably stems from the fact that platform cooperativism studies have been constructed in the mirror of Uber studies, privileging discourse-centred approaches that do not always capture the distance between principles and practices.

As Grohmann (2023) notes, despite global connections, platform cooperatives are deeply embedded in their local institutional contexts, which can either support or constrain their development, thus making it difficult to generalise at a global level. All these entities are therefore embedded in their specific conditions. The cycle logistics sector widely benefited from the recent turn that cities are adopting towards zero-emission mobility and logistics: in Barcelona, strict regulations on last-mile logistics have been introduced as part of broader mobility transformations (Guichoux, 2024, b). Moreover, in Catalunya, the SSE has received significant financial and training support from various levels of government over the last decade (Cañada et al., 2023).

In line with the growing academic attention that platform cooperatives recently received, our case benefited from astonishing attentiveness from researchers. This can be explained not only by their interesting path as concrete responses to a key sector of the gig economy, but also by the absence of clear policy implementation contesting the emergence and consolidation of the latter (Savoldelli, 2021; Simonet, 2024; Chaibi, 2024). As the literature already put forth, Mensakas and CoopCycle were both created with the aim of being an alternative to capitalist delivery digital platforms (Guichoux 2024). Yet, even when it emerges as an alternative, its

relationship to and dependence on the mainstream continues to matter (Shanahan, 2024), simultaneously sustaining their viability while partially reproducing the existing power relations between big business and its subcontractors (Fortuny-Sicart, 2025). As will be clarified in the empirical section, applying the concept of grey zones to platform cooperativism allows us to focus our study not only on its resistance to Uberisation, but also on its specific emerging grey zones.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach (Stake, 1995), as it offers a consistent framework for capturing the complexity and particularities of the phenomena under study and for preserving the multiple realities and conflicting opinions (*ib.*). In this section, we first introduce our case study and then introduce our methodological work.

Mensakas, and its membership of the Federation and platform cooperative CoopCycle, was considered a revealing case that could serve as a basis for an in-depth analysis of the ambivalences faced by platform cooperatives, as hybrid organisations, when putting their ideals into practice within the capitalist economic hybrid systems (Wright, 2013). The choice was guided by both its relevance to our research focus and by our direct access to the field where we conducted our research. The intuition on which this article is based emerged from our previous fieldwork as a form of a mystery (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011), after finding unexpected research results at the local level (at Mensakas' workplace) but also at the level of the Federation (CoopCycle).

Mensakas was founded in 2018 by a group of riders who were already part of the *Riders X Derechos* grassroots collective¹ (Guichoux, 2024, a). After being deactivated by Deliveroo, they turned to the cooperative model to continue working as bike couriers in Barcelona (Soto Aliaga, 2023). As the first platform cooperative in Catalunya, Mensakas represents a groundbreaking initiative within the region's SSE (Cañada et al., 2024). In line with existing research, the cooperative has significantly benefited from Catalunya's favourable institutional environment, which, as previously suggested, has long fostered cooperative practices and alternative economic models (Cañada et al., 2023).

Despite initial efforts to develop its own digital platform, Mensakas was ultimately

1. Riders x Derechos literally means "rights for delivery riders" and stems from a movement that began in Barcelona in 2017, which developed outside the main trade unions and played a decisive role in drafting the Riders Regulation Act.

unsuccessful in doing so and later chose to join the Coopcycle Federation. The participation in the Federation is just one of many forms of intercooperation that the cooperative has established over time. As explored in section 4.1, the cooperative is also part of Som Ecologista, a Catalan network of bike logistics. Finally, as put forth in section 4.2, since its creation, the cooperative has diversified its service, almost completely abandoning food delivery. Currently, the main activity is represented by last-mile logistics, thanks to the building they are renting out in a central part of the city. Due to this shift in service, Mensakas has also been strengthened by the recent turn in the logistics sector aimed at reducing emissions. Nevertheless, the cooperative faces competition from other firms, some likewise financed by various levels of government.

