

FOOTHOLDS:

Social and economic enfranchisement for undocumented Mexican  
immigrants in Philadelphia through a pre-figurative capitalist  
alternative.

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## ABSTRACT

### *English*

This is a participant-observation and interview-based organizational analysis of a workers' cooperative in South Philadelphia. Operating as a general construction company and comprised entirely of undocumented immigrants, this space sits at a particularly niche intersection of immigrant work experience and alternative economics in a quickly developing urban schema. Heavily relying on cooperative theoretical literature, this study assesses how, if at all, the cooperative practices a democratized workspace and socially/economically empowers its constituents. Marshalled against interviews with professionals and day laborers—workers' only other option were they not in the cooperative—this study concludes that, while the workspace is not democratized in practice or on theoretical grounds, it fosters an “underlying cooperative ethos” that provides structural benefits greater than those in day laboring and operates as a “foothold” into more competitive work/opportunity in the formal economy.

### *Español*

Por observación participante y entrevistas, se ha realizado un análisis de una cooperativa de trabajadores en Filadelfia Sur. Porque se funciona como una compañía de construcción y se componen totalmente de inmigrantes mexicanos, este espacio ocupa una intersección particular de experiencia de trabajadores inmigrantes y formas económicas alternativas en un esquema urbano que desarrolla rápidamente. Esta obra se funda mucho en la teórica cooperativa y evalúa cómo, si lo hace, la cooperativa se democratiza y cómo esto fortalece los trabajadores en forma económica y/o social. Se pone en conversación con entrevistas de expertos y jornaleros—la forma de trabajo de ellos si no estuvieran en la cooperativa—este estudio concluye que, mientras el espacio no sea democratizado en la práctica o en forma teórica, alimenta una “filosofía cooperativa subyacente” que proviene beneficios estructurales más mejores que los de ser jornalero y funciona como un punto de apoyo hasta oportunidades más competitivas dentro de la economía formal.

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## INTRODUCTION

On the floor, debris and construction materials are indistinguishable; flooded with plaster, electric saws, and edges of various just and jag, a ride to work in an Edifi-Coop van is as dangerous as the work itself. The workers seem unencumbered by the clutter, more focused on vigorously rubbing their hands and zipping up their coats in an effort to stay warm. Despite being a cozy, 62 degrees outside, they shiver—they are used to a more blistering kind of heat. Crushed amongst this dicey potpourri, I jostle down Washington Avenue with several Edifi-Coop workers, salsa music bubbling from the radio.

Because Edifi-Coop's workforce is so small, no one specializes—being a “jack-of-all-trades” is part of the gig. Still, upon arrival, workers divvy up and immediately get to work: priming the walls, measuring the bathroom, sawing the marble. They work efficiently, but not without fun. Amidst the lifting and lugging, they laugh. The house-to-be fills with a cacophony of whirring construction tools, Mexican slang I don't understand, and—of course—more salsa.

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At first glance, Edifi-Coop appears like any other construction company. Everyone who works at Edifi-Coop is Mexican, but in a country where construction workers are almost 30% Latinx,<sup>1</sup> despite making up only 16% of the United States' labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics), nothing appears awry. Edifi-Coop's singularity lies below visible demographics: all of its workers are undocumented immigrants from Mexico.

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years, scholarship surround Latino/a persons has called into question the role of gender and gender construction in Spanish genealogy. In an effort to contribute to the work of these scholars in centering gender in discourse, upholding intersectionality as an academic precedent, and be inclusive of non-binary persons who may/not be the subject of my writing, I will be using an “-x” instead of an “-a” or “-o” suffix when referring to persons who are of Latin-American descent. For a full discussion of “Latinx” see: Scharrón-del Río, M. R., & Aja, A. A. (2015). The case FOR ‘Latinx’: Why intersectionality is not a choice. *Latino Rebels*, 5.

Of further interest is the claim by José<sup>2</sup>, the founder, that Edifi-Coop is a workers' cooperative. This study examines this claim in light of cooperative theory and what role Edifi-Coop serves as a work option for these undocumented workers. Seeing as workers at Edifi-Coop would be otherwise funneled into contingent day labor markets, this analysis illuminates how workers benefit from Edifi-Coop's organizational structure and operations as they are. In order to make this assessment, I have spent six months observing Edifi-Coop and conducting extensive interviews with its personnel. To make informed comparisons, I have complemented these data with semi-structured interviews with day laborers, experts on day laboring, and case studies from Cleveland, New York, and Washington, DC. Through this work, I address how immigrants of this particular political vulnerability find social and economic enfranchisement in Philadelphia's fringe economy; further, I provide a political economic analysis suggesting the larger implications of such alternative economic practice.

As I will detail, Edifi-Coop boasts a cooperative value system that facilitates pro-social behaviors and provides leverage for work in more formalized labor markets more as a result of the business' character than praxis. Serving as an intermediary, Edifi-Coop provides tangible benefits that outpace the hardships and insecurity ever-present in day laboring. The results of this research tell a compelling story about models of enfranchisement within the informal economy and demonstrate particular modes of immigrant response to America's current political economic paradigm.

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<sup>2</sup> José is not his real name. All names, including that of the company itself ("Edifi-Coop") are pseudonyms.

## REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

José, its founder, claims that Edifi-Coop is a workers' cooperative, a space that "exist[s] to sell [its] goods or services in the market in order to provide income and job security to [its] members" (Gunn 2004, 38). In workers' cooperatives, workers' hold financial and administrative stake in the company; decisions are made democratically or through democratic representation. A successful workers' cooperative requires a *democratized* workspace; Paul Bernstein referred to this as a "process of transformation," one which will henceforth be referred to as *workplace democratization* (Bernstein 1976, 4). Bernstein's model of workplace democratization was based on six discrete, necessary components: participation in decision making; frequent feedback of economic results to all employees; full sharing with employees of management-level information and expertise; an independent board of appeal in case of disputes; and a particular set of attitudes and values (*type of consciousness* [emphasis added]; Bernstein 1976). These ideas have been echoed in other cooperative theoretical literature (Conover 1959).

