Lessons from AmazonCoop’s “Fair Trade” Partnership Among Indigenous Brazil Nut Harvesters and The Body Shop

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As organizations committed to radical social transformation, cooperatives face a serious challenge: they must build on the present in order to change it. To succeed, cooperatives must strike a fine balance. Those that cannot meet the demands of highly competitive markets risk financial collapse, but those that simply conform to the status quo become complicit in re-creating inequality and marginalization. Faced with this dilemma, many cooperative managers and commentators have prioritized pragmatic questions of how to launch and sustain cooperative economic projects. In the process, however, they often ignore questions of history, power, and change that should be central to cooperativism.

In this chapter, I examine AmazonCoop from a historical-political-ecological perspective in order to demonstrate how a thorough consideration of power and history can enhance cooperatives’ impacts as deeply transformative change agents. A power-centered approach directs our attention to the noblest goal of cooperativism—which is, after all, not to establish a particular type of

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organization or survive in a global economy, but rather to create more just social and economic arrangements—and suggests innovative possibilities for achieving this goal.

AMAZONCOOP

AmazonCoop (also known as CAMPEALTA) was founded in 1998 by representatives of the Fundação Nacional do Índio (Brazilian National Indian Agency—FUNAI) and the UK-based cosmetics company The Body Shop to formalize trade links between the multinational firm and Brazil nut harvesters from eight indigenous tribes. The cooperative was intended to supply The Body Shop with the raw materials and ecologically sustainable, socially just symbolism needed for its best-selling products, to help FUNAI protect and serve indigenous people despite neoliberal reforms that decreased funding and restricted their responsibilities, to allow indigenous people to finance their own community development, and to protect the environment by offering tribes an income-generating alternative to alliances with mining and logging companies. As a public-private partnership based on fair trade, the cooperative grew directly out of processes of neoliberal economic globalization and movements to harness globalization to benefit poor and excluded people. The cooperative was gradually destroyed between 2006 and 2007 as a result of legal troubles, strained relations with The Body Shop, and serious power struggles among the cooperative’s nonindigenous stakeholders. Nonetheless, it offers valuable lessons for other cooperatives.

AmazonCoop was located in Altamira, Pará, in the central region of the Brazilian Amazon. Although Altamira was important in the rubber booms at the opening of the twentieth century and during World War II, the local economy is currently supported primarily by legal and illegal logging, agriculture, and the extraction of nontimber forest products such as Brazil nuts, which are the fifth most valuable nontimber forest product nationally (IBGE 2004). Intensive natural resource exploitation has resulted in severe deforestation, water pollution, and the invasion of indigenous territories (Fausto 2001, 99; Fisher

†Amazonia is a culturally, ecologically, and economically diverse region that defies easy generalization. When I refer to the Amazon in this paper, the modifiers “Brazilian” and, in some cases, “Altamiran” are implied.
2000). Nonetheless, satellite images showing relatively intact forest on indigenous lands (Schwartzman and Zimmerman 2005; Zimmerman et al. 2001) and ethnobotanical studies (Posey 2002) have stimulated efforts to preserve Amazonian ecosystems through indigenous development projects similar to AmazonCoop’s Brazil nut trade. Outside of these programs, most of the region’s indigenous people combine subsistence activities with cash incomes from mining and logging concessions, employment in extractive industries, and government pensions (Castro 1992).