CoopCycle was founded in France in 2017 by a group of volunteers (not delivery workers themselves) that emerged during the *Nuit Debout*, an occupy-type movement embedded in the social movement against labour reforms in France. This initial group of volunteers aimed to develop an alternative digital commons as a way of engaging politically against the uberisation of work. Even if the initial idea emerged in Paris, it quickly expanded throughout Europe and beyond, to countries such as Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, and Canada. To become a member, delivery organisations must be an SSE entity based on the definition of the European Union and prefer the status of employees rather than independent workers. The Federation has the legal form of an association and, at the time of writing this manuscript, it was expected to become a French multi-stakeholder cooperative (SCIC) in the coming months. The platform, which provides logistics and marketplace software to its members, is federated, allowing the model to grow in breadth rather than height (Kasparian, 2022). Despite its growth, CoopCycle has maintained a democratic governance structure. The founders have gradually ceded their power to a democratically elected council that represents the members of the entire CoopCycle Federation. Currently, the main core activities are food delivery (which refers to the core activity of platforms such as Deliveroo or Glovo), last mile (a logistical step aimed at delivering a product to the end customer, i.e. bringing a parcel from its final storage location to the end customer) and local commerce (e.g. delivery for bakeries, local stores, flower stores, etc.).

We found Carelli et al.'s (2022) invitation about grey zones to be the perfect opportunity to generate knowledge grounded in the intersection of our disciplines: geography, organisation studies, and sociology. When we discussed our findings, especially the most surprising ones related to the ambivalences of platform cooperatives, we realised, on the one hand, that there was an unexplored area that needed

to be studied, but also that each of us had different, albeit complementary, interpretations of this phenomenon, influenced by our respective disciplines. Our work aims not only to produce knowledge about the grey zones of the SSE, but also to detail how we collectively produced this epistemological effort. Our work is based on the dialogue between qualitative and ethnographic fieldworks we have separately conducted with Mensakas (Eccher and Guichoux) and CoopCycle (Fortuny-Sicart and Guichoux) over the past four years, which provided immersion at both levels and served as a rich source of triangulation. Together, these fieldworks provide an in-depth longitudinal understanding that stems from our direct engagement and avoids the pitfall of short-term approaches that often focus on the context of emergence and the founders' point of view. Therefore, it allowed us to use a combination of data collection methods that are summarised in Table 1:

TABLE 1: Synthesised table of methods adopted and the data collected

METHODS	MATERIAL
Interviews	• 12 interviews with CoopCycle's founders, volunteers, developers, federation employees, board members, and former and existing presidents and coordinators (2022–2024). • 20 interviews with a sample of workers of cooperatives and associations which are CoopCycle members (2023–2024). • 12 interviews with Mensakas riders (2023–2024). • 8 interviews with Mensakas' subcontractors (2024).
On-Site Observation	• Two authors did 10 months of participant observation as riders in Mensakas. • Two authors observed and participated as translators in CoopCycle's board meetings and internal training courses during the period 2023–2025. • Two authors participated as translators in the 2023, 2024, and 2025 CoopCycle's AGMs, and the third one attended the 2024 and 2025 AGMs. • One author did non-participative observation in the mentoring session in Mensakas in 2024 organised by CoopCycle's federation. • One author did participant observation of trainings organised by the second-tier cooperative Som Ecologista.
Research Diary	• Each researcher had extensive fieldnotes and reflections collected during the research process, together with data gathered and analysed.
Archive Analysis	• CoopCycle license model: https://wiki.coopcycle.org/fr:license • Official CoopCycle documentation: https://docs.coopcycle.org/en/

METHODS	MATERIAL
	• Internal documents and communications (concerning governance, decisions, software development, strategic proposals and roadmaps). • Erasmus+ internal documents and presentations for each session.
Online Observations	• Blog: https://blogs.mediapart.fr/coopcycle/blog • Website: https://coopcycle.org/fr/ • Access to CoopCycle's Slack channels, including group discussions from 2017 to 2025. • When volunteering as bike couriers, the two authors could experiment with the use of Coopcycle digital platform and of other digital tools adopted by Mensakas (e.g. Telegram chats).

Compared with most existing research on platform cooperativism, which often relies on interviews with founders or leaders (Mannan and Pek, 2024) or with members at an early stage of the cooperative project (e.g. Cañada et al., 2024; Alquézar Crusellas, 2025), thus producing narratives shaped by the initial desires and aspirations of participants rather than by the realities of the everyday cooperative life, our approach offers a more grounded perspective. Additionally, we acknowledge Soto Aliaga's (2023) critique regarding the idealisation of platform cooperativism and the risk that such portrayals place additional pressure on members.

