# IMAGINE, STUDYING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY AND IMAGINARY IN THE ERA OF CAPITALOCENE

by **Alexandrine LAPOUTTE, Timothée DUVERGER & Eric DACHEUX (eds)**

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Alexandrine LAPOUTTE, Timothée DUVERGER and Eric DACHEUX (eds)

# Imagine, Studying the Relationship between Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) and Imaginary in the Era of Capitalocene

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Lastly, we would like to thank you, dear readers, and wish you an engaging and enlightening read.

Alexandrine Lapoutte, Timothée Duverger and Eric Dacheux

## Foreword

Dedicated to the promotion and study of the social, cooperative, and public economy, CIRIEC's global network of researchers, academics, and practitioners commits to advancing knowledge and fostering multidisciplinary dialogue. On the initiative of CIRIEC's International Scientific Commission on Social and Cooperative Economy, a Working Group has been set up to study **"Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) Utopias and Imaginary Narratives"**. Led by Alexandrine Lapoutte, Timothée Duverger and Eric Dacheux, the imaginative and utopian/dystopian dimensions of SSE were explored to see how alternative economic models can inspire transformative change.

The culmination of this work is the publication you are about to read, which compiles the group's findings and insights on stories and mobilization within organizations, on utopia as a catalyst for local transitions, on imagining solidarity through cultural works, and finally on deconstructing economic myths.

With backgrounds in communication sciences, economics, sociology, psychosocial studies, management and organizational sciences, political science, and philosophy, members of the Working Group felt it necessary to open up to new topics, and/or revitalize former ones. Illustrations, shared stories, songs were formerly used to bring people together to create collective societal endeavours, e.g. the basis of our social security, our humanist identity. It is now time to re-explore mutual thinking, re-experiment, shape re-invented utopias for a societal vision of a liveable future together, and not turn against each other.

We urgently need to rediscover the path of collective and solidarity imaginary narratives in order to co-construct new structures, together with the civil society paving the way for successful and joyful initiatives. This book offers a fresh perspective on the potential of SSE to create a more just and inclusive society.

And we could imagine a continuation of this publication in the form of a graphic novel, or artistic videos, or multi-cultural designs by teenagers and youth drawing their desired future and projecting their dreams. Let's develop new tools to re-enchant, re-connect, and re-democratize, by listening to and actively involving the citizens of our world.

Barbara Sak
Director of CIRIEC

# Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) Utopias and Imaginary Narratives

Alexandrine LAPOUTTE[*], Timothée DUVERGER[**], Eric DACHEUX[***]

## Introduction

Although the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) has been confronted with the phenomenon of isomorphism, it has retained a strong utopian dimension. In recent years, we see a return of utopias in society. What forms do the ideals of the SSE take today? Utopia is known to contribute to the instituting, creative function of the imaginary. The social imaginary can be notably approached through fictions, which possess a powerful symbolic force. Fictions (tales, literary stories, media stories, etc.) are conceived here as tools of transmission and transformation for the SSE, even if they are rarely used as such. With a team of multidisciplinary researchers brought together by CIRIEC International, we have sought to understand the utopias and imaginaries of the SSE, in forms ranging from fiction to economic imaginaries, whether they come from actors or researchers.

## A return of Utopia?

The utopian socialism of the 19th century broadly inspired the birth of SSE organizations. The work of Desroche (1976) has made a considerable contribution to this subject, by studying the different utopias at the origins of cooperative enterprises and by formalizing the trajectory from written utopias to practiced utopias. Cooperation is seen as a spin-off of utopia; it thus manifests the secularization of millenarianism, the idea that "the kingdom is for now".

For a time banished for having led to the worst, then swallowed up by galloping liberalism, utopias seem to come back to our consciousnesses and imaginaries. They take the form of a quest for a model other than liberalism, an alternative to breakdown according to collapsology, the search for a good life with the convivialism movement. Very recently, Covid has given rise to a certain utopian effervescence

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around sustainability and the ecological transition, and has put the question of the "world after" on the public and political scene (Allen, 2022; Claeys, 2022).

