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Laura: This is the Laura Flanders Show, the place where the people who say it, can't be done, take a backseat to the people who are doing it. Welcome.

If you're a regular viewer of this program, you know that we often report on social change and economic change and the way they go together. As a journalist, I've seen time and again that building fair societies requires people not just having permission or rights under law to do things, but the means to transform their reality, money, jobs, or other ways to make a healthy living. As a lot of us worry about the dangerous way our winner-take-all economic system here in the States, concentrates wealth and power at the top of society and leaves a whole lot of people out. Many of us are asking if there are more cooperative ways we might run this place. To look at one example, I traveled to the European nation of Spain, where two of the places most brutally repressed under the 20th century dictatorship of Generalissimo Francisco Franco, survived, and in the process, built what are now the world's largest worker-owned co-ops. Are there lessons for us here? Eighty years ago, Spain fell under a 30-year dictatorship after right beat left in a brutal Civil War. All these years later, the legacy of that conflict lives on, and discussions of the contrast between authoritarianism, colonialism, and control on the one hand, and democracy, self-determination, and social economy on the other. How did their community-based model of business help them resist and survive under dictatorship? And how do co-ops and cooperation function today? The Mondragón Federation of the Basque region was founded in 1956. Today it's Spain's 10th largest business with well over 80,000 employees and yet more overseas. American Fred Freundlich came to Mondragón 25 years ago to study the social impact of worker owned businesses. Today, he's a professor at Mondragón University, a university funded by the Federation.

Fred: In the early years, the history of Mondragón, its beginnings, go back to the period in Spain right after the Spanish Civil War, which was 1936 to 39. So the Basque country had sided against the dictator Franco who won the war. Franco's government designated it as occupied enemy territory. The rest of the world was involved in the Second World War, so no one was paying attention to desperate situation in Spain, or in the Basque country in particular, characterized by destruction from the war, polarized society, political oppression, dictatorship. When into this situation comes a priest, Arizmendi Arrieta, and he had a sort of a broad vision for social change based on Catholic social doctrine, which is not about preparing oneself for the next life, but creating God's kingdom on

earth, so to speak. So he had this vision based on human dignity. Everyone should have sort of a minimally decent standard of living, solidarity, people should take care of each other, share when necessary, mutual and individual responsibility, hard work. And he decided, he came to the conclusion after working on this vision, in reality, in the community, on the ground for many years, that this vision needed to be taken into the economy, into businesses. So business became viewed, for a generation or more, as a place for progressive people to express their values. It's not enough on its own as a response to fascism or authoritarianism anywhere, but it is a significant part. Now we're talking about 98 to 110 or so cooperative organizations, almost all of them worker cooperatives, where the people who work in the enterprise are the members and the owners. They employ 74,000 people roughly, all over the world.

Laura: Fred and I are not the only Americans drawn to the Basque country to learn about worker-owned co-ops and their potential to transform society. My trip to Spain coincides with a delegation led by the Democracy Collaborative and California's Beneficial State Bank. They're both U.S. groups dedicated to building new economic systems in the U.S. Democracy Collaborative Executive Vice President Marjorie Kelly speaks with Mikel Lezamiz at Ulma Packaging Co-operative about how co-ops are different and how they run.

Mikel: It's a co-op formed by 1600 people, workers. So this is the meeting area in the workshop. All these workers are the members, most of them. And all the money, all the assets that we can see here, belongs to the workers.

Laura: Mondragón's worker-owned co-ops aren't limited to manufacturing. Following the death of Franco, Basques began to establish media organizations that worked in their own language, which had been banned under the dictatorship. Aitor Lagoma of the Goiena Media Co-operative explained that it was second nature to found new publications and channels as worker-owned businesses.

Aitor: We started, I have to go to '70s or before, when Franco dies on 1880s, we need a Basque language, the medias and production and other things, because we don't have anything. We just have a national TV. People from Arrasate, for example, was the first magazine in Basque language. After a start difference in different towns around like Basque magazines. So we decided to put them together and make a bigger and a stronger magazine in Basque language. It was a good improvement for them to read in Basque and understand and things like that. Maybe for us, it was quite easy or natural thing that in 2001, we start with this project, make it like cooperative. I'm not gonna say like a tradition, but it's like something that we understand that if we own and we work better, and we can be stronger.

Laura: The role that Basque identity has played and continues to play in Mondragón's resistance and culture is apparent everywhere we go. I interviewed Beneficial State Bank Co-founder and CEO Kat Taylor about what she's been learning.

Kat: I came with a set of colleagues to join the delegation of Democracy Collaborative in visiting the cooperatives of Mondragón because we wanna see how you sustain a culture, not just an economy of cooperative endeavors. And they have done that for over 70 years. So my colleagues and I are taking careful notes about how we could institute reforms in the capitalistic system of the United States to be more cooperative before it crashes us into climate disaster and social chaos. I hope in my lifetime, I play a part in realigning finance in support of public values, and that, therefore, the economy reflects that.