Edifi-Coop's cooperative practice is undoubtedly informed by its constituency's Mexican heritage; cooperative activity has spiked in Latin America in response to the political and economic crises that have percolated the region in the last thirty years (Larrabure et al. 2011). *Unidades de producción socialistas* in Venezuela and *empresas recuperadas* in Buenos Aires, Argentina are important, large-scale precedents of cooperative practice. Empresas recuperadas, in particular, are a poignant example: they are, by definition, more concerned with community maintenance and support than market success (a philosophy referred to as *compañerismo*); wages fluctuate with the individual business' profit; and workers are equally compensated for equal work. These are the most successful example of democratized workspaces in the world (Larrabure et al. 2011). Mexico, too, offers a rich history of cooperativism. From *ejidatarios*—

collectively owned and managed farmlands—to cooperative fishing practices along the Gulf of Mexico, cooperative practice is most visible in Latin America and illustrates socioeconomic antecedents that likely informed the founding and crystallization not just of the economic practice, but of the cultural spirit of Edifi-Coop. Political economic experts suggest that burgeoning cooperative enterprise is a response to the increasing austerity, market deregulation, and privatization that have exacerbated inequality on regional, national, and global scales; as such, these fledgling cooperatives (the examples from the literature or Edifi-Coop) are likely to be intermediary in stage, unfinished in their process of workplace democratization, and fluctuating in practice (Larrabure et al. 2011).

Because all of the workers at Edifi-Coop are undocumented, it is essential to recognize that cooperativism is not merely a response to political and economic conditions, but an attempt at enfranchisement in a system that has otherwise relegated them to the informal economy. Undocumented migrants are prolific within America's informal economy, particularly in "day laboring"—highly contingent work in which workers may be employed for only a day or hours at a time. In fact, the North America Congress on Latin America reports that over half of day laborers in the United States are from Mexico alone (Valenzuela 2007). Day laboring is precarious and workers are often the subjects of physical and emotional abuse and myriad workplace violations (Kalleberg 2008; Peck & Theodore 2011; Dole & Kerr 2001). This contextualizes the narrowness and unaccountability of Edifi-Coop workers' alternatives and illustrates how their current workspace is not just unique, but immensely valuable. In light of contemporary cooperative practice and migrant economic experiences in America, workers have established an alternative that is socially viable and economically empowering.

## METHODOLOGY

I was interested in a case study that would enable me to understand alternatives to private enterprise in action. Cooperative enterprise is, by most measures, burgeoning in Philadelphia. I consulted professors of political economy about my interest in such practice, some of whom directed me to Edifi-Coop. This setting presented a unique opportunity for examining vanguard alternative capitalist practice within an urban, contemporarily American political-economic context.

Guiding my fieldwork was relevant literature in sociology, cooperative theory, and historico-cultural understandings of cooperativism in Latin America. I also consulted scholars across the University of Pennsylvania's History, Latin American Studies, and Urban Studies departments for further direction as I began my participant observation. I had to look beyond the literature on cooperativism to understand what it means in the context of a Mexican-immigrant community in contemporary urban America. Together, these sources formed the basis of a theoretical framework that allowed me to construct interview questions and observational foci, and make informed assessments about cooperativism in Edifi-Coop.

My field research entailed a six-month participant-observation of Edifi-Coop. I also sought to interview members of the cooperative and persons who work as day laborers in the Philadelphia area. The participant observation was the longest and most involved part of the study. After establishing a rapport with José, I began visiting Edifi-Coop on a biweekly basis to observe the workers and their workspace. After three months, I reduced this to once a week. By partaking in their work-day, I was able to converse with them and glean knowledge about the workplace environment and its operations. These observations informed the interviews, my final and most formalized mode of data collection.



Interviews took place wherever workers were willing to meet me, including (but not limited to): the backs of vans, various South Philadelphia beer gardens, and Geno's Steaks (they can't stand Pat's). With one exception, I conducted about a dozen interviews over a four-week period. Some interviews functioned as multiple sources, as they were workers in Edifi-Coop who had also worked as day laborers. I recorded interviews when permitted. All interviews with workers and day laborers were conducted in Spanish. While this proved limiting in some capacities, it was my only option for communicating with them; not only because it made them more comfortable, but because they often had little to no proficiency in English. I managed to develop substantive relationships with a few workers who became key informants on the organizational and administrative processes of Edifi-Coop. I formulated an interview questionnaire that afforded workers ample room to speak about cooperative practice in Edifi-Coop and, if applicable, their experiences with temporary labor markets. I analyzed interview transcriptions and field notes to assess the nature of their work and its larger political-economic implications. Noting the discrepancies between formal cooperative theory and the picture of the workplace that emerged from my data, I used literature on cooperativism in Latin America and research on the experience of day laboring in the U.S. to decipher my informants' testimony about the nature of the workplace represented by Edifi-Coop.

A culturally-, socially-, and economically-oriented set of theory surrounding cooperativism has provided a foundation upon which I have built my fieldwork and interview analyses. The discussion offers my inductive and theoretical insights of the research detailed above.

## PRESENTATION OF DATA & ANALYSIS

Workers in Edifi-Coop gather every morning outside of José's office, clutching Styrofoam cups of instant coffee. As the clock ticks toward 8:00am, they reluctantly split off into different vehicles. From there, they drive to any of their dozen-or-so worksites in the South Philadelphia area.

On the job, workers are gregarious but efficient. While one worker may do any number of tasks in a given day—prime or paint walls, saw and construct with various materials, record measurements, transport hazardous materials, etc.—he is rarely confused about what is next; these guys know what they are doing. Whilst working, they poke fun at one another, sing off key to the radio, and, when they get the chance, pal around with José. José spends most of his day in his car, whipping from site to site, making sure everything is according to plan. When he shows up, workers are quick to fawn in their limited time—it is evident they absolutely adore him. They usually call in lunch from a local *taquería*, charging one with the duty of picking up all the *asado* before noon. They enjoy their meals, but don't dawdle—it's always right back to work (or as José puts it, “¡ándense!”).

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At first glance, an Edifi-Coop team functions just like any other construction crew; however, as my research reveals, it is much more complicated. I used the formal definition of cooperativism, in the literature as well as the broader definition of cooperative practices and values to understand what take place in Edifi-Coop, particularly in consideration of its affective characteristics and cultural context. Ultimately, I show that while Edifi-Coop doesn't measure up to the formal or structural characteristics of a cooperative, it does have characteristics that distinguish it from a typical capitalist/entrepreneurial enterprise.