## The social imaginary

Utopia can be grasped with the help of the concept of social imaginary (Castoriadis, 1975), i.e., the shared imaginary representations. The social imaginary (Castoriadis, 1975; Ricoeur, 1984, 1997) comprises a duality. The imaginary representations have a double social function: at the same time to allow each one to order his practices within a social world legitimized by a base of beliefs, myths and shared ideologies, but also to allow each one to contribute to the creation of a new society through dreams, fantasies, utopias. On this subject, Castoriadis (1975) distinguishes an instituting, creative function, and an instituted function, guiding the behaviours. Ricoeur (1984) identifies an ideological pole which aims at preserving the social order, while the second pole, utopian, aims at upsetting it.

To say it in other words, the social imaginary is a sensible understanding of the society by a collective. This collective sensible understanding then contrasts on the one hand with cognitive understandings (representations, political and scientific discourses) and on the other hand with imagination (imaginary specific to individual psyche).

SSE imaginaries therefore have a role to play in the transmission of values and practices specific to the SSE (instituted function) as well as in supporting its transformative role (instituting function), mobilize and propel alternative imaginaries. The imaginary appears in dreams, myths, art...

## Fiction as expression of social imaginary

We can find in the literature references to forms of SSE. As examples and to only remain in XIX$^{th}$ century in France, let's quote *Atala* by Chateaubriand where Social Economy is for the first time defined in its contemporary sense, *Travail* by Zola about which Henri Desroche has written, as Balzac's books analysed by Vienney (1977), novels published by Georges Sand in the years 1840 (*Le Compagnon du Tour de France*, *Consuelo*, *Le meunier d'Angibault* …), or also the poems digged up by Jacques Rancière and Alain Faure in *La Parole ouvrière*.

One can also pay interest in the effects of the story. For example, tales are known to open to the magic and to the possibility of transforming the real. They are said having a power on people who listen to them and a learning of the freedom (Bricout, 2005). The impact of the imaginary can be explained by the symbolic effect, the belief allowing to regain freedom and creativity, and thus to fuel the cycle of giving (Caillé, 2019): "to make affects, sensations and representations - individual and collective - converge in a dynamic of life, freedom and creativity" (p. 256, our translation). This dynamic can thus support an activity of transformation, empowerment, and resilience.

A few years ago, management became interested in narratives and storytelling, the narrative and fictional process in organizations (Grimand, 2009; Gendron and Pierssens, 2009). Fiction plays a role of illustration, performativity of the real (anticipation, prefiguration), of a tool in case of difficulty in observation, or of renewal of the theory of collective action (Julliot, Lenglet and Rouquet, 2022). More recently, the social sciences, particularly management, have made room for creativity and artistic approaches. The instituting imaginaries can be grasped through the concept of futurity (Bodet & Lamarche, 2020), research resulting from the Commons's work on institutionalism.

## Economics in a different way

Although economics emerged as a science with a methodological corpus at the turn of the 20th century, it is not itself devoid of imagination. It could even be said that it is based on the myth of *homo oeconomicus*, acting in the market and driven solely by instrumental rationality. A myth that has its place in the age of the capitalocene (Moore, 2016), conceived as a new geological period in which humanity is the main force transforming the earth system, but which must be reinscribed in the history of the world-economy. It is indeed the "age of capital" (Hobsbawm, 1975) that is at the origin of the extractivist economy and of inequalities in access to resources, both within and between nations. With the aim of deconstructing the developmentist thinking that has flourished in the countries of the South, often to the detriment of local communities, Serge Latouche has proposed decolonising our economic imagination (2003), which amounts to constructing a new epistemology capable of welcoming alternative creativities.