AmazonCoop generated income through Brazil nut sales, an Internet service provider, and an eco-lodge in order to provide social and economic benefits to more than 2,000 indigenous people living in 14 villages and representing 8 indigenous tribes: the Arara, Araweté, Asurini, Curuaia, Kayapó, Parakanã, Xikrin, and Xypaia.‡ Membership in the cooperative was organized at the village level, with one or two representatives from each village granted the members’ right to vote in the General Assembly, but these village representatives were not elected and the vast majority of decisions were made by international advisors and nonindigenous Brazilian managers. As I have discussed elsewhere (Burke 2006, 2010), the cooperative’s social and economic impacts in indigenous villages were inconsistent:

AmazonCoop’s international alliances certainly provided significant material benefits. The Brazil nut trading program more than doubled the annual profits of indigenous nut collectors while steering tribes away from alliances with the more environmentally damaging mining and logging industries, and tourist-funded, cooperative-managed health and education projects further contributed to a widely supported form of development. The cooperative provided indirect benefits by supporting [government services, both financially and administratively]. Unfortunately, AmazonCoop also made indigenous people more vulnerable and more dependent on outsiders, failed to include them as informed participants in their own development, masked the negative effects on them of unfavorable government policies, and perpetuated discriminatory distinctions among them. (Burke 2010, 42)

‡For consistency, I use the same ethnic categories as AmazonCoop. The Xikrin, however, are considered to be members of the larger Kayapó ethnic group (though they are somewhat distinct from other Kayapó groups), and the degree of involvement of the Xypaia and Curuaia is unclear.
Our initial analysis of AmazonCoop, based on research conducted in 2005 (Burke and Canova 2006; Burke 2006), demonstrated that global markets and international alliances provided significant economic opportunities for the cooperative and its indigenous members through increased incomes and support for new infrastructure. However, it also showed that successful cooperative economies guarantee neither genuine cooperativism, nor social development, nor transformation of the structural conditions that maintain marginalization. In particular, our research raised serious concerns about AmazonCoop’s structure and its success in altering the deep inequalities that plague Brazilian society. Cooperative managers and members failed to translate the principles of democracy, participation, autonomy, and self-sufficiency into action, leaving indigenous people in the region as passive beneficiaries subject to the decisions and desires of the cooperative’s international advisors and the local, nonindigenous cooperative staff, including the director of FUNAI-Altamira. This lack of indigenous participation raised concerns—which were, unfortunately, borne out—about the cooperative’s sustainability.

In the present chapter, I consider the cooperative from a slightly different perspective. By examining AmazonCoop in the light of indigenous people’s involvement in historical extractivist economies in the Brazilian Amazon, I analyze how the cooperative altered the regional political economy and the sources of power and patterns of exploitation of indigenous people. To conclude, I argue that cooperatives can act most effectively as agents of change only when their activities are explicitly designed to alter historically unequal power relations.

HISTORICAL STRUGGLES IN AMAZONIAN EXTRACTIVISM

The contemporary globalization underlying AmazonCoop’s work has deep historical precedents in the Brazilian Amazon. For almost four centuries, the resource-rich Amazon has been a source of wealth for colonial and capitalist systems, and the resulting extractive industries have been important sites of political and economic negotiation among Amazonian indigenous people, nonindigenous Brazilians, local and foreign commercial interests, and the state. Understanding the impacts of AmazonCoop and contemporary globalization requires that we investigate the history of Amazonian extractivism, and particularly the
history of the rubber industry. Three features of the rubber industry are particularly important for this discussion: the involvement of indigenous people in the rubber industry, the organization of rubber extraction through the *aviamento* debt-peonage system, and the recurrence of the *aviamento* system in Amazonian political-economic organization throughout the twentieth century (Burke 2006).

The Amazon presented would-be rubber barons with a number of serious obstacles. As Bunker (1984) explains, each mode of extraction in the region has been shaped by the social and ecological legacies of previous extractive projects. The late nineteenth-century elite could not easily respond to nearly insatiable rubber demand because the colonial-era spice and animal oil trades had degraded ecosystems, decimated the local, indigenous labor pool, and encouraged survivors to flee to upland areas from which they could more effectively control contact with Euro-Brazilians. To capitalize on new global markets and the high quality of Brazilian rubber, the elite were forced to import tens of thousands of workers to the region, mostly from drought-burdened Ceará.