Laura: In the Basque Country, cooperatively-owned businesses and an ethos of solidarity are simply a fact of life. But in comparison to the U.S., the Basque region is a small, tight-knit sort of place. What would it take to build the same ethos in a place as large and diverse as the United States? At the end of our time in Mondragón, I asked Marjorie Kelly and delegation member Loren Harris of The Kenneth Rainin Foundation. Is it too simple to draw a parallel between some of the politics of the era in which Mondragón was born and the politics of now? How do you see this moment in compared to that one?

Marjorie: There's definitely a parallel. I mean, we're in hard times, people are looking for strongmen all over the world today just as it happened during the civil war in that era. And in that earlier time, what we were seeing was the fall of the monarchy. And we pass through dictatorship and then onto democracy as a virtually universal form of government. I think something similar is happening now in the economy. What's dying is an economy built for the few, and hopefully we're moving into a new economy for the many.

Laura: You've talked about the divine right of capital.

Marjorie: Yeah, We live for so long with the divine right of Kings, as though it was normal that a few people had blue blood and ruled over us. Well, today we think it's normal that the 1% holds all the assets. A couple of billionaires own more wealth than half of the people in the world. That's absurd, and we need to recognize there is another way to organize an economy.

Laura: So how would you say we're doing in putting forward that other vision?

Loren: Well, I think we have a lot of work to do, and I think Marjorie gives us an example. I think we've heard that there are thousands of visitors here every year. I think we could do a lot more to help tell the story of why this model holds promise, why this example holds promise for the world. And I also think we have to really create new stories about what's possible in an economy that is a shift from an old, extractive economy where a few people benefit from the labor of many to one where everyone's labor really matters and makes a contribution to their lifestyle and their life quality being improved.

Laura: But just to push you a little bit, aren't there some issues, aren't there some concerns about the question of localism, mutual aid, a community that hangs together, that is debt deeply and networked? What

happens to migrants? What happens to people that weren't here 50 years ago? People who look different or talk different, or haven't been steeped in this culture?

Loren: A healthy democracy is one where everyone has a voice. Everyone makes a contribution, everyone's valued. The humanity is seen. We see diversity and we value it. We see an unintentional about including everyone in that democratic enterprise. And I think what's promising here, even with some limitations, is the possibility of re-imagining a democracy through the workplace, and that having an effect on how we think about our democracy in a political space, in a public square. And I think that'll be the story of Mondragón, 50 years from now.

Laura: From Mondragón, I traveled 300 miles to the East, to the city of Barcelona in the Catalonia region. Another flash point in the Spanish civil war. Franco banned Catalan culture and language too. And as in the Basque country, local people resisted through alternative modes of economics and hanging together. Ivan Miró is a historian and an expert on the cooperative movement in Catalonia past and future. We caught up with him in a building that served as a food co-op in the 1920s and '30s and was the site of resistance when the civil war broke out.

Ivan: Now we are in La Lleialtat Santsenca. It's an ancient cooperative of consumption.

Laura: What would have happened here in history?

Ivan: Many things. They learned to organize in collective form. We learned very much from our grandfather and grandmother about how without the state and without capitalism people can live very well.

Laura: The anarchist tradition.

Ivan: One of them. The republican tradition, the anarchist tradition, and the socialism tradition in Catalonia is so important of course.

Laura: What is happening here now?

Ivan: Now, we are trying to rebuild this kind of special organization, and we want to build a cooperative city. We talk about municipalism. For us, municipalism is not just a local political action made by the local governments. We understand municipalism is the collective action from the neighborhood. For us, this is an important idea because it's not another kind of politics top-down. It's bottom up, so I think it's a different way to understand the city and to re-appropriate all the city in a political, cultural and economic way.

Laura: From the historic layout at Santsenca, I headed to the Ecos cooperative, a very 21st century group of social enterprises with its own coworking space. Guernica Facundo Vericat is co-founder and coordinator of LabCoop, a co-op incubator housed at Ecos.

Guernica: It started in 2011, after two years of talking to each other, searching the way to put in common needs and interests and having a new way to inter-cooperate between us.

Laura: The social economy that you're talking about, the cooperative economy that you're talking about, is very different from what some people hear a lot about, which is the sharing economy or co-working like We Work. How is a place like this different from We Work?

Guernica: It's nothing related. It's a very different focus on what economy should be. The relations should be equality, equity, democratic, participative, et cetera. For sharing economy, it's okay, you have some resources as a person or enterprise, okay, put in common to others and I will take benefits for it.

Laura: But no equity

Guernica: No equity, no.

Laura: with respect to power or ownership or control. Does gender make a difference?

Guernica: Social and solidarity economy and cooperatives, are most participate by women. We have also a long space to improve. Also, because we are in a patriarchal context.

Laura: But you're coming a long way.

Guernica: Yes, we are trying.

Laura: Franco called Barcelona The Red City on account of its unions and co-ops and social economy. Those were repressed brutally under the dictatorship, but they've been making a comeback, especially recently under the city's first woman mayor Ada Colau and her party Barcelona En Comú, which is dedicated specifically to the expansion and preservation of publicly-shared assets and the commons.

Joan Subirats is the co-founder and spokesperson of Barcelona En Comú, one of the intellectuals behind the movement.

Joan: We try to avoid the idea that the only way to do politics is politics as usual, in a very realistic way. For example, the typical politics as usual is local government is not so important as state government. Well, why not? This idea that cities are probably more global than states, in that sense, is a very powerful idea, and we are trying to do this network of fearless cities and to create the conditions that municipalism is not a very low level of politics, but is a very important level of politics.

Laura: Mayo Fuster Morrell served as an advisor on one of Ada Colau's key initiatives, a digital commons for Barcelona.

What has happened here in the last four years that you've been involved in that you are proud of?

Mayo: First thing is that we have the first woman mayor in the history of Barcelona after 150 men. That's the first change. The second element is that the Barcelona En Comú in the municipality has been promoting a lot commons-oriented digital economy. So we are seeing particularly the platform economy or collaborative economy, which it's time, the economic production and consumption is mediated by digital platforms. And these digital platforms can have the form of a very extractionist, capitalist, like the case of Uber, in which put in question the workers' rights, or the case of Airbnb, which is confronting with access to housing or the right to the city. What we see with the platform economy and the commons-oriented collaborative economy, is the possibility of scaling up the percentage of the GDP in order to promote the scalability of democratization of economy. For example, there is Som Mobilitat, which is a platform cooperative based on exchange of cars, bicycles, motorbikes, which are electric and environmentally friendly. We also have Som Energia, which is around the energy sector, which is a very essential sector of the system. So the difference in Barcelona is you have alternatives in a sense that you have options. That's a position in which Barcelona, is a worldwide reference, actually.

Laura: The commons and community are sometimes intention, and that's part of what's been playing out here in Barcelona recently. This square was the site of many demonstrations in 2017. There's lots of tourists here now, but two years ago, there were people protesting for Catalan independence. Those demonstrations were brutally repressed by the state government based in Madrid. The question of Catalan self-determination has become harder than ever. What happens now to the agenda of the commons? People don't know. In the face of repression, the temptation is often to close ranks. In the most recent elections, Ada Colau and her Commons party lost the majority when the people of Barcelona voted for the Catalan separatist party of Ernest Maragall. Maragall's appeal lay largely in his pledge to defend Catalan self-determination against the federal government in Madrid. Your agenda, your plan for this city, is what?

Ernest: We're working for enriching the inhabitants of Catalonia as a nation, as a political subject, one could say. Then one of the matters is which is the role of Barcelona as a capital of this country? And all this process, as you know, we are in the middle of a conflict with the Spanish state. We have our political prisoners. Half of the political prisoners are members of our party, of the Esquerra Republicana of Catalonia. Then, well, here we are.

Laura: How does your experience in the history here affect your feelings about democracy and sovereignty and self-determination? Do you remember those days? Can you describe those days for our audience?

Ernest: How do you forget? It's unforgettable, this period. It's probably inside our mind. What does it mean fighting against dictatorship? Fighting for freedoms, for basic rights? I feel it sincerely affected our main basic social, individual rights now in the Spanish state. It's not like dictatorship, of course. But it's a democracy in risk, of course it

is. And Ada Colau's project forces have not been so clear in favor of solidarity, but we are committed.

Laura: Ernest Maragall's party won a narrow popular vote, Ada Colau and the Barcelona En Comú movement were able to form a coalition government and stay in power. The movement for the commons continues. But the question of identity remains red hot. Can cosmopolitan Barcelona build a commons that really is for everyone? For answers to that question, I spoke to some whose roots in Catalonia do not go generations back. Senegalese immigrants Ababacar Thiakh and Fatou Mbaye lead a coop called DIOM.

If the commons are for everyone, can solidarity go beyond localism and ethnic or regional pride? Can the successful strategies of history be celebrated and simultaneously updated for our contemporary global reality?

You live in a city where anarchists and trade unions and communists imagined they could beat...

Joan: Yeah.

Laura: the fascism of Madrid, Mussolini, and Hitler?

Joan: Yeah.

Laura: Is there a connection there? Do you feel a connection?

Joan: We are in the similar problems. If you want inequality, a sense of our own protection, a need to reinforce the capacity of fight of people. But at the same time, we have to be aware that the problems are different, and the answers have to be different also.

Mayo: We have to reinforce the power and the lifestyle and the type of economy that we have and the type of digital governance that we have and infrastructure, and at the same time, having a more democratic institution.

Loren: I think the story that the future will tell of this moment is one of renewal, of the possibility of thinking about how we imagine something that's different than today and work really hard to create that future together, opening up ourselves to the possibility of new voices, new contributors, and new people in ideas coming to bear to realize a future that's better than what we have today.

Laura: In Spain's November elections, the right wing party Vox, which celebrates the dictatorship of Franco, doubled its support. Vox would crack down even more harshly on immigration and regional independence movements, making the history of Mondragón and Barcelona more relevant than ever. I leave with a burning question, can our commitments to each other trump those who divide us? And can the circle of our common interests be drawn spaciouly enough for all? For more on this episode and other forward thinking content, and to tune into our podcast, visit

our website at LauraFlanders.org, and follow us on social media @TheLFshow.