But we don't have to reinvent everything. This is what the SSE is demonstrating, both through its theories and its practices. It is already experimenting with local utopias (Duverger, 2021), drawing on alternative imaginaries. Its theories are also imbued with a different vision of society and nature, in which the economy, particularly the capital, is re-embedded (Polanyi, 1944), i.e. subject to social norms enacted either by the public authorities or by civil society organisations.

The question that emerges is: how can fictional SSE narratives contribute to transmitting and renewing the practices in SSE, and how does the SSE in turn nourish the imaginary?

After several collective seminars, we have brought together 10 contributions, each of which, in its own way, seeks to answer this question. They focus on very different objects, ranging from cultural works to economic theories and the narratives of actors. They also draw on a variety of theoretical frameworks, reflecting the disciplinary and international diversity of the contributors. What they all have in common, however, is that they emphasise the decisive nature of the imaginary.

We have grouped these contributions into four main parts.

* * *

The **first part** of the book begins with case studies of mobilising narratives in SSE organisations.

In chapter 1, Jennifer Eschweiler, building on recent work that makes a conceptual connection between utopia and social innovation for social change, draws on two interviews with founders of German SSE organisations that can be understood as platforms or intermediaries of social innovation for social change. In a hermeneutical phenomenological approach, the analysis focusses on the function and form of social imaginaries, inspired by Levitas' distinction of content, function and form of utopia as utopian method (2011). It examines how two SSE founders form, share and enact social imaginaries in their various transformative pursuits. The paper concludes with a short reflection on the main insights and what they indicate about the relevance of utopia in SSE research.

In chapter 2, Alexandrine Lapoutte examines social imaginary operating behind the project of French SSE Republic. Using a symbolic approach, the paper tries to identify myths, magic rituals and metaphors present in positive imaginary narratives. Stories mobilise myths of democratic organisation, local territory, fulfilling work, circular economy and friendly artificial intelligence (AI). Magical rituals stand in governance and conviviality. Metaphors carried belong to the fields of taste for life, battle, salutary crisis, ordeal and navigation. In conclusion it underlines the enabling nature of this SSE symbolism, based on autonomy.

* * *

The **second part** of the book brings together contributions that insist on SSE utopias as catalysts for local transitions.

In chapter 3, Julian Manley investigates the value of dream-thinking as a process for imagining the impossible, that is one aspect of Utopia, or 'no-place'. Taking a psychosocial approach and the wide inter-disciplinary perspective that such an approach offers, the chapter suggests that the complex inter-relationality that is part of dream and ecological thinking is an opportunity for imagining futures that go beyond standard linear thought processes. In this context, dream-thinking can be linked to the innovative and creative potential for a different kind of social economy. Such a utopian, dream society is compared to contemporary developments in Community Wealth Building (CWB) and its principal exponent, the Preston Model. A further component of the dream utopia behind CWB is the adherence of CWB projects to cooperative values and principles, where cooperation can be viewed as a benign alternative to competition and individualism. In the spirit of innovation and utopian thinking, the chapter concludes by encouraging the reader to live with the uncertainty of progress, an uncertainty without endings and targets, where process is one of continuous renovation as innovation.

Then chapter 4, by Nadine Richez-Battesti and Mariagrazia Cairo Crocco, focuses on grassroots utopias. From association to multi-stakeholder organizations, new organizational models and forms of work are emerging as objects that hold out the promise of emancipation from, and alternatives to neoliberalism. They constitute workplaces with a utopian aim - often in the context of social micro-experiments - which reflect a specific relationship with a particular territory. This is examined with a qualitative analysis built on 4 case studies in France.

In chapter 5, Timothée Duverger studies the role of the imaginaries of the SSE in narratives of transition. There is a close link between utopias and their experiments, at the heart of which is the social and solidarity economy. This article proposes to cross three books that have a common core around the principle "*small is beautiful*": Ernest F. Schumacher's 1973 essay of the same name, Ernest Callenbach's 1975 novel *Ecotopia*, and Rob Hopkins' essay *What If... We were unleashing our imagination to create the future we want?* in 2019. This will lead us to specify their utopian coordinates, to analyze the role of the imaginaries of the SSE in the re-embedding of the economy and technology in society, as well as their inclusion in dissemination strategies based on experiments whose models must be disseminated.

