

EASTERN GERMAN COOPERATIVE FARMING*On the Cusp of a New Generation*

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Introduction

The decline and dissolution of eastern Germany's agricultural production cooperatives (APCs) has been anticipated by formal economic theory since reunification on the grounds of inefficiency.¹ Yet, more recent scholarship on the varieties of capitalism tells us that efficiency does not lead to simple convergence of market forms, but rather that different institutional solutions and social systems of production can achieve desired ends—including efficiency—with varied designs.² Today, the cooperative farm sector, underpinned by conservative, democratic governance, persists without naiveté and little nostalgia on the cusp of a new postcommunist generation and still accounts for the largest share of agricultural production in eastern Germany. Even if the cooperative farming sector follows a slow decline, the firms will convert or persist depending less on their ability to achieve efficiency as on their ability to maintain productive land holdings, and to promote a new generation of management and enthusiastic members committed not to nostalgia but toward the future of their own lives, their firms, and their local communities. Some of the cooperatives are likely to persist for a long time. In this article, in an effort to understand the environment in which cooperatives face the future, I provide an eyewitness account of the internal politics between workers and bosses, highlight survival strategies, consider the institutional constraints and supports facing cooperatives, and sketch portraits of the farmers who face the task of carrying the cooperative tradition forward.

Eastern Germany's APCs have democratic features that bind workers, managers, and community stakeholders in a formal mission to serve com-



munity welfare. The cooperatives are an alternative to both the small independent farmer that typifies agriculture in western Germany and the large, conventional, private agricultural corporations and large private farmers that have arisen in the east since 1990. The cooperatives constitute a particular, mildly participatory, social-democratic farming experience that counts as a substantial departure from the elite domination of Prussian history, the illiberal nature of the German Democratic Republic, and the subordination and exclusion that imbues much of world agriculture. Their persistence should be valued in light of an alternative future scenario in which large-scale farming in the hands of a potentially detached economic elite reduces the quality of the local political culture.

The current agricultural cooperatives derive from a complex recipe of colliding institutions combining communist collectivization with liberal property rights and an established western acceptance of cooperative associations. Reunification recognized the patchwork of small property ownership established by the Soviet land reform of the 1940s that aimed to break up the landed estates of the reactionary Junker elites. The pattern of fragmented property ownership had lain dormant beneath large-scale cooperative farms organized as such in the communist era because the revolutionary move to small parcels proved unproductive in the hands of inexperienced, undercapitalized farmers.³ East German policy pushed cooperative production with a mix of political pressure and incentives. Private property rights remained on the books, but were irrelevant for all practical purposes. Once mature, a lopsided but mixed system of farm governance resulted. Collective farms tilled 82 percent of the land, state farms 7.6 percent, individual farms 5.4 percent, and farms for personal use 4.8 percent.⁴

Reunification revived the property rights of numerous owners of relatively small parcels. Production cooperatives from this historical moment remained viable by rebundling the smallholdings of active farmers and other stakeholders in order to preserve the established economies of scale. Cooperatives continued as cooperatives because they were able to avoid the total imposition of western farming models.⁵ Many farmers lacked sufficient resources to strike out on their own.⁶ Farmers also sought to preserve both local cultural values and communities.⁷ The total area managed by cooperatives has declined, mostly through fusion, from 1,464 in the early years after reunification to 1,079 by 2005 to the current number around 1,000 as of 2010.⁸ The share of utilized farmland farmed by cooperatives has declined from 44.1 percent to 27 percent, but cooperatives, as a firm category, averaging 4,400 acres in size, still cultivate the largest share of farmland in eastern Germany.

The large farms of the eastern states, both the APCs and large farms not managed with cooperative governance, when combined with the agriculture in the western states produce a stark dichotomy of small and large. In 2010 the average farm in the western states ranged from 31 to 70 hectares compared to the eastern states that averaged between 145 to 285 hectares. Western Germany's small family farms have been carefully propped up by state policy interventions of price supports, export subsidies, and external protection under the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). After forty years of communist agricultural policy the large eastern German farms have emerged with better economies of scale for efficient modern production. After an enormous initial purge of redundant farm labor during the tumultuous reunification decade, the eastern farming sector is more stable in many respects than its western counterpart. The smaller western farms conform to the broad European trend of declining farm employment of about 25 percent over the past decade and increasing average farm size by 24 to 47 percent in the process of absorbing nearly 100,000 small farms. The eastern states, in contrast, have lost from 12 to 15 percent of employment with changes to average farm sizes of less than 10 percent.⁹ The APCs of eastern Germany are a familiar feature of the eastern European postcommunist experience. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria feature hundreds of large-size APCs that also persist.¹⁰