If importing laborers was difficult, ecological and economic barriers posed even greater problems. *Seringalistas* (rubber bosses) struggled to make a profit in a highly volatile world market while using imported, impoverished, and inexperienced laborers to collect widely dispersed wild rubber in “what may be the most inaccessible area in all of Brazil” (Nimuendajú 1920, 149). They faced high costs related to river transport, numerous intermediaries between tapping and export, and the provisioning of tappers so that they could dedicate themselves to rubber collection rather than subsistence. They also faced high risks of losing their product on dangerous rivers, of losing upward of 50 percent of their tappers to disease and desertion, of losing profits due to unfavorable exchange rates and rapidly changing prices at export houses, and of being cheated when workers covertly sold rubber to itinerant traders (Barham and Coomes 1994).

The infamous *aviamento* system effectively overcame these obstacles to economic organization. Through this system, rubber tappers were transported into the Amazon and advanced supplies at the beginning of each season with the expectation that they repay these debts in rubber. *Seringalistas* set the terms of trade and in many cases used extreme violence to ensure payment. Minor *seringalistas* entered into similar arrangements with larger ones, and larger ones with the export houses that ultimately controlled prices and credit. Tappers, located at the bottom of the debt and pricing pyramid, paid as much as 250 to
500 percent above city prices for basic goods and received less than 50 percent of going prices for their rubber (Barham and Coomes 1994).

Indigenous Amazonians were profoundly, though not uniformly, affected by the rubber boom, particularly as tappers invaded upland areas in search of caucho trees and forced indigenous populations to flee, resist, or join the rubber economy as willing and unwilling laborers. Some tribes in the Altamira region fell prey to disease and a “slow and cruel war of extermination” (Nimuendajú 1920, 146). The Kayapó-Gorotire, for example, were attacked by rubber tappers after a period of peace and forced to migrate several times, initiating a long-standing war against the tappers of the Xingu, Fresco, Iriri, and Curua Rivers. Widespread violence made the Gorotire so haunting in popular mythology that Fisher (2000) reports present-day Brazilians shouting “Gorotire” to scare their children into good behavior. Other tribes worked with rubber tappers to identify trees, defend territories against competitors, and provide food in times of need, all in exchange for manufactured goods (Fisher 2000). The unequal influx of weapons affected intertribal power dynamics, forcing some tribes to migrate away from their well-armed neighbors. Enterprising seringalistas often exploited intertribal tensions, arming and paying “pacified” tribes to attack and sometimes enslave those who posed a greater threat to extractivism (Nimuendajú 1920, 152). A different Kayapó group, however, “had the rare fortune of making their first contact with well-intentioned civilized people . . . in 1891,” and thereby “escaped from extermination by iron and fire, which was the fate of the others during the great advance of the caucho rubber tappers in this region” (Nimuendajú 1920, 147). Their good luck was not the norm.

Nimuendajú described, north of the Kayapó, other “leftovers of tribes, meager wastes that the wave of caucho rubber tappers did not drown in its brutal advance” (1920, 150). The Asurini “appeared” in 1894 and immediately launched a war against the “civilized people,” maintaining an area between the Xingu and Pacajá Rivers by attacking on both sides. But the seringalistas armed and paid the “pacified” Arara to attack the Asurini, reducing their numbers and power significantly. Nimuendajú described the Arara and the remaining Xipaya and Curuaia as “belonging to” different white settlers, a relationship that he says saved the latter groups from the full onslaught of the rubber tappers but also forced some Xipaya into “conditions that can only be clearly characterized by one Portuguese word: slavery” (Nimuendajú 1920, 152). The Juruna, at one time the most important tribe of the Xingu region, were attacked, forced to migrate, and attacked again before finally establishing peaceful relations with a rubber
tapper who took several leaders to Altamira. Most of the travelers died in the city, and the survivors fled into the forest.