### *Cooperative Theoretical Analysis of Edifi-Coop*

In comparing my data with the “necessary components” of cooperativism outlined in the above literature, I have assessed Edifi-Coop against workers’ cooperative theory, using Bernstein’s and The Rochdale Society’s praxes as standards.

The components of cooperativism most obviously missing are those of democratic control and participation in decision making. In Edifi-Coop, José makes all organizational, operational, and financial decisions. In many instances, when I probed about Edifi-Coop’s decision-making processes, workers laughed in my face; asked me to repeat the question, confused; or dismissed it with a wave of a hand. To the workers in Edifi-Coop, this question is not just presumptuous, but outlandish. “[José] makes all of those decisions,” responded one worker when I asked if members voted on issues such as worker compensation or hourly rates; “I’ve never voted on anything,” said another, puzzled. While José has told me on several occasions that workers have “input” in what they get paid and when they work, he has never explicitly detailed the processes by which said input is gathered, assessed, or implemented. When prodded, he would usually ignore me or change the subject. Speaking with workers, it became glaringly obvious that cooperativism was a veneer under which José operated a highly undemocratic and hierarchical firm with near-total control. As one succinctly put it:

**Worker:** *[Shaking his head, laughing]* We don’t vote on salary, on hires, on anything.”

This statement was upheld by every worker with whom I spoke. José makes every administrative decision in Edifi-Coop and no one can recall an instance in the four years of its existence in which a vote was cast. The closest workers come to having a managerial hand in Edifi-Coop is when they make suggestions as to who should be hired—in fact, this is how everyone who works at Edifi-Coop found their job. Regardless, José makes the ultimate decision on whether a person is hired—no other opinion is sought or formally included in the decision.

Workers at Edifi-Coop are not concerned with this; most found it bewildering that I would imagine this a part of their operations. Workers may be content with their pay and workplace operations, but they do not participate in deciding them; this privilege is exclusively José's. Democratizing the workplace is, arguably, the most central facet of a legitimate workers' cooperative; in Edifi-Coop, democracy is nonexistent.

Most other components of cooperativism are altogether not met by Edifi-Coop. For example, frequent feedback to workers of economic results is a feature one would expect of a cooperative, Edifi-Coop's finances were opaque; neither I nor Edifi-Coop's employees were permitted access to any materials regarding Edifi-Coop's finances, which indicates that the space is economically inaccessible and financially covert.

Workers at Edifi-Coop were paid on either a weekly or bimonthly basis, depending on the amount of work the company received. To my knowledge, Edifi-Coop has no office space—all activity takes place on the street. As such, I was able to observe when workers were paid (typically Thursdays), a process that was completely clandestine. While workers shared Coronas from the local bodega and discussed their weekend plans, José would call workers over individually to be paid. In no instance did he alert workers how much they would be paid, much less the pay of others. In Edifi-Coop, pay is literally behind the back.

Regardless of how common this type of practice is in the informal economy, it is antithetical to developing cooperative practices. Over the first few months of my participant observation, I probed workers about pay and financial transparency.

**Worker:** I don't know anything about what anyone else is paid—why would I?

**Worker:** [*Puzzled expression*] José makes all the decisions about pay. I take what I [can] get when I can get it.

Workers not only lack a say in one-another's pay, but have no indication of (or desire to affect) other workers' wages. Workers, for the most part, disregarded my questions about the state of the businesses finances outside of salaries/pay.

Presumably, economic success for Edifi-Coop is contingent on the amount of work they have contracted; often, when work runs dry, José subcontracts with other construction agencies. In these cases, Edifi-Coop helps accelerate the work of other firms under their auspice, snagging dividends in the process. Still, it is unclear how successfully subcontracting buoys Edifi-Coop in times of hardship or supplements workers' wages. Seeing as no workers could provide explicit feedback, I conclude that there is no general communication in the firm surrounding its fiscal status.

José avoided or otherwise shirked my offer to review Edifi-Coop's finances. As a result, I, like the workers, experienced first-hand the lack of transparency about finances. José eluded conversations regarding finances at all costs, and never explained why. His unwillingness to provide any sort of economic feedback to me or his workers could be the result of several factors, though the risk of exploitation is likely among them.

Similarly, José did not share with employees of management level information and expertise, as prescribed by formal cooperative theory. The aim of sharing such information in a cooperative is to lessen specialization within the workplace (Saraph et al. 1992). José has one employee who serves as a trusted confidant, but, from my interview with him, I learned that even he has very limited knowledge of Edifi-Coop's operations. José doesn't seek administrative assistance of any kind, a clear effort to maintain control over the firm.

Regardless of their being kept in the dark about business finances and operations, workers in Edifi-Coop love José, chiming adorations like, "He is a great boss" and "He is the

only boss in this game [industry] who actually gives a shit.” These sentiments only further contradict the presence of cooperativism in that their veneration of him demonstrates his superiority within the firm. José is seen as a *boss*, not a fellow worker or equal stakeholder. This control is beyond discursive. By not seeking administrative assistance and failing to disseminate financial and administrative information about Edifi-Coop, control and operation of Edifi-Coop remains firmly in José’s grasp.

Discrepancies with workplace democratization also include Edifi-Coop’s external relationships. Theory suggests formal cooperative practice entails interaction with other local cooperatives. Edifi-Coop’s does not have a relationship with the greater (albeit small) Philadelphia cooperative community. I interpret this lack of cooperation and José’s authority to more so reflect the actors’ tenuous relationship with the state rather than their ambitions as a coop. This is a necessary distinction. Ironically, the imbalance of political status between José and the workers serves as the bedrock upon which Edifi-Coop’s workers build a sense of mutual social responsibility. While Edifi-Coop is licensed with and pays taxes to the city of Philadelphia, its employees are nonetheless undocumented; though it remains unclear how José logs hours and workers with the municipality, I have gathered from my research that they remain insular and endemic to South Philadelphia as a mode of protection. The language barrier puts workers in the impossible situation of being unable to communicate with others, including clients—much of these duties are delegated to José by necessity. Further, workers, while trusting of me and individuals, are perpetually thinking about their precarious citizenry status. They drive five miles per hour below the speed limit, obey all other traffic laws, and travel in groups. These behaviors seem overly scrupulous, but they are necessary—any altercation with the police would result in their deportation. When I asked if these behaviors had anything to do with being

undocumented, one worker turned to me and provided one of the few English idioms he'd learned since emigrating: "Duh."