By taking a longitudinal and multidisciplinary approach, our engagement allowed us to explore both the challenges and achievements of cooperative life. During this investigation, subjective involvement was not an obstacle but a requirement to access the field and conduct scientific work. Our direct participation allowed us to build relationships based on trust, which enabled us to access the field in exchange for our free work for the cooperatives. This foothold also gave us access to confidential documents such as financial statements, employment contracts, and meeting minutes.

For the data analysis, we employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), consistent with our critical and comprehensive approach (Charmaz, 2017), and with our reflexive methodological emphasis (Charmaz, 2006; Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2017). The result of this analysis was the emergence of three main categories of grey zones specific to the experiences of the members of the delivery platform cooperative here studied. The three categories are extensively explored in the next empirical section. We argue that grey zones, such as those emerging from this article, should be seen as an acknowledgement of the current

limitations and challenges of platform cooperatives, which could serve as part of a rethinking of how these organisations could expand their transformative potential. Therefore, this work also aims to inform policies seeking to expand their transformative potential, for example, by better balancing the power relations between these SSE organisations and the large multinational companies on which they depend or to which they are closely linked.

Grey zones in bike delivery platform cooperatives

Thanks to our fieldwork, we spotlight grey zones in three key areas of the bike delivery cooperatives using digital platforms: the sometimes ambiguous relationships, both economically and in the workplace, and the way in which the knowledge circulates and hybridises between the Federation and the local level, and within it.

4.1 Economic relations: between the dominant and the alternative

The first aspect concerns the economic relations that these cooperatives developed over the past few years and how they try to survive, hence compete, in the delivery sector of our cities. As this section clarifies, this includes both capitalist and cooperative interactions established by Mensakas at a multiscalar level. The cooperative was originally established to counter the exploitative conditions of the gig economy and promote alternative consumption models in urban spaces. Therefore, it may seem conflicting for Mensakas to deliver for large logistical chains when attempting to diversify its business model. On top of being a common characteristic in the CoopCycle Federation, interacting with capitalist companies does not only represent a feature of dependency for Mensakas, but also one in which they have some agency. While depending economically on huge companies, the latter are motivated to work with them, due to the policy implemented by governments, exactly as for the case of Barcelona urban freight mobility. As previously specified, many cities are shifting towards zero-emission solutions in these sectors, thus forcing companies to interact with these alternative experiences.

As part of the Catalan SSE, Mensakas aims to support local businesses and other cooperatives within the SSE network, as their preference for non-conventional commercial actors is closely tied to their political struggle. In this sense, the economic relations developed by the cooperative become a battleground for a more just society. However, a closer examination of actual economic relations, beyond the members' discourse, reveals a more complex reality. Mensakas' clients, meaning the businesses that outsource their last-mile deliveries to the cooperative, are

not exclusively local businesses or cooperatives. Among the 27 enterprises mapped between January and October 2024 during the ethnographic work of one of the authors, only 10 were part of the SSE, while the remaining 17 were conventional businesses, thus showing that this alternative is embedded in an economic network mainly dominated by non-SSE organisations. This observation results in two key points: first, it is noteworthy that, even in a city like Barcelona, where the SSE is well developed, only a few cooperatives outsource their logistics to a cooperative delivery service, likely relying instead on capitalist logistics enterprises, thus generating an additional economic grey zone. This may be due to several reasons that lay outside the scope of this paper. Second, this finding highlights the heterogeneity of the economic relations that the delivery cooperative establishes. Dependence on capitalist enterprises is a feature which requires further critical analysis at the level of CoopCycle's members, such as Mensakas, but also at the level of the digital infrastructure needed to operate (Estima and Lemos, 2025).

For instance, among these enterprises are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), such as a Catalan company that sells boxes of fruit and vegetables rejected by large retailers. For Mensakas' economy, this is a very important client since the huge volume of deliveries allows the cooperative to cover the costs of other smaller actors only able to pay less for Mensakas' service. That is also why, during a Mensakas General Assembly in 2023, the members acknowledged the importance of keeping this client "as a bridge to find other clients that better reflect our values" (fieldwork note 12/2023).

Differently, we observe in Mensakas, as well as in other cooperatives that are part of CoopCycle, an interaction with large international logistics firms. In Catalunya, the second-tier cooperative Som Ecologista (of which Mensakas is part) works with Dachser, another German company expanding its operations in Europe by acquiring national logistics enterprises.