Farm cooperatives have their roots in a cooperative tradition that dates to the early days of the rise of the German industrial economy in the mid nineteenth century, when intellectuals developed consumer and banking cooperatives in which members relied on themselves and each other to improve their position in the market.¹¹ "Germany is a country with a cooperative system that is rich in tradition and highly developed," writes Jos Bijman.¹² The APCs are unique in the industrialized west for their cooperative production rather than the usual cooperative activities related to processing, marketing, or purchasing that abound throughout European agriculture. The cooperatives are also not a simple model of worker-owners, the efficiency of which liberal economists traditionally doubted for, among other failings, collective action problems in which members who could not be excluded from cooperative success would undersupply the effort necessary to persist. Indeed, cooperative farms have executives who hold the power of an employer capable of releasing anyone at any time. The members of cooperatives may own land farmed by the cooperative and they may work at the farm. But, these are not requirements for membership. Moreover, not all workers are members. For example, I visited a farm in Saxony-Anhalt that had forty-six cooperative members and thirty

workers. In addition, a cooperative is constituted by hundreds of land leases with non-member outsiders.

Cooperatives are thus complex combinations of land ownership, membership, labor, and rented land. Cooperatives offer several advantages, managers argue. Cooperatives involve the character and quality of many people. Bank credit is better because banks know the liability lies with the cooperative, not individuals. Managers benefit from other managers being able to cover them if they need time off. Specialization in various areas of production such as milk, livestock, and field crops is superior to the expertise of any one person. Diversification from that specialization brings stability or persistence. Finally, managers claim the APCs are connected to village life in a way some private corporate firms with outside management may not be.

The Political Terrain between Cooperative Workers and Bosses

The executive of a cooperative is a member of a board of directors, which is elected by the general membership. The executive is appointed by a second advisory board, which is also elected by the members of the cooperative. Thus, oversight and management boards are directly elected and a very small representative assembly chooses the individuals invested with executive authority. The goal of a cooperative is to promote the economic activities of its members through collaborative firm management. This structure of elections and management gives the cooperatives a democratic aspect that contrasts somewhat with what Charles Lindblom identified as the coercion of state-planned economies and the authoritarian aspect of employment within capitalist enterprise.¹³ In practice, this democratic governance structure ranges from hollow formality to authentic participation in decision making for the enterprise.¹⁴ The cooperative holds a general assembly once a year to elect its officers. The six-member advisory board of one cooperative I visited in Saxony-Anhalt had been selected from a slate of eight candidates. One worker who was nearing retirement, and who had experienced the farm under both communism and liberal capitalism, said he voted for members who were collegial and worked hard. I learned the story of one younger worker who had felt the pain of not being elected to the advisory board by his peers who perceived him as friendly enough, but not yet sufficiently mature for the position. This story of frustrated ambition is an important testimony to active member involvement counting as something more than hollow formality.

Overall, the democratic aspect of the cooperatives is a limited, conservative check on management. For example, members can place an item on the agenda at the general assembly with the support of 10 percent of the members, but that has never happened at the cooperatives I visited. When I asked some workers what their input was at a general assembly they looked at each other and joked that everyone just raises their hand and says yes to whatever the leadership suggests. The idea that workers would vote for benefits and conditions leading to inefficiency or would challenge the authority of their boss appears implausible. In addition, on the ground at such a farm, one can readily believe that few people possess the complex set of skills necessary to manage such an organization. The main narrative I encountered was a dearth of managerial talent rather than electoral competition for the position.

The veto power of the membership was more evident, however, at a general assembly that I attended at a cooperative farm in Brandenburg that had, in the face of economic failure, replaced its leadership with a veteran farm chief from a nearby cooperative. In one particular meeting, the membership fired its old boss and selected a new one. In the course of a couple of years that new chief had eliminated farm debt by half and steered the farm toward a modest profit. At the assembly, three dozen people, mostly middle-aged, and some quite elderly, listened to the boss read his annual report from handwritten notes. New officers were elected to the advisory board including two middle-aged women. There was no discussion or conflict. Bouquets of flowers were presented to certain members for their participation in cooperative management. After the meeting, the membership shared a meal and drinks. The directors mingled with members. An elderly man who identified himself as the farm executive from previous years before the cooperative went downhill expressed nothing but admiration for the abilities of the new management.