As a group, Edifi-Coop cannot effectively facilitate relationships with other cooperatives without directly jeopardizing its workers; being part of a larger cooperative network begets a level of visibility that would endanger—with the sole exception of José—every worker within the firm. Similarly, while administration of Edifi-Coop is not horizontal, it is not domineering either; it is protective. Nonetheless, Edifi-Coop has achieved some visibility as a cooperative enterprise: I was directed to José by friends and mentors who are familiar with cooperative theory/practice. While it's unclear how this base level legitimacy was attained, it doesn't hold up in the face of these workers' lived reality.

Discussions with José reaffirmed how the citizenship status of Edifi-Coop's workers made cooperativism difficult. External factors have, majorly, shaped his role and Edifi-Coop's larger business operations. As the only documented worker at Edifi-Coop, many of the business' titles and taxes must be filed and paid through him. Because of his fluency in English, José is and must be the political and legal liaison between the company and the greater Philadelphia municipality. José is the one who pays taxes to the city, who gets licensures for all of Edifi-Coop's vehicles, and who filed for business privileges when the firm was conceived in 2013. Through José's leadership and legal status, the business simultaneously maintains its secrecy and viability as a workspace for undocumented immigrants in the South Philadelphia community. José protects the identities of his workers by taking on this dominant leadership position. As I came to realize, revealing information about finances or cooperating with other businesses is an unattainable privilege in light of Edifi-Coop's workers' legal statuses. Revealing this information is not just careless—it's dangerous.

By most theoretical metrics, Edifi-Coop is not a cooperative; however, theory limits my capacity for examining Edifi-Coop's practices within its exacting political economic environment. While riding to a work site with one of the more perspicacious construction workers in fall 2017, he interrupted our informal interview to provide the following:

**Worker:** Look, I know what you're getting at—no, [Edifi-Coop] is not a cooperative. We don't vote or know nothing about another's salary. We are over-saturated with work and personal issues—we have [to fulfill] obligations to families of our *own* before trying to build one here. We work forty to sixty hours a week just to cover our bills and our families. It only occurs to us to cover our expenses; it's hard to invest ourselves in a cooperative when we live check-to-check [emphasis added].

This quote was salient for the fact that this worker not only knew what cooperativism *meant*, but dismissed the utopic, bourgeois form of cooperativism I tried to pin down—it simply cannot be applied here. Structural political-economic factors and the harsh realities of his and his community's immigrant livelihoods hinder the development of a democratized workplace. When individuals are preoccupied with scraping by, constantly tried by the status of living “check-to-check,” it becomes impossible to extend one's consciousness beyond one's self and family. The workers' pressures are so great that the luxury of co-ownership is more than they want or can handle. Workers are unable to find stability beyond making ends meet.

In many instances, workers found my questions about cooperativism confusing or frustrating; in an effort to clarify, I would backpedal. “What is a cooperative?” I would ask, or, “What does ‘cooperative’ mean to you?” The grand majority of answers were some iteration of “I don't know.” The most I stemmed regarding “cooperativism” were vague answers about mutual aid and an expectation of a “sense of community.” Some workers had an operating definition of cooperativism, but it was not widespread. In a few cases, workers hadn't even



realized that *cooperative* was decalé on the vans they rode to and from work. Although cooperative practice was not evident in what I heard, an implicit, burgeoning form permeated through what I saw.

Looking at my data in light of the literature, on cooperativism, I have clearly established Edifi-Coop is not a cooperative by ideal or theoretical standards; however, by triangulating this evidence with field work and interviews, and contextualizing it within the reality of these workers' economic precarity and political vulnerability, I argue that business practices in Edifi-Coop *are* analytically consequential inasmuch as they represent a business format that is responsive and *resistant* to late capitalist enterprise in a manner that is beyond mere abstraction.

#### *Assertion of a Cooperative Ethos*

More important than what Edifi-Coop is not, is what it is; despite not being a cooperative by managerial or economic metrics, there are components within it that resemble cooperativism. These are best encapsulated by Bernstein's ultimate tenet: a cooperative must have "a particular set of attitudes and values"—a "type of consciousness" (45). While this isn't built into the structural operations of Edifi-Coop, it persists in the workers' mutual sociocultural identity and, paradoxically, as a result of the power imbalances implicit in José's political and legal privilege.

**Worker:** [*After being provided a definition of "workers cooperative"*] I don't think this is a cooperative by that definition, but... we look after each-other. If I need help, José is there for me... There is not economic [support], but social support."

As already noted, while some workers have an understanding of what cooperativism is, it is not widespread. The social support described by the worker above was reflected in myriad ways by others with whom I spoke. Though I did not find an explicit articulated philosophy, but it became immensely clear that workers in Edifi-Coop feel as though they can rely on one-another; trust one-another with personal experiences and protections; and find a sense of

belonging. This does not arise from cooperative *practice*, but rather from an underlying cooperative *ethos*.

This fits the literature pertaining to cooperative practice in Latin America. This workspace is a reaction to crisis, not unlike the political-economic tensions present when coops first germinated in Venezuela and Argentina. José uses “cooperative” to appeal to a familiar cultural and economic history, and provide a common point of identification. From this, they presume a set of mutual, culturally significant values that they are carrying to the workplace. It doesn’t necessarily matter what a cooperative “is” so much as it is a “kind” of workplace more prevalent in their country of origin. As Michael J. Piore synthesized in his research paper *Birds of Passage*, “One can better understand migration by ignoring income differences and recognizing that people are rooted in a social context in ways that other commodities are not” (229). Coming from a country with a higher instance of cooperativism/cooperative practice, this appears familiar and draws on workers’ nostalgia. Once operating within the cooperative, this provides a foundation upon which all workers can build a stronger set of collective and communicated values. José’s insistence on the use of the word “cooperative” stems from its social and historical prevalence in these workers’ home country of Mexico.