The experience of Som Ecologista functions as a crucial bargaining tool with multinational enterprises when considering the broader economic strategies of delivery cooperatives. Furthermore, it allows us to present an additional grey zone that goes beyond the pure economic relations. Notably, Mensakas and Som Ecologista share the same president, highlighting the close ties characterising this type of initiative. The second-tier cooperative serves as a mechanism to ensure the sustainability of the cooperatives through intercooperation. For example, members of one cooperative sometimes offer their working hours to another cooperative when needed. Additionally, when Mensakas' building caught fire in December 2024, the cooperative was able to continue its operations only thanks to the

solidarity it mobilised: other cooperatives, as well as private enterprises, lent cargo bikes and other essential equipment to sustain Mensakas' cycling logistics activities. This strong relation among cooperatives represents a grey zone where solidarity logics win over strict economic logic.

This section aimed at shedding light on the ambiguous relationships between Digital Solidarity Economies and capitalist enterprises, thus suggesting that delivery cooperatives have become key actors in urban logistics. Hence, by facilitating multinational logistics companies' access to urban markets, delivery cooperatives improve working conditions in the sector while also challenging corporate power. However, it is striking that the objective of promoting alternative models of consumption conflicts with the need to work with big logistic actors that enable economic viability in the short term.

4.2 Labour relations: the emergence of new blurred boundaries at work inside and outside the cooperative

Since the very beginning, Mensakas hires its members, in contrast to other cooperatives, where workers are self-employed and may sometimes keep working for Uber-type platforms as a complementary income. This attachment to salaried employment can be traced to the cooperative's militant roots in the *Riders X Derechos* collective. The hourly wage corresponds to the Spanish minimum salary for a working time between 10 and 25 hours, and the cooperative is active from Monday to Saturday morning. Between 2022 and 2024, almost all the riders combined their work at Mensakas with diverse professional or creative practices, whether remunerated or not, such as circus arts, photography, or university studies. The subsequent analysis, however, focuses on the cooperative's labour process, its modalities of work organisation, and the professional relationships that emerge therein.

The strategic shift towards cycle logistics has considerably reshaped the conditions within which Mensakas operates, not only putting the cooperative in competition with giants of urban logistics but also reshaping the very content of the work and its pace. Cargo-bike delivery entails a significant component of handling operations, which Tranchant names "moving work" (Tranchant, 2019): collecting parcels, organising the loading of each cargo ("pick up"), and delivering ("drop off"). Yet this visible part of the work only represents a fraction of the labour process, which mainly relies on a digital infrastructure and also depends on the dispatcher who allocates tasks through the software Coopcycle. Beyond delivery, the cooperative's activity also demands administrative and commercial work, which involves managing interactions with customers and public authorities without forgetting

bike and hub maintenance.

The division of labour follows a geometric logic rather than an arithmetical one, in function of each person's skills: some are used to go to "Mordor" (the most remote districts), while others carry "mountains" of boxes. Long-term observation also reveals practices of solidarity as a keystone; for instance, those who finish first help those who are still on the road. These solidarity practices break with the atomisation on Uber platforms, but they should not overshadow grey zones in the organisation of work that generate unpaid labour and conflicts. This is highlighted by A., who has been a rider for less than a year, when he describes the reciprocity of mutual support that underpins the team: "Sometimes helping out means earning very little. Because with the work we do, there are days when you say, we earn very little for the physical effort we put in". (Interview with A., 21 May 2023, Barcelona).

Observing the boundaries of work is therefore very useful to understand these phenomena stemming from external and economic pressures. Where does delivery work begin and end? Do we have to deliver right into the kitchens of restaurants or school canteens? Who unloads the lorry upon its arrival at the hub? In theory, this task falls to the lorry driver who brings goods to the hub, an independent worker paid per pallet. In fact, everyone pitches in to speed up operations. In such situations, the more experienced employees adopt a different attitude from the novices to manage this grey zone: the former are more likely to refuse this task and protest, while the latter tend to show *loyalty* (Hirschman, 1971).

One recurring point of friction is also last-minute orders, which disrupt rounds and cause delays. In general, no one wishes to take charge of these requests coming from local shops or from a cooperative restaurant. In bike delivery, it is very difficult to combine scheduled and express delivery at the same time. More broadly, the uncertainty of working hours engenders stress and fatigue: riders may be compelled to start another route just as they are about to finish, and this additional time is not always paid for. This recurring situation sparks internal controversy. While dispatchers encourage riders to decide whether or not to accept the order, it seems difficult to decide in the rush of the moment. On the contrary, some riders argue for refusing these requests – or even temporarily cutting the platform during peak activity – as a way of safeguarding working conditions. This excess of actual work over prescribed work extends beyond delivery. Dispatch, for example, requires many hours to prepare routes. It also comes from the fact that technological infrastructures reproduce asymmetrical power relationships, since many companies do not interface directly with CoopCycle, but instead send delivery instructions via Excel spreadsheets to the dispatcher, who has to upload them. Generally

speaking, working in Mensakas involves more than just delivering: “Well, for example, in a cooperative, if you want a fixed schedule and nothing else... That’s not possible, because you have to participate in other ways besides delivering” (Interview with A.).