Survival Strategies

The efforts of cooperatives to achieve diversification, cost control, and close supervision, are not particular to cooperative microeconomics, but they speak to the intention and ability of cooperatives to attain competitive efficiency in a noncooperative world. The cooperatives that I visited were clear that their future success lay in diversification of revenue sources and investment in that diversification strategy. One farm in Saxony-Anhalt boasted a brand new methane gas power plant to heat homes in the village at the

edge of the farm. The same cooperative had an egg factory, 500 dairy cows, and a huge, new equipment barn that farmer workers labored to complete in the season between planting and harvesting. Another farm in Brandenburg had thoroughly renovated its village butcher shop to include a dining area and delivers meat products to a network of retail outlets in the region. The cooperative plans to build its own slaughterhouse so as to achieve more efficiency. The executive articulates a goal to diversify so as to survive when prices fall in any one area. A third farm featured a brand new, 160-meter, state-of-the-art, self-cleaning, open-air, dairy cow barn.

Disciplined cost control further suggests how cooperatives strive for efficiency. I observed one manager carefully oversee an inventory of blades for power tools, insist workers recycle rusty steel rather than use new stock, and constantly change the timing and pattern of his routine patrols throughout an extensive complex of offices, barns, and fields in order to prevent his workers from figuring out how to relax in his absence. The executive confirms the tendency of cooperative members with property to slack off, a behavior he assigns to the majority of humanity, not cooperative workers in particular. To this end the executive uses an incentive system adapted from the socialist era that determines the level of hourly pay.

The Institutional Context from the European Union to Village Life

The cooperative farms are embedded in an institutional context that inspires anxiety and lament, but also cements them firmly into the fabric of the political economy. Here I describe how the role of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy, laws governing cooperatives, and the role of village social life influence the cooperative farming experience.

The CAP, accounting for 43 percent of the EU's budget, subsidizes farmers with direct payments and price supports. At an average subsidy of EURO 300 per hectare, large farms get more money than small farms, thus benefiting the large size of cooperatives. Efforts to limit the advantages to large farms under the CAP were unsuccessful in the reform cycle ending in 2013. Prior to that decision, the possibility of losing existing subsidies because of their size had cooperative managers on edge. Farm managers say their farms could not survive without EU subsidies. The potential limitation of subsidies to farms based on size speaks to European sensibilities favoring smallness and suspicion of the very scale that makes larger farms efficient. Throughout the former socialist world various forms of collectivization pro-

duced large-scale farms that—whatever their dubious political origins—achieve the efficient economies of scale associated with modernity. Such modernity, notwithstanding the cooperative mission, attracts skepticism about fairness, ecology, and the wisdom of supporting size, including from western Germany where small, private farms are the historical norm. Complicating the issue is that not all large farms in eastern Germany are cooperatives. The cooperative managers themselves speak skeptically of large, private, noncooperative corporations, some owned by extremely wealthy individuals, competing for the long-term control of land through purchases and leases. Given that the cooperatives are a bundle of lease contracts with hundreds of individual parcels, the competition over land leases with the private, well-funded corporations is clear. Cooperatives, from their perspective, need to hold their own land tight and to try to get larger, not smaller, even as largeness risks a policy backlash. For now, however, the CAP rewards large size and thus reinforces the cooperative sector.

Laws governing cooperative production both undermine and support cooperative agriculture. Although cooperatives pay dividends to their members, the law does not allow the value of an individual's initial required investment to increase in value over time. In a social context where socialist nostalgia grows weaker and the individualism of western ideology in the institutions grows stronger, a new investment can only be withdrawn in the future in the same amount. This lack of incentive for investors is a particular weakness. The profit-limiting rule is a particular area of tension in the cooperative farm sector, according to one manager, and something that should be reformed according to another. The practice of cooperative law, however, also offers some support to the cooperative farms. German law closely regulates cooperatives. Each cooperative farm must undergo an annual audit to ensure its conformity. Audits are expensive and require the service of specialized auditing firms organized as cooperative associations that emerged at the request of the cooperative farm sector. These associations support cooperatives as the intermediaries between the farms and the state, marrying the two institutions. In addition, the staff of the associations themselves has an interest in persistence. At the twentieth annual meeting of an auditing association in Saxony-Anhalt, I observed two hundred farmers gathered to hear state ministers, their own experienced attorneys, and the cooperative leadership of the association—drawn from the ranks of cooperative farm managers—retell the story of survival and prosperity since the tumultuous days of reunification. The law thus breeds a specialized legal industry that has both a rational and moral stake in the positive outcomes it oversees.