A cooperative ethos became increasingly evident as I spent time at Edifi-Coop. Workers are extremely friendly with one another, making a point of greeting each and every person on site and talking about their previous evening at home or the past weekend. Workers are honest and emotional, divulging family issues, financial concerns, and the daily trials of living in a country that is not their own. While we might expect to see this in a multiplicity of workplaces, it takes on a particular meaning in consideration of these workers’ cultural background. As noted in University of California Los Angeles’s Center for the Study of Urban Poverty 2004 report, *In*

*Pursuit of the American Dream*, contingent workspaces are overwhelmingly Hispanic; these immigrant workers are “family oriented” and seek spaces that foster an intimate sense of community (1).

Much of this ethos is reflected in José’s relationship with the rest of the workforce. Despite his imperious management of the firm, workers express their adoration for him. Virtually everyone I spoke with had positive things to say about José, glorifying him for his commitment to Edifi-Coop and his willingness to take on workers’ personal issues.

**Worker:** José is my boss, but that is not how I see him... I see him as a brother.

**Worker:** José is a great boss. He has taught me a lot and [because of him] I can work in construction.

**Worker:** I used to work with José before I worked for him. He has always been an *hermano*, and I will always think of him that way.

These quotes percolated up from long narratives in which José demonstrated an immense amount of altruism—helping someone’s kids get to school, assisting with an outstanding debt, easing the transition to a new home following an eviction—outside of the workplace. These actions, however, were not performed in a vacuum; workers take these memories with them to work, and they contextualize their relationship with José and the rest of the workers. While Edifi-Coop may not be operating under purist cooperative principles, José’s care for his employees cements a feeling of solidarity within Edifi-Coop. I see this energy in the way workers talk to José, talk about José, and—most importantly—talk to each other.

José’s behavior is reaffirmed in Edifi-Coop, generating a warm, amicable environment. Workers end up not just wanting to work well for José, but alongside one-another. This paradigm maintains a rigid duality—José on top, everyone else below—but makes workers *happy*. They

feel valued and important. I could observe the behavior associated with these sentiments, but one worker captured it well when he said:

**Worker:** We hang out, we socialize. Work is work, but it's not miserable. We get along and that makes being here better... [this is] the best job I've ever had.

Pay at Edifi-Coop is far more consistent than what workers would otherwise receive in contingent/day labor markets. Workers report that their wages at Edifi-Coop are not significantly more than what they have been paid previously as unskilled workers, but are palpably more consistent and reliable. To these workers, the reliability and consistency in wages distinguish the work at Edifi-Coop from any other unskilled work position in the informal economy emerges. To workers, the wages at Edifi-Coop are so generous and stable that they may presume cooperativism is just that—consistency in an otherwise precarious market. While the way pay is actually distributed does not meet ideals of workplace democracy, it neither undercuts the sentiment. It *reflects* cooperativism in that it demonstrates fairness. Cooperatives are based on a concern for the collective over one's self, and José's consistency with pay cultivates that communal sense.

The research material also suggests that, despite their current circumstances, José and the Edifi-Coop crew actually have a long-standing aim toward better workplace democratization. In an interview with WHYY Philadelphia's *Radio Times*, José stated that Edifi-Coop "is not a formal coop," but merely a beginning: "We need to water the seed" (Hernandez).

In the interview, José speaks candidly about the difficulties presented by his workers' lack of legal status, like pooling resources, obtaining licenses, insurance, and the privilege of calling the police. All of his statements here corroborate what he told me in person and further underscore the inequity wrought by these migrants' political vulnerability. Despite recognizing

that he is functionally responsible for all of Edifi-Coop's operations, José says he simply "doesn't bear the same burden" as his workers.

José touts cooperative practice in the interview that I did not personally witness throughout my time with Edifi-Coop. For example, he says the decision to interview in the first place was one on which "all of [Edifi-Coop] was consulted." It is evident that formally voting procedures were not practiced, but there is an implication that the decision resulted from input from all of Edifi-Coop's workers. The informality of this practices underscores the idea that workplace democratization is developing at more of a philosophical as opposed to structural level within the business.

This not only suggests that José's workers are aware of the working power imbalance, but they are actively accepting it with the hope eventually realizing their cooperative aims. This substantiates Bernstein's claim of cooperativism being an "ongoing" and "fluctuating" process, one in which we—in the case of Edifi-Coop—must expect non- or partially-democratic actions take place in an effort to achieve more cooperative means. Granted, this still leaves certain questions about the workplace unanswered (as he did with me, José adamantly refuses the title of "boss" in the radio interview, yet there is no clear recognition from the workers—many of whom are present in the interview but do not speak—that they maintain the same managerial status), but the interview is nonetheless salient. Considering the timeline of this research in respect to that of Edifi-Coop's growth, it seems plausible that I was simply not present long enough to witness any substantive growth toward more structurally-sound cooperative practices. In the interview, José talks in-depth about how the business has grown. Initially a couple of guys with nothing but some tools and a bike, Edifi-Coop is now a group of a couple dozen with six trucks and multiple sophisticated projects under its belt. For three years, this growth is extraordinary,

but it is also indicative of the cooperative's nascence. To expect more formalized structures may be unrealistic; one could be optimistic that, with more time, economic success, and social stability, the space could break past nebulous ideas about cooperativism into formalistic cooperative action.

The strong sense of community and mutualism found in Edifi-Coop is built on a set of shared values grounded in a common historico-cultural identity and reinforced by José's generosity. While workers don't have a shared definition of cooperativism, they have an implicit understanding of the practice and workers' cooperatives generally as they pertain to Mexico's cultural and economic history. Drawn by that understanding, workers find that José's behavior extends past that of employer into what one would expect of a friend or close confidant. Seeing these actions as precedents, workers facilitate relationships with one-another and increase productivity by reinforcing a healthy and satisfying work environment. Alongside regular and substantive pay, these factors are necessary to the productivity and economic enfranchisement of Edifi-Coop. These shared values—however unspoken—incentivize work, provide support in times of instability, and generate a preliminary level of collectivism within the firm. Albeit tenuously, the present attitude is inextricably linked to larger cooperative ideals about mutualism and an understanding of productivity and efficiency as relying on collective social and economic stability. Without the constraints of being undocumented, these workers may very well expect greater transparency or workplace democratization; however, in light of their uneven political statuses and insularity, only an intermediary form emerges.