Finally, conflicts arise not only from organisation but also in relation to material conditions, especially remuneration. At least two key issues can be identified. Firstly, the grey zone between paid hours and voluntary work tackles the question of “self-management work” (Cardoso, 2019) and emerges, for instance, during general meetings, not paid in Mensakas. Reproductive work (cleaning the premises, regulating conflict) is also less valued than delivery work, and often marginalised in the agenda. Secondly, wage levels themselves are a source of tension. Analysis of the non-work sphere shows that most of Mensakas’ workers live far from the city centre, in outlying towns, in alternative housing systems, or benefit from family resources. While demands for a higher wage are usually muted to preserve the financial equilibrium of the cooperative, they sometimes surface and reveal a contradiction between workplace autonomy and material conditions.

This was the case at a Coopcycle training course in June 2023, when the president of the Federation visited for several days of training for recruits. One of the exercises proposed was to assess one’s “ideal but realistic” salary. Almost all those present said they would like to be paid 1.5 to 2 times more. This observation, in line with work in the sociology of activism, points out the limits of symbolic rewards (Gaxie, 2005). It should also be considered in relation to the volume of unpaid hours, which represents approximately 23% (Coopcycle General Assembly, Grenoble, August 2023).

A constant challenge is to reduce the reliance on unpaid work on which a cooperative like Mensakas was based in its early days. Central to this issue is the recognition and remuneration of work that goes beyond delivery - namely, handling, administration, commercial tasks, and reproductive work. Equally significant is the time devoted to general assemblies, which represent a form of democratic labour, but it is rarely remunerated. However, this situation is not specific to Mensakas, as similar tensions can be observed in other cooperatives belonging to CoopCycle.

4.3 Knowledge sharing and hybridisation: refusing, hybridising, and integrating managerial tools to remain alternative while surviving

Since its inception, Mensakas has struggled to reconcile its economic development with its political project. Its integration into CoopCycle proved decisive because

the Federation provided a turnkey technological solution. Since then, Mensakas has played a key role in the dynamics of CoopCycle, which in turn provides it with ongoing support in the operations' management and with concrete managerial tools.

In terms of internal tensions, Mensakas, as well as CoopCycle as a federation, identified these immediate needs of collectives: the need to develop economic models and the need to acquire the skills and tools lacking to set up a successful economic activity while maintaining democratic governance and operational organisation. Therefore, CoopCycle strives to meet these needs. On the one hand, by offering training to develop the missing skills (in terms of strategy, finance, commercial prospecting, marketing, cooperative governance, or efficiency). On the other hand, by encouraging the exchange of skills, contacts, and experiences between its members as part of these trainings, but also through mentoring programmes, and offering formal and informal spaces for such interactions (e.g., Slack channels, on-line or face-to-face workshops where members can propose to discuss different topics such as burnout, diversification, or medical delivery). These efforts were supported by two years of Erasmus+ funding, which provided CoopCycle with the necessary resources to structure and implement a training and mentoring system in 2023 and 2024. This support has been translated into formal training, mentoring, and the creation of spaces where these exchanges can emerge and be promoted internally in formal and informal ways, and in AGMs, which go beyond simply sharing information and validating decisions, and include formal and informal interactions during the scheduled session, but also during breaks and social events. This circulation of knowledge aims to make the collectives stable and viable, provide useful tools for organising their activities, ideas, and experiences that could be reproduced or avoided, and contribute to the increasing professionalisation of the Federation's members (Srncet et al., 2024).