After the Brazilian rubber industry collapsed under competition from more efficient Southeast Asian plantations, many indigenous people fled to more secure upland areas, and nonindigenous people migrated in search of other economic opportunities. But the aviamento system continued to organize Amazonian labor and commodity flows, including the extraction of Brazil nuts, throughout the twentieth century (Laraia and da Matta 1967). Aviamento remained a “rational” way of organizing and controlling scarce labor and capital in an Amazonian ecological context, and had likely become a fairly hegemonic template for social and economic organization. Relations among regional elite and between the elite, intermediaries, and extractivists certainly changed over time (see, for example, the discussion in Weinstein 1983), but one hundred years of patron-client networks organized around the aviamento system likely made it difficult to conceive of viable alternatives, let alone establish them against entrenched elite interests.

The case of the Kayapó-Xikrin demonstrates the continuity and institutionalization of the aviamento system and the importance of extractivism in regional political economies. After years of disrupting local extractive efforts, the Xikrin were “pacified” at the end of the 1950s, integrated by government officials into the international fur trade under the aviamento model, and used to fight and settle the Asurini and Araweté, who were also seen as threats to extractivism. Fisher (2000) notes that the Xikrin entered the fur trade to meet their own goals, not simply because of government coercion. Government-issued firearms offered security after several decades of war and migration, and long treks in search of furs allowed Xikrin families to avoid sad and dangerous reunions with the spirits of the many ancestors who died during contact and lingered in villages. In many ways, the Xikrin think of the fur boom as a golden age of peace, security, and impressive access to goods. With its own source of goods, the tribe was not vulnerable to the vagaries of government spending. However, the international ban on the fur trade generated that vulnerability and prompted the government and tribe to reorient their efforts around Brazil nut collection.

While the Brazilian state played little direct role in the rubber boom, it has entangled itself in contemporary manifestations of the aviamento system as an intermediary. By the 1970s, FUNAI had “pacified” and “villagized” many of Altamira’s indigenous people and had drawn them back into extractivism through trade in fur and Brazil nuts. By mediating indigenous peoples’ involvement
in extractivism, FUNAI used indigenous labor to underwrite its own operating costs and established itself as a powerful supplier of manufactured goods. Extractivism turned indigenous groups into “self-financing and dependent communit[ies] . . . initiated into a system that [has] been in existence since the rubber boom in Amazonia, a system still widely practiced on Indian posts” (Fisher 2000, 77). In this context, however, FUNAI’s power is largely dependent on fluctuations in the world market in nontimber forest products. Writing just as AmazonCoop was being founded, Fisher describes the Brazil nut harvest as “a calculated gamble” and “a time of great anxiety” for Xikrin villagers (2000, 78).

Extractivism creates a delicate and competitive set of alliances among Amazonian indigenous peoples, FUNAI, and corporations. Goods and services are critical forms of currency that make those alliances possible. Nonindigenous people seek raw materials such as spices, rubber, fur, timber, minerals, and Brazil nuts, and they depend on a predictable and controlled labor process to obtain these goods. Manufactured debt and direct government mandates shape indigenous people into “useful” extractivists. For their part, indigenous people seek manufactured goods and development projects that, in addition to their instrumental value, have the political value of reinforcing the power of chiefs as intermediaries with the white world and redistributors of trade goods. These material bases of chiefly power have become especially important because the dispersed and family-based nature of extractivism has weakened chiefs’ traditional roles as organizers of communal labor (Fisher 2000).

Fisher’s account of Kayapó-Xikrin involvement in extractivism is particularly rich because it explains the sources of indigenous people’s power and agency in these negotiations and conflicts: their labor power, ecological knowledge, ability to disrupt nonindigenous economies, and ability to fall back on traditional hunting–planting–gathering livelihoods that permit relative autonomy. Indigenous people have been a resource and threat to extractive industries, and they have generally remained resilient to economic booms and busts. Their ability to shift between government and corporate partners has also been helpful; for example, a downturn in the FUNAI-organized Brazil nut trade in the late 1990s prompted tribes to fulfill their demand for goods through alliances with mining and timber firms. This is where the story of AmazonCoop begins.

Like previous extractive projects in the region, AmazonCoop grew from the convergence of foreign demand and local and international entrepreneurship. Through the cooperative, indigenous people, corporations, and the state sought to capitalize on local natural resources within the political and economic con-
text of globalization and neoliberal policies. The cooperative’s adaptations, like those of nineteenth-century seringalistas, were shaped by previous extractive projects. AmazonCoop was established in a region structured around the old aviação system, where indigenous people and other extractivists have often been controlled by debt and violence in a nearly lawless land, and where they typically have occupied the most unfavorable position within a value chain controlled by foreigners and a large number of intermediaries. Worse, while indigenous people historically found power in their ability to provide or withhold critical knowledge, to play competing firms against each other, to violently disrupt the riverine trade of rubber and basic necessities, and to return to traditional means of subsistence, state-led “pacification” and “villagization” have significantly limited many of these avenues of indigenous power. In addition to this historical legacy, AmazonCoop also embodies several distinctive features of contemporary society, most notably the prominence of international civil society, new niche markets for socially responsible consumption, the improved legal and social status of indigenous people in Brazil and beyond, and consumer concern for the people and ecology of the rain forest.

CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL EXTRACTIVISM IN THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON: ANALYZING AMAZONCOOP AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

Cooperative organizations are a promising addition to the extractivist economic landscape in this region. Cooperatives are meant to benefit members by changing their position within production, marketing, and/or consumption systems. By drawing members together in a single institution, they can provide important benefits like economies of scale; access to credit, capital, and machinery; possibilities for providing social services en masse; and the ability of members to mobilize and exert political influence. In our previous research, we have shown that the AmazonCoop trade relationship did provide significant material benefits to indigenous extractivists in Altamira. By combining vertical integration with The Body Shop’s above-market price, the cooperative was able to pay indigenous harvesters more than double the local rate for riverside purchases of Brazil nut.

However, I argue that if cooperatives are to be agents of change, they must do more than help members benefit from existing political economies; they must also change unjust patterns of power and exploitation within those political
economies. To what extent did AmazonCoop change historical relations of power, control, and exploitation? On the surface, the (nonindigenous) cooperative directors seemed to be on the right track. They listed self-sufficiency, cultural integrity, and the ability to engage effectively with o mundo branco (the white world) as their most important goals for indigenous members. The cooperative’s success in vertical integration of the rubber industry and economic diversification (results of large infusions of foreign capital) also seemed promising. Unlike the rubber tappers of the past, the cooperative was able to eliminate several intermediaries by purchasing its own cargo boat, warehouse, and oil-processing plant. This ensured the cooperative a larger profit and fewer risks than historical seringalistas enjoyed, and therefore reduced the need for extreme exploitation and violence.

On closer examination, however, AmazonCoop reproduced many historical relations of control and exploitation without enhancing the bases of indigenous people’s power. The continuities in Amazonian extractivism are particularly evident in the organization of Brazil nut collection. As with previous modes of extraction, the Brazil nut trade is internationally oriented, with a market structure determined by forces outside of Brazil and its indigenous communities. The costs, risks, and difficulties of Brazil nut extraction resemble those of rubber (though they are less extreme), and the cooperative’s extractive program is organized along the lines of previous FUNAI programs, which are themselves variations of the aviamento system. Laborers are controlled by the cooperative’s and FUNAI’s near monopoly on manufactured goods and development projects, by debt accrued through advanced supplies, and by strong government control over indigenous villages.

AmazonCoop’s Brazil nuts are harvested directly from the forest, a difficult, time-consuming, and dangerous process. In most member villages, the nuts are collected in February and March by individual families, some of whom spend the entire two-month harvest season in the forest. Traveling to distant Brazil nut patches requires a significant investment of time and money for inputs such as gasoline, food, and hunting and fishing supplies. To offset these costs and encourage intensive dedication to Brazil nuts, the cooperative advances money and supplies at the start of each harvest season, which harvesters must repay in nuts. The extractivists we interviewed gave mixed reviews of this credit system, complaining about low end-of-season profits but content with the higher yields made possible by more time in the forest. Long absences threaten family agricultural production, however, and may decrease food quality for the rest
of the year. One Asurini family dedicated themselves so intensively to Brazil nuts that they did not grow their own farinha (yuca or manioc meal), marking the first time that anyone could remember a family lacking this staple food. Though not as exploitative as the traditional aviamento system, AmazonCoop's credit system creates dependencies on the cooperative, the government, and the Brazil nut harvest by encouraging extraction at the expense of other livelihood options.

If the cooperative had been owned and operated by its indigenous members, this manner of organizing extractivism would have been a significant change from the aviamento system: indigenous harvesters would suddenly have controlled the capital, credit, and equipment that shaped their work, and their production of Brazil nut oil would have moved them up the value chain. Unfortunately, however, AmazonCoop was a top-heavy organization in which power and decision-making authority were concentrated not only outside of indigenous villages but also outside of Brazil. The cooperative's use of “them” in public references to indigenous members is revealing in this regard. AmazonCoop was an organization of nonindigenous advocates acting on behalf of the indigenous people of the Altamira region and in the interest of a multinational corporation and a government agency. The cooperative's strategy was devised by an international advisory board composed of representatives from multinational corporations and leaders of the corporate social responsibility movement. This strategy was then handed down to an administrative council whose active members were all nonindigenous Brazilians. It was only through village representatives to the General Assembly that indigenous people were involved in decision making, but assemblies were rarely held, and a quorum required the presence of as few as three indigenous people. In addition, the cooperative’s three main income sources—Brazil nut sales, the provision of Internet services, and donations via the Tataquara Eco-Lodge—all depended on nonindigenous managers and foreign money and markets. Indigenous people had virtually no say in the organization of these economic projects and controlled none of the assets on which they depended.

AmazonCoop probably did not choose this international orientation for the purpose of maintaining the dependency of indigenous members. In addition to extremely low levels of education and professional capacity in Altamira's indigenous villages, there were several good reasons that the cooperative founders might have looked abroad for support. The cooperative was founded by nonindigenous entities—The Body Shop and the regional FUNAI administration—to
meet the material, financial, and marketing needs of those entities. In addition, this strategy was an economically rational response to the cooperative’s ability to mobilize significant levels of foreign capital from countries where indigenous Amazonians have high symbolic power and to the difficulties of finding domestic support as a result of anti-indigenous racism. Finally, the cooperative emphasized international partnerships because, in the view of its managers, the Brazilian state had failed to provide adequate support for indigenous people. Nonetheless, while international links facilitated access to new markets, funding sources, and expertise, they did little to eliminate the dependencies and power imbalances of previous extractive systems.

In fact, the cooperative decreased many of the traditional sources of indigenous power within extractivist economies. By integrating indigenous people, the state, and corporate interests into a single institution, it reduced competition between corporations and the state and limited opportunities for indigenous groups to play outsiders against each other. That it eliminated competition without securing a long-term commitment or formal contract from The Body Shop made the economic benefits of this “fair trade” system even more precarious. In addition, because indigenous labor contributed to less than half of the cooperative’s total income (the Internet service provider was equally lucrative), their ability to use slow-downs and strikes to pressure Brazilian and international decision makers was limited. The extent of government control over indigenous villages, development and social service opportunities, and the cooperative further enforced indigenous people’s compliance with the cooperative’s labor demands.

The final days of the cooperative revealed the full extent of indigenous disempowerment. In the dramatic conflicts that led to the cooperative’s dissolution, the organization’s enormous debts and legal liabilities were transferred to a newly appointed indigenous president while a sizeable portion of machinery and other assets mysteriously disappeared or were transferred to nonindigenous people. Indigenous people not only lacked effective decision-making power, even the collective nature of cooperative economic resources was a farce. Given this, the cooperative can best be seen as a new intermediary in an aviamento-like system. Rather than enabling indigenous people to control their own capital, credit, and labor, the cooperative maintained indigenous people at the lowest rungs of the production chain, albeit with better compensation.

Of course, better compensation and decreased exploitation are important gains, and the indigenous villagers that we spoke with were clearly happy with
the higher incomes that the cooperative permitted. My point is simply that these benefits were secured through the workings of a highly unequal society and did not entail a change in indigenous people’s position within local power relations.

Furthermore, many of these benefits depended more on external factors than on the cooperative itself. For example, because Brazil nuts have a shorter harvest season and constitute a much smaller industry than rubber, harvesters are able to pursue other subsistence activities and are less likely to become dependent on this single commodity and the intermediaries who control its sale. Also, the security of a “pacified,” government-monitored indigenous labor pool lowers economic risks and the need for more extreme forms of labor control. Most important, though, the main value of the cooperative’s Brazil nuts derives not from their use-value but from their symbolism, from the positive image that comes with fair trade, cooperative organization, and indigenous development. This fact alters the industry, establishing a limit to the exploitability of indigenous people and obliging corporate and state partners to provide (or at least appear to provide) something recognizable as “development.”

CONSIDERING POWER AND HISTORY IN COOPERATIVE DESIGN

By now it should be clear that AmazonCoop provided economic benefits to indigenous people in the Altamira region, but it did not change (or even attempt to change) their extreme marginalization within networks of power. Unfortunately, this is not an unusual outcome of cooperative organizing. The AmazonCoop story can be useful, however, for reimagining how we might transform cooperatives from beneficial social and economic institutions into agents of profound social change.

The key, I think, lies in the way that we think about cooperative design. If we focus on developing cooperatives that can successfully execute economic projects, that is precisely what we will get: cooperatives that execute economic projects and marginally improve people’s well-being. This work is important, but these cooperatives will tend to work within—and therefore reproduce—the power dynamics that have created today’s vastly unequal world. What if we design cooperatives based on a different set of questions? What if, instead of (or alongside of) the standard question of how to organize economically viable
cooperatives, we also thoroughly interrogate how our cooperatives can challenge the historical relations of power that have created the very need for institutionalized cooperation among the poor?

AmazonCoop provides a useful example for how cooperatives might be designed differently. The founders of AmazonCoop asked, “What type of organization do we need to create in order to trade with those multinational corporations that will pay a premium in order to appear fair and just?” This question is perfectly reasonable, but it reduces indigenous people’s interests to the narrow issue of achieving a higher price for their products. It also puts multinational corporations in the driver’s seat by emphasizing the need to adapt to their demands. Most important, it diverts attention away from critical reflection on the status quo. Instead, we might place this new possibility of cooperative-based fair trade into the historical context of indigenous involvement in extractivism, asking how it could alter the resources, challenges, and vulnerabilities that shape indigenous people’s social and economic opportunities. While there are many ways to approach this discussion, I offer the following questions as one path for considering how historical power relations can be mobilized and changed in order to promote indigenous well-being today:

1. How can indigenous people use this cooperative to preserve and expand historical sources of power in extractive economies?
2. How can indigenous people use this cooperative to mobilize new types of power available in today’s global economic and social landscape?
3. How can indigenous people use this cooperative to avoid, escape, or change the dynamics that have contributed to their unfavorable position in extractive economies?

These questions clearly establish that the cooperative is not an end in itself but rather a tool that indigenous people might use to combat their systematic marginalization. By making power central to cooperative design, they help us look beyond the ways that indigenous people can use the cooperative to make inroads with a multinational corporation willing to pay a premium for the right to use indigenous, environmental, and fair trade symbolism; they also prompt us to think about how indigenous people can carve out power within that trade relationship and how they can leverage that relationship to make broader claims to power.

Examining the old aviamento system, it is clear that a lack of capital maintained indigenous people in the lowest links of the commodity chain. A
genuinely participatory cooperative would create the possibility of indigenous-controlled credit to support the Brazil nut harvest and indigenous-owned transportation and processing plants. These new commons would surely improve the position of indigenous people within the commodity chain, but the series of questions that I propose raise other possibilities as well.

For example, history shows that indigenous people sometimes resorted to extreme measures—disrupting trade through violent river closures or leaving the rubber trade altogether—in order to force consideration of their interests. This historical understanding could be used to ensure that any new cooperative actively privileges indigenous interests. First, we might institutionalize frequent and meaningful opportunities for indigenous people to express their interests in ways that do not disrupt trade, for example through regular meetings on indigenous lands. But a cooperative that seeks to actively challenge power hierarchies might take a second, more unusual step of valuing and even strengthening indigenous people’s ability to disrupt trade. This type of ultimate veto power—which could be established through a number of different mechanisms—subordinates the cooperative economic project to the broader goal of social change. The cooperative might also strengthen indigenous power vis-à-vis international partners and other local economic elite (including the government) by using profits to strengthen traditional subsistence systems and to pursue new livelihood options, thus decreasing dependency on individual industries and partners. Not incidentally, designing these possibilities for protest into the cooperative might actually stabilize (rather than threaten) international partnerships by decreasing the risk of unexpected and more dramatic forms of resistance. If indigenous people have the power to demand meaningful dialogue, they don’t need to assert their power through mass mobilizations, protests, and media attacks against their partner corporation.

This brings us to a second point: how the cooperative might use contemporary developments to promote change. AmazonCoop was founded on the new symbolic value of indigenous people and the interest of international civil society in indigenous rights and conservation, but these resources were used only to increase profits to The Body Shop and earnings for indigenous harvesters. The lack of engagement with indigenous political movements is especially surprising given that the initial idea for The Body Shop’s involvement in the region grew out of a masterfully executed symbolic protest by local indigenous people against the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam. A lucrative project like the AmazonCoop Brazil nut trade might lend extra weight to indigenous demands that the Brazilian government uphold basic rights, particularly in areas like land
rights and education, which become (monetarily) valuable prerequisites for foreign direct investment. This type of project could also be used to unite tribes that were previously divided (and exploited through their division) and to form mutually beneficial relationships between urban and rural indigenous people.

These ideas offer a hint of the possibilities that emerge when we consider cooperatives as agents of change rather than more limited economic projects, and when we place them in their historical context. Of course, most cooperatives will not be able to launch entirely new modes of production, extraction, exchange, and distribution. Historical relations of exploitation, dependency, and unequal exchange may be so entrenched that cooperative members cannot create a radically new alternative all at once. In fact, some of that resistance will come from cooperators themselves; developing an intertribal cooperative in the Altamira region would challenge traditional systems of chiefly power and authority, and parallel projects in other rural areas would provoke similar challenges. But these sticking points only underscore the importance of more transformative cooperatives. They raise a final question that could aid in rethinking cooperatives:

4. How can cooperative members engage in these still imperfect, still exploitative economic practices in a way that promotes their long-term liberation from systems of exploitation?

Change will not come overnight, neither in cooperatives nor in society at large. Many new AmazonCoops will be created, projects that don’t challenge the status quo but do improve living conditions for the economically disenfranchised by offering them slightly higher profits and added social perks. These remain valuable. But I think that cooperatives can aspire to more. Through critical interrogations of power and history, I think cooperatives can help us imagine and move toward a more profound reconfiguration of power in the future. This is surely a worthwhile task.