### *Legitimizing Work in Edifi-Coop*

Edifi-Coop's cooperative ethos has tangible advantages when compared to day laboring. Day laborers, including those I met in Edifi-Coop, experience innumerable workplace violations

and personal abuses, including but not limited to: nonpayment, receiving less than the agreed upon wage, lack of breaks and basic amenities, abandonment at the worksite, racially targeted violence, sexual assault, and exposure to hazardous materials/activities (Valenzuela 2007). The day laborer experience provides a good litmus for understanding the structural benefits workers find in Edifi-Coop and legitimize it as a premiere work option.

As detailed above, workers in Edifi-Coop are incentivized by their pay. All four workers at Edifi-Coop who had previously been day laborers said that a major draw to Edifi-Coop was the knowledge that they would receive regular and substantial pay. In case studies of day laborer markets in Cleveland, Washington DC, and New York, researchers have found that day laborers are consistently cheated when it comes to pay. In one of these studies, 57% reported getting paid less than the wage they had agreed upon (Valenzuela 2007). For those who do get paid, wages typically fall under minimum wage. Most day laborers' wages would mark them and their families as living well below the poverty line (Theodore et al. 2008).

While I do not know the amount of workers' wages in Edifi-Coop, data from interviews imply that they are competitive enough to draw workers out of the day labor economy. As mentioned previously, pay at Edifi-Coop is progressive and equitable relative to the rest of Philadelphia's informal economy; in the same way this reflects an underlying cooperative ethos, it provides a structural benefit that exceeds what could be found otherwise.

A major issue in day laboring is job safety and security. In the Washington DC metropolitan area alone, 81% of day laborers report not receiving any form of job safety training; a majority report not receiving essential safety equipment; and 84% report having to seek work at least four days a week. As a day laborer, work is never guaranteed. Day laborers are riddled

with anxiety and exhausted by the constant pressure and need to find work. When speaking to one worker in Edifi-Coop, he said the following:

**Worker:** I would clean houses—one days, two days—and then the work would end. I spent every day looking for a job, and in many cases never found one.

This is the typical day laborer experience. Not only are workers subject to the interminable process of job-hunting, but they have no bargaining power once work is attained, often working for free. The worker quoted above summed up his job security at Edifi-Coop as such: “I will get paid.”

Not only is pay a reflection of relative equity and financial privilege, but of a larger sense of stability and security. Simply knowing one will be paid assuages the fear of showing up to work. Just by working at Edifi-Coop—and *knowing* that they work at Edifi-Coop—workers report an immense sense of security unmatched by contingent work. This comfort is magnified by the distinct sense of belonging and values they experience.

The shared values visible at Edifi-Coop are the foundation of a nascent but imperative cooperative character. When compared with day labor, such sense of community becomes all the more essential. Not only are day labor markets overwhelmingly Latinx (94%; Valenzuela 2007), but they are rife with racial discrimination and violence. In Abel Valenzuela’s 2007 *Immigrant day laborers: Myths and realities*, he noted that 23.2% of day laborers reported having experienced violence in the workplace at least once. Those at Edifi-Coop who had worked as day laborers unilaterally cited racism and threats of racially charged violence as the worst aspect of the day labor job. Conversely, when asked about advantages at Edifi-Coop that don’t exist in day laborer circles, workers provided vehement feedback, such as:

**Worker:** [*Laughing*] I work here because there’s no fucking racism.”



This was unanimously upheld by other workers who had been day laborers. Day laborers experience brutal verbal assault, often to the point of being discouraged from seeking work with the employer. As a professional at Friends of Farmworkers—a workers’ rights activist group based just outside of Philadelphia—put it: “[immigrants in the day laboring economy] are frequently exposed to varying levels of racial discrimination and violence; it’s a major problem.” In many instances, the threat of violence poses not just a physical, but legal risk: involvement in a fight or stand-off may end with the immigrant’s incarceration or deportation. Across the market, day laborers cite racial discrimination as one of the worst and most endangering aspects of their work (Dole & Kerr).

I finally saw the most striking difference between work at Edifi-Coop and as a day laborer: acceptance. In his seminal ethnography *Sidewalk*, sociologist Mitchell Duneier coins the phrase “sustaining habitat”—a work environment that reflects urban poor persons’ ‘venture capitalist’ tendencies and, paradoxically, makes their decrepit and dangerous work options (or surrounding environment) more tolerable. These spaces become hubs of cultural commerce and anti-capitalists sentiments, despite providing incorporation into a capitalist world. Through José’s legal connectedness, Edifi-Coop becomes a sustaining habitat despite workers’ undocumented status.

I saw this clearly in Edifi-Coop. Through a shared cultural perspective and lived experiences, workers in Edifi-Coop facilitate shared values between themselves and José. Workers in Edifi-Coop consciously begin each morning by greeting one another and chatting. Before peeling off into different vans, anywhere from ten to thirty minutes of the “work” morning are spent in plastic chairs strewn in the alley, talking over cigarettes and the occasional breakfast sandwich. These conversations set the tenor of the day—by emotionally checking in on

one-another, workers establish an environment that is intimate, socially informed, and dynamic. Add José's status with the state, and this mode of enfranchisement becomes not just economically, but *emotionally* viable. I saw José effortlessly see-saw between English and Spanish, always quick to mobilize his workers, allay a disgruntled client, or troubleshoot work permit difficulties with officials over the phone. His authority is not just professional, but personal—he puts himself on the line with all non-workers to ensure the safety and secrecy of Edifi-Coop.

What I saw and heard in Edifi-Coop challenges some assumptions of theoretical cooperative practice, which may not be expected amidst the trials and callousness of the larger capitalist economy. In consideration of this reality, the mere presence of shared values and beliefs within the workplace is startling; as a mode of social *and* economic empowerment, extraordinary. In watching workers frequently and actively express concern for one-another; offer assistance outside of the workplace; and, in José's case, demonstrate superlative knowledge of economic loopholes and political blind spots as they pertain to workers' wellbeing, I realized that Edifi-Coop is not a cooperative and it doesn't have to be. Through this underlying cooperative ethos, workers in Edifi-Coop are empowered more than they would be otherwise. This ethos is not just moving in the context of the political economic climate, but corroborating of the theory: such philosophy parallels the *compañerismo* central to Argentine cooperative practice (see page 7) and the “pre-figurative” nature of new cooperativism as it is formulating in Latin America (Larrabure et al. 2011).