These spaces are a clear example of the continuous reflection on how alternative organisations, such as delivery cooperatives, face strategic decisions to offer something different while partially reproducing the dominant order (Dahlman et al., 2022; Shanahan, 2024) or to remain actively democratic while being efficient enough (Bauni, 2022). For example, to strategically develop alternative commercial networks while working for bigger clients, which may be less aligned to the local collectives' political project. Another example is the discussion about what platform cooperativism is or how to better define the democratic governance of the collectives and their distinct roles and spaces (Cariou, 2021) (Fieldnotes on the politics and governance sessions of their internal training, May 2023). In these

spaces, we can also observe how the dominant knowledge derived from traditional organisational theory (Chiapello and Gilbert, 2013) and, more specifically, from strategic management (Mousli, 2013) is used, but also appropriated by alternative actors. This is done to help them align their ideals with their practices and to understand their sector and strategically build a competitive advantage to survive in a competitive market (for example, by using tools such as PEST analysis [referring to a Political, Economic, Social, and Technological analysis of their environment] or SWOT analysis [referring to Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, or Threats]).

In the case of Mensakas, the organisation benefited from its internal training and workshop but also from its mentoring programme. In June 2023, a visit from the president of Coopcycle accelerated the structuring of the collective and strengthened the skills of recruits. It also helped to resolve internal conflicts. This programme, funded by the European Union, is a good example of the link between redistribution and intercooperation, where the former finances the latter. It also provided the funding for Mensakas' members' participation in the AGMs; in the one held in Grenoble in 2023, some of them took part in a governance workshop and drew up a plan for their current and future governance, emphasising the need to decentralise administrative tasks and decision-making (Fieldnotes, August 2023).

However, this appropriation will be different for each member as they will have different backgrounds and ideas of what their local alternatives should be and how they should position themselves to be attractive to other external actors while preserving their values (e.g., favouring a situated over an activist discourse).

The results of this ongoing experiment show that the knowledge disseminated constitutes a form of hybrid knowledge that incorporates some of the tools used by conventional capitalist companies while attempting to hybridise them with their political project and its cooperative values, led by a solidarity logic. This process leads these alternatives to reinvent organisational practices and knowledge, but also to integrate managerial knowledge or hybridise it (Maisonnette et al., 2019) by attempting to integrate it into the specificities of the Digital Solidarity Economy and its sector of activity. They are constantly trying to recognise economic logic, as they rely on the market (Sandoval, 2020), but also trying to make solidarity the dominant force, by attempting to escape both degeneration and the risk of isolation that could kill their spirit or jeopardise their survival (Shanahan, 2024).

In any case, the question remains open for such an alternative: to what extent should managerial tools be rejected, appropriated, or hybridised? How could this be done in a way that does not allow the market logic to dominate over the soli-

clarity one? How could public support, such as their Erasmus+ programme, in this case, allow these alternatives to have the time and resources to hybridise and reinvent their knowledge in a way that contributes to a transformative, rather than a degenerative, change of such workplaces?

Conclusion

Although they are breaking with uberisation, bike delivery platform cooperatives are nonetheless two-fold organisations – political and economic – whose compromises generate grey zones explored in this article through the economic relationships, labour process, and knowledge management of a Barcelona-based case study.

Firstly, this case study shows that economically, the cooperative needs to interact with a heterogeneity of actors. Together with Som Ecològica, Mensakas is a subcontractor in a sector where competition is harsh and margins are low. The heterogeneity of current economic interactions generates grey zones. On the one hand, grey zones emerge due to the difference between the narrative the cooperative promotes of an alternative consumption model in urban spaces, and the need to deliver any product for multinational logistic companies. However, these grey zones exist because, at this stage of the movement's life course, they allow its economic survival and sustainability. On the other hand, they exist due to the implementation of specific policies in Catalonia that force companies to shift towards bike logistics. Additionally, policies exist to financially support the whole SSE. Within this world, the support is not only economic, but intercooperation appears as a key solidarity feature of this entrepreneurial experience. Both the policy and intercooperation through Som Ecològica seem to provide the cooperative with greater bargaining power, although this is still significantly limited when working with large logistics players.

Secondly, this economic multi-positioning enables the cooperative to reach a balance between activities in line with the political project of delivering without any boss or exploitation, and other clients that do not belong to SSE but enable financial equilibrium to be achieved. While this duality makes it possible to stabilise a regular volume, it has consequences on the labour process. Above all, the cooperative's financial precariousness tends to favour the acceptance of any order – last-minute, distant, or heavy – which sometimes worsens working conditions and remuneration. Our observations further highlight the persistent gap between prescribed and actual work, particularly reproductive and democratic work, which creates a structural dependence on voluntary contributions. This dependence illus-

trates a paradox at the heart of hybrid organisations such as Mensakas: although they are based on aspirations for collective autonomy and solidarity, their viability is conditioned by the very forms of unpaid work that are nevertheless discussed within the working collective.

Thirdly, the notion of grey zone seems relevant to understanding the knowledge that cooperatives such as Mensakas and other Coopcycle members re-appropriate in formal (training programme, Slack channels) or informal (AGMs, informal discussions, visits, etc.) settings. This know-how relates to organisational matters (governance, political values, human resources) but also to commercial and financial strategy. We have seen that the Coopcycle Federation does not hesitate to poach knowledge and tools from the conventional economy – marketing, human resources, advertising – and thus to hijack the tools of capitalist organisations. They also share experiences on how to get inside the market or to escape from dangerous grey zones that can alter the initial project over the long term. The network stresses diversification strategies to ensure business predictability and avoid the risk of dependence on a single client. These individual and collective learning processes aim to tame the grey zones generated by the compromises and negotiations that are part of the daily life of alternatives like Mensakas. They also show that such organisations face making choices concerning their organisation and strategy and the use or hybridisation of managerial tools in order to balance continuous tensions among the social, the political, and the economic (Bunders and De Moor, 2024).

The combination of our findings leads to the more general hypothesis that the grey zones are reconfigured depending on the strategic dilemmas alternative platforms face, their local history, and their ideological orientation. While compromises seem inevitable when entering the urban logistics or hot meal delivery markets, they are not the only way to remain sustainable. This also raises the ongoing challenge to strike a balance between remaining alternative while still being able to be sustainable (Audebrand, 2017) and to remunerate the entire labour process and not just the time spent on the bike.

The contributions of this article could be summarised as follows. *First*, our extended use of the concept of grey zones in the context of platform cooperatives seeks to draw out the practical implications of the ambivalences and tensions inherent to digital alternatives and self-managed organisations. If platform capitalism relies on the ambiguity of self-employed status without preventing workplace solidarity and resistance, then platform cooperativism must equally be examined through the grey zones it produces. *Second*, our study contributes to recent calls for exam-

ining platform cooperatives beyond their initial stages and from a more longitudinal perspective (Bunders and De Moor, 2024), while also addressing the scarcity of research on their economic viability (Ghirlanda and Kirov, 2024). In this respect, the concept of grey zone seems heuristic for interrogating how paradoxes, ambivalences, and contradictions are displaced, reproduced, or transformed over time (Bunders et al., 2022; Bunders and De Moor, 2024; Mannan and Pek, 2024). By foregrounding these dynamics, our analysis underscores how cooperatives such as Mensakas generate new configurations of power and labour agency. *Last*, our article sheds light on the ongoing compromises cooperatives as Digital Solidarity Economies are making to navigate their political and economic dimensions (Bunders and De Moor, 2024), but also the necessity of policy support to overcome their current limitations (Le Lay and Lemouzy, 2025; Srnec et al., 2024; Espelt and Rodriguez, 2025) and unleash further transformative potential.

Sharing the results of fieldwork on alternatives like Mensakas also opens up debates on the role of public support that could help these alternatives within the current configuration of hybrid capitalist systems. A clear example is Erasmus+ funding, which supports the development of organisational skills as well as the circulation of experiences by providing the Federation with resources necessary to produce content and facilitate exchanges and collective practices. Such support can create the institutional spaces and tools needed to critically interrogate and potentially redefine the grey zones identified in this study. We also have to keep in mind that public policy remains a double-edged sword. Mensakas, for instance, benefited for several years from the Barcelona Activa scheme – the city’s local development agency and public programme for promoting entrepreneurial innovation. Yet, the same program also supported companies such as Glovo and other capitalist start-ups. In their interactions with public authorities, initiatives like Mensakas and CoopCycle thus face the persistent risk of being instrumentalised for purposes of greenwashing or democratic “washing”. This risk of having policies functioning as a double-edged sword is probably an issue to be explored in future research. In all cases, this brings us back to the territorial approaches (Kasparian, 2022; Grohmann, 2023), since grey zones and the strategy of diversification depend on local configurations, institutions, and the logistics market, on their ability to weave links with the local cooperative ecosystem and to interact with public authorities to secure public orders or regulations favourable to alternatives. There is, therefore, nothing definitive about Digital Solidarity Economies playing the role of green link in a dark logistics chain. Its transformative potential is and will always be in a continuous process of construction and recomposition.

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