Family ties and village life also support the cooperatives. Although some managers argue that few people care strongly about the cooperative form in particular, family and community ties are salient. One manager said he would personally do better in a private farm, but marriage now binds him to the cooperative. Another manager, a chief executive, was a second-generation cooperative farmer. In relaxed conversations it was clear that this grown man of obvious ability was humbled by the enormity of his task and felt a powerful pressure to fill the role with honor. The family and the village hold more sway than any cooperative impulse imbued with socialist values. The cooperative impulse predates twentieth-century socialism and is rooted in the community, as is cooperative agriculture.

Generational Change in Cooperative Farming

Although cooperatives are legal business forms that do not rely on large numbers of owner-workers, they must rely on a minimum foundation of collective choice. As the reunification generation goes into retirement and the nostalgia for socialist communitarianism wanes, a new generation of farmers must participate as cooperative farmers for the cooperative business form to endure. After a founding period, in this case a period of upheaval, growth, and consolidation, cooperatives face decline if they cannot attract high-quality new managers, maintain social capital and a sense of community and shared goals.¹⁵ In this section, using interview data collected during visits to four cooperatives in Saxony-Anhalt and Brandenburg in June 2011, I describe individual workers, young and old, to illustrate the range of cooperative self-consciousness and the identities of cooperative workers on the precipice of a new generation. The individuals include a nostalgic mechanic; an ambivalent, middle-aged livestock manager; a fulfilled livestock manager on the cusp of retirement; an exuberant careerist; a hopeful middle-aged butcher shop manager; a committed, youthful office worker; a self-confident, young mechanic; and an uninformed farm intern.

In the machine shop, an older worker approaching retirement remembers the socialist period as the good old days and only tolerates the conditions of the present era. He has been at the cooperative for nearly thirty years, working at a moderate, even pace and reliably producing quality work. He respects the socialist period. Back then, he worked without concerns about retirement and received money and common consumer items from relatives in the west. He raised pigs and tended a garden on the side. He says he was more independent back then than he is today, a total inver-

sion of the standard western interpretation in which socialist subjects were dependent on the state and made free by liberal democracy. The pressure and anxiety that accompany the capitalist economy are still unwelcome to this man, but he cares about the cooperative. When asked, he describes without hesitation what kind of responsible and hardworking co-worker gets his vote for the supervisory board. His particular attachment to an economic life free from the psychic burden of uncertainty will fade from the cooperative sector when he retires. Another older worker is a middle-aged woman who came to her current position after reunification. She describes herself as simply connected to the enterprise, “zum Betrieb gebunden.” She was on the supervisory board, but stepped down because she felt it was too much for her and required skills that she did not possess. She does not glow at the mention of the cooperative, but gives it begrudging respect. When I ask her how she feels about her relationship to management, she notes after much hesitation that my questions have become “substantive.”

Not all of the older workers are so ambivalent. An elderly female worker is in charge of 500 caged livestock and supervises a small crew. She sits on the supervisory board and says that the feeling and meaning of being listened to makes a difference for her. She also respects the past. “Back then, we also had lives,” she says, repeating a familiar refrain: “Damals haben wir auch gelebt.” She appreciates and articulates a feeling of togetherness—the farm as a family. She criticizes “kids these days” as well as other farms where workers care more about the end of the day than getting the work done. She said the cooperative manager is always helpful when she has needs. She is sure it would not be that way in a conventional firm.

When I asked another senior supervisory member of the cooperative if the cooperative and his membership is something worth valuing, his face radiates warmth. “Definitely,” he replies. This man says that he could retire anytime. He expresses pride and satisfaction in climbing the ladder of responsibility and authority over the years. He doubts that co-workers would actually listen to his instructions at a conventional firm. He describes being committed to the firm. He is energetic and buoyant. He inherited a house and land in the village and his daughter is a member of the cooperative. This individual is the ultimate proponent of cooperative management, notably bound simultaneously to an economic model and a deeply rooted community.