As a sustaining habitat, Edifi-Coop provides unique social and economic benefits that could never be realized in temporary work markets. Workers in Edifi-Coop are able to demonstrate a level of social and interpersonal concern for one another that exceeds parallel

work experiences. According to all the workers I interviewed—a significant proportion of the space’s total workforce—pay, sense of community, and belonging at Edifi-Coop far exceed those received as a day laborer. While workers don’t develop a consciousness that democratizes the workplace, it’s sufficient to contribute to the prioritization of an amicable work environment and genuinely intimate relationships. Both the social atmosphere and pay at Edifi-Coop are demonstrably different enough from day labor that they may be construed as a cooperative ethos. Built upon this ethos, the opportunity to avoid racism/discrimination, receive reliable pay, and foster a genuine sense of community, Edifi-Coop is a superior work option.

#### *Edifi-Coop as a Political Economic Intermediary*

Through reliable pay and consistent work, Edifi-Coop approximates formal employment despite the fact that the persons there are employed illegally. While worker’s alternatives are nestled deep in the informal economy, Edifi-Coop is not so easily pinned. Edifi-Coop illuminates the malleable and obfuscated boundaries between the formal and informal economy. As Theodore et al. articulate in an article about the residential construction industry, features of informality exist in this regulated industry (7):

The highly casualized segments of the residential construction industry do not exist as an independent labor market that is entirely separate and distinct from the more regulated, “mainstream” construction labor market. Rather, the dynamics of the more casualized segments are conditioned by the restructuring strategies of the enterprises that employ these workers, and by the three-decades-long shrinking union presence in the industry which has ushered back in a range of employer practices associated with the “gloves off” economy.

This is particularly illustrative of the sustaining habitat Edifi-Coop cultivates for undocumented immigrants. Social and economic enfranchisement here uplifts workers toward the formal economy and, by extension, interactions with more formalized work sectors. This was

the case with Alvarez, a worker at Edifi-Coop with whom I developed a particularly strong relationship. After months of speaking with him and learning about his experience at Edifi-Coop, he suddenly left to work at another company. When I asked him about it, he said he did not leave because of tensions with José or Edifi-Coop; in fact, he maintained that his relationship with José was stronger than ever. Actually, Alvarez left because he got offered a job with a higher salary by an employer who offered to assist him with seeking legal citizenship status. I asked about his day-to-day experience, to which he replied that, in addition to being salaried, he felt secure and accepted in the workplace. Despite being undocumented, Alvarez managed to leverage his work at Edifi-Coop competitively. Because he was already receiving consistent pay and part of a secure and intimate work environment, he had bargaining power with his current employer when negotiating the job.

By the same logic, we might conceptualize Edifi-Coop as a *cooperative intermediary*, one which lacks a collective consciousness, but is pre-figurative of a space in which such a consciousness might arise around workplace democratization. Workers in Edifi-Coop are concerned about one-another's well-being, but do not place concern for the group over themselves (particularly economically); however, this may still be illustrative of a transitional stage. As workers learn that their jobs at Edifi-Coop afford them viable negotiating power with prospective employers, they may also realize that this same cogency can exist within Edifi-Coop. Maybe then—in spite of their undocumented status—workers could make moves to institute workplace democratization, from ethos to practice.

Operating as a cooperative intermediary wedged between the formal and informal economies, Edifi-Coop is both a result of and response to our current political economic schema. Workers are drawn to Edifi-Coop by a sense of cultural solidarity and stay for the reliable wages.

With José operating as a legal interlocutor, Edifi-Coop has evolved into a sustaining habitat that affords social and economic leverage. In a political economic age characterized by precarity, ephemerality of work, and stark individualism, Edifi-Coop offers a haven of work security and community.

## CONCLUSION

Although Edifi-Coop does not function as a cooperative in its formal structure, it presents social and economic benefits to its workers that are superior to those of day laboring and offers a foothold into more competitive work opportunities within the formalized economy. Through a shared cultural identity and relying on José's privileges as a citizen, workers in Edifi-Coop manage to cultivate a sense of community that keeps them happy and productive at work. Paired with the availability of consistent and reliable pay otherwise unavailable to undocumented immigrants, workers have found benefits that outmode their alternatives. These workers avoid discrimination and exploitation; are able to manage individual and familial subsistence; and develop a nascent collective identity. It is in this third point that a greater significance emerges.

Both the formal and informal economy are facts of a capitalist system. Social scientists have established that the informal economy is a result of late-capitalist poverty management<sup>3</sup>, a mode by which the states absorbs surplus labor through illicit economic activity. Workers who are marginalized from mainstream economic activities are forced into the informal economy as their only mode of subsistence. Such activity, while the result of disenfranchisement, operates well within capitalism, subject to its ideology. Workers in Edifi-Coop have, to the contrary, found not only a level of enfranchisement necessary for subsistence and incorporation but, by achieving this status within an otherwise exploitative situation, a form of resistance.

In establishing that Edifi-Coop is an economic intermediary with an underlying cooperative ethos, I argue that this space is pre-figurative of economic enterprise that may, with

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<sup>3</sup> For detailed discussions of how the informal economy absorbs surplus work populations as a manner of poverty management within a capitalist system, see: Bourgois, P. (1995). *In search of respect: Selling crack in El barrio*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Katz, M. (1996). *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*; and Katz, M. (2001). *The price of citizenship: redefining the American welfare state*. New York: Henry Holt and Company

further development, prove as equitable as a cooperative. In *The “New Cooperativism” in Latin America*, Larrabure et al. understood these “pre-figurative” models as “foreshadow[ing] a post-capitalist world by experimenting with alternatives that develop the seeds of the future in the present society, creating the new inside the old” (183). In this case, the literature substantiates Edifi-Coop—by operating as it does within a capitalist paradigm, it subverts it. While the workplace is not democratized, its workers’ sense of belonging and superlative wages challenge the informal economy in which it sits. Characterized by extremely low wages, high levels of flexibility, and insecurity, the informal economy promotes in its participants highly individualized consciousness—Edifi-Coop’s philosophy is anything but. While workers may not be so activated as to insist on a cooperative workplace in function, their unconditional self-worth and reliable pay have allowed them to build a sense of mutuality and collective identity. These become crucial points of support against which workers weigh future employment opportunities. In a political economy characterized by extreme immobility, a firm that creates a more humane workplace environment contests the very paradigm in which it was founded and operates. In Karl Polanyi’s seminal *The Great Transformation*, the social effects of being relegated as “surplus labor”—and, further still, the gravity of our contemporary political economic state—are evident; however, for context, it is best illustrated by the following (76):