* * *

In a **third part** of the book, researchers investigate how cultural work reflects on solidarity, especially cyberpunk and blues.

Chapter 6, by Elif Tuğba Şimşek, explores how the concepts of solidarity, framed through the paradigms of redistribution and recognition, manifest within cyberpunk cinema, focusing on *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). Drawing on the works of Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler, the paper examines the complex dynamics of solidarity in futuristic scenarios. This analysis highlights how cyberpunk narratives reflect the interdependence of socioeconomic and cultural injustices in shaping solidarity.

Laigha Young, in chapter 7, focuses on the Blues, as a countercultural art form, engendering dialogical consciousness – both in terms of production practices and the creation of broader relational ontologies. This conceptual investigation explores the Blues genre as an “axiology-in-practice” within African American alter-collectivities. Using imaginary reconstitution as a utopian method of analysis, and assemblage theory as a medium of musical understanding, the following piece investigates everyday utopias within Blues production. These everyday utopias have reverberating materializations within Black socioeconomic spaces. With the integral nature of dialogical art forms in crafting cooperative consciousness and collective survivance, the epistemology of the Blues genre becomes the foundation to an embodied ethical economic practice.

* * *

In a **fourth and last part**, contributions attend to deconstruct, or de-mythologise, economic myths and foster a path for alternative.

Chapter 8, by Ermanno C. Tortia, considers utopia as prospective statements about social realities, representing "pole stars" for developing social thinking in development programs and policies. It aims to reconstruct the concept of utopia from a social economy point of view, striving to highlight what conceptual criteria can be used to classify different types of utopias, especially "feasible" and "unfeasible" on the one hand, and "good" and "bad" utopias on the other. To achieve these results, elements of complexity theory, social systems theory in the social sciences, and critical realism in philosophy are considered. Some examples referred to organisation in the social economy are used to show how definitions and conceptual categories can be applied to real-world cases, or to utopian ideas that achieved some degree of relevance in culture and science.

The contribution of Jerome Nikolai Warren, in chapter 9, seeks to situate mainstream economic theory with respect to Rudolf Bultmann's concept of "de-mythologizing". Applying this concept, together with Cornelius Castoriadis' discussion around "instituting" vs. "instituted" societies, the chapter argues that neoclassical economics is in fact a *dystopia*. In order to move beyond its influence, scholars and practitioners must together develop economic and management theories lodged in the lived experiences of the diversity of organizational types in existence, including cooperatives. This applies both in the study of contemporary firms, as well as in historiography, where an "archaeology of knowledge" is needed to uncover hidden or lost traditions of community-oriented wealth-building. It suggests three lines of future research to realize this aim.

Eric Dacheux, in chapter 10, proposes a new social imaginary in the making in the SSE: deliberalism. Social imaginary is never stable because it is shaped by the tension between the instituted social imaginary and the instituting social imaginary. As part of this understanding of Castoriadis' work, we will present deliberalism as an instituting social imaginary in the making within the SSE or, more precisely, within a part of the SSE that we call "solidarity initiatives".

We are proud to present these contributions, which we believe open up a new field of research by exploring the links between the SSE and the imaginary.

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# Part I.

# Stories and Mobilization in Organizations

## Chapter 1

# 'We Don't Go the Way of Revolution. We Don't Go the Way of Reform.' Social Imaginaries as Utopian Method in the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE)

Jennifer ESCHWEILER*

**Abstract**

Building on recent work that makes a conceptual connection between utopia and social innovation for social change (Langergaard & Eschweiler, 2022), this chapter draws on two interviews with founders of German SSE organisations