The butcher shop manager trained at the cooperative and has recently returned to manage the newly modernized facility. He would like to become a member of the cooperative to formalize the “close connection” that he already feels. He has been asked to become a member, but momentarily lacks the several thousand dollars required. Perhaps this man, at forty

years old, is the kind of cooperative agriculturalist that can perhaps lead the current cooperative farm model into the next generation. Similarly intent on the future is a young worker in the cooperative business office. She has paid several thousand dollars to become a member of the cooperative because she simply wants to be a part of it.

In contrast to the old, nostalgic mechanic, there is a young mechanic, filled with confidence and on-the-job training. "Everyone cooks with water," he says to make the point that the people who manufacture tractors and harvester machines are not smarter than him and he can figure out how to fix it. Just keep going until it is fixed, he says. This man could get a job as an inspirational speaker. He splays his body over a tractor's substantial fender to reach deep inside to reset a hydraulic line. Like the young office worker, he is the new generation. He recently sought a position in the governing structure of the cooperative. He too may be the bridge between the cooperative past and future.

The range of age and spectrum of interest in cooperative farming ends with a young intern in a three-year educational program. He hopes to get a job from the boss, and if not he will retrain in a different field. When I ask him about his knowledge of the cooperative he gives a dumb look. "I am just a worker," he says. His lack of knowledge seems like a lost recruitment opportunity, but his boss says that building membership is about more than warm bodies, and new members need enough experience to prove their merit and develop into members.

One executive describes the difficulty finding motivated young people who want to enter agriculture. Young people favor the better pay in industrial western Germany. The agricultural cooperative pays less and seasonally requires working long hours and weekends. Another executive says his cooperative has little trouble finding willing workers or new cooperative members, but a lot of trouble finding much needed management personnel. Young, university-trained candidates, he says, are too arrogant, too presumptive, and expect to lead without experience. Management recruitment problems plague the cooperative, he says, not regeneration of the cooperative itself from below. According to him, cooperatives fail when old managers hang on too long, without providing for managerial succession, and then die suddenly, leaving a cooperative vulnerable to privatization. He argues that the question of generational renewal of the labor force is actually a bigger problem for small private farms where children do not follow their parents into the family business. Interviews with workers suggest sufficient enthusiasm among the younger echelons in the cooperatives. Additional education for such vocational workers could address the management gap.

Conclusion

The cooperatives contain both historical resistance to modern capitalism from the origins of cooperatives in the nineteenth century and a strong element of high modern capitalism due to the large-scale production created by the particular style of collectivization during the socialist era. Typified by large farm size that dwarfs the average family farm in western Germany, cooperatives are competitive and persistent if their efficiencies of scale are matched by managerial authority that provides for succession of leadership and retains control of an aggregate stock of leased land. Success and persistence does not rely on a large group of worker-owners tilling only their own land and sharing enough authority to shirk work. Cooperative law and practice allows for very few members to manage a firm and employ people and resources any way they see fit. The promise of a cooperative lies in the spirit of consultation with other members in leadership positions, the legitimacy that flows from that consultation, and from shared expertise. A new generation of cooperative members and workers, appearing sufficient to the task, will assemble itself from the families and village communities whose persistent identity and intent to avoid dislocation provide a better social adhesive than socialist nostalgia. Cooperative law and the European Union's subsidy of large farms are key supports. The bigger challenges are identifying managerial talent and the control of leased land.

While the particular variety of democracy on a farm cooperative is limited and conservative, it is evident that the democratic form can be essential for the survival of a cooperative, as in the case when one cooperative voted for a new boss. It is also evident that the democratic, associative quality of the cooperatives matters to people, not as a memory of socialism, but just because it does. For these reasons, individual cooperatives with high quality leadership and membership should persist into the foreseeable future while those farms without these essential human ingredients will not. Given the reactionary nature of eastern Germany's past experience with large, landed estates, and the precarious viability of small farms in the west, the production cooperatives arguably represent a fortuitously worthwhile compromise between rival visions of agricultural political economy. In this sense, the quality of cooperative farm governance is a substantive consideration for the quality of rural political culture in the east. From a wider view, the persistence of production cooperatives with an effective role for local membership is an important testimony to the possibilities of combining work with the voice of the community.

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Notes

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