“...To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment, indeed, even of the amount and use of purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society. For the alleged commodity, "labor power" cannot be shoved about, used indiscriminately, or even left unused, without affecting the human individual who happens to be the bearer of this peculiar commodity. In disposing of a man's labor power the system would, incidentally, dispose of the physical, psychological, and moral entity of "man" attached to the tag. Robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions, human beings would perish from the effects of social exposure; they would die as the victims of acute social dislocation through vice,

perversion, crime, and starvation. Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighborhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted, military safety jeopardized, the power to produce food and raw materials destroyed...”

By banding together over a shared cultural background, wage reliability, and sense of community, José and his workers manage to defy traditional capitalist enterprise (and state repression based on citizenship) even without a fully or formally democratized workplace.

The ethos present in Edifi-Coop underscores its values and sense of *community*. While I argue these pose substantive benefits in the form of worker productivity, they are not directly oriented toward capital accumulation or *capitalist business practice* per se; rather, they process and relocate their sociality by reclaiming the cultural institutions and social modes of which they were “robbed.” This “double movement” reflects a historical tug-of-war between calculating market logic and our need for human social institutions (Polanyi 1957, 97).

Some may argue Edifi-Coop is merely paternalistic, José’s behavior indicative of dogmatism instead of social reorientation—this is not true. Workers answer to José only inasmuch as he respects their expertise as workers and trusts them to *do* their work—no worker, at any point, reported feeling indebted or subordinate to José. While they may sit below him administratively, José’s workers boast an extraordinary amount of responsibility and sense of agency in the workplace. Additionally, he does not restrict, but *augments* their freedom: by providing them economic stability and pay that is, reportedly, qualitatively better than other unskilled work in the market, he empowers his workers, giving them the social and fiscal means to find more legitimate or formal work opportunities. José’s control of the workspace is not reflective of how he leads or the interpersonal dynamics he cultivates; rather, it illustrates the gravity of his workers’ political positionality and his commitment to keeping them clandestine in the state’s periphery.



By resituating our understandings of cooperativism within the realities of the informal economy, we see that business practice by José and his workers is *responsive* to their economic vulnerability; it is fledgling, it is problematic, but it is better than current, standard paradigms. The cooperative ethos is a double-movement, a reactionary process by which communities re-embed social warmth in an otherwise philosophically cold, market-driven landscape. Through the facilitation of social responsibility, cultural collectivism, and camaraderie, everyone at Edifi-Coop takes part in creating this social security: it is vestigial of their home, nostalgic for their culture, and protective of their livelihoods. This underlying cooperative ethos embeds institutional arrangements that mitigate the harshness of the surrounding capitalist economy and—as Polanyi would argue—preserves workers’ humanity.

Still, workplace dynamics in Edifi-Coop are deeply problematic, and the social protections could be improved with some minor administrative changes. The following suggestions would not only further enfranchise and protect workers, but move Edifi-Coop toward more democratic practices: (1) José should extend management-level information and work to senior workers at Edifi-Coop. In delegating simple managerial tasks to senior workers, José alleviates his own inundated workload and distributes power throughout the firm. José could limit these distributions to systems and processes which happen internally so as not to risk the exposure of workers in the larger political landscape. Underlying economic motives may be preventing this, but I contend José could make such structural rearrangements with nominal monetary reallocation: because of the space’s strong sense of community and social responsibility, I contend workers would be willing to take on managerial tasks/duties with little-to-no incentive. (2) José should consult professionals at worker centers (see page 14). While providing economic enfranchisement, regular work with worker centers in the Philadelphia area

would be the best way to offer his workers true legal assistance. If José can economically empower *and* politically legitimize his workers, the footholds provided by Edifi-Coop could become that much more powerful. (3) José should implement voting procedures, starting with hires. It is evident José values the opinions and insight of his workers, otherwise he would not let them make suggestions regarding new hires in the first place. As such, he should formalize this trust, allowing workers to cast votes on potential new members of the cooperative. Putting this kind of faith in his workers would demonstrate the mutualism he informally evinces through his prosocial behaviors and would give workers a sense of authority over the space, bending it toward more democratic, non-hierarchical practices.

Although such normative suggestions may improve workplace democracy in Edifi-Coop, they would not be satisfactory for developing a nuanced understanding of the larger significance of intermediary cooperative, or pre-figurative alternative, economic practice. The available literature on American cooperative practice is sparse, a dialectic for partial modes of workplace democratization totally absent. Contemporary economic sociologists and political economic anthropologists should assay the scope and prevalence of cooperative practice in urban America's informal economies, regardless of how partial or implicit. Further research should seek to find likenesses to Edifi-Coop and develop a vocabulary with which we may talk about these alternative structures of socioeconomic empowerment, particularly as they are exercised by or existing within immigrant communities. Centralizing undocumented workers will be imperative to developing an understanding of how these models are playing out in an increasingly globalized world and precarious American economy. Studying alternatives to capitalism that do not neatly fit within theoretical molds need not just be expanded, but legitimized in theoretical discourse and academic circles.

In many ways, the prospect of a better job and sense of legitimacy can be enough to empower workers; through Edifi-Coop, this can become a reality. When I last spoke with Alvarez, soon following his matriculation at his new job, I asked if he would like to get a beer so that I might learn more about how he was doing and in the hope that he may provide more insight for my research. Little did I know the fodder would pour from the enthusiasm of his response: “Yes, I’d love to get beer. In fact, the first round’s on me.”

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\* This was an interview with José in which he did not remain anonymous. Due to the growing success and visibility of his business, as well as the nature of this project, his information has and will remain anonymous. For a complete citation or additional information regarding this radio interview, please reach out to WHYY's *Radio Times* correspondent, Marty Moss-Coane, directly (updated Tuesday, March 20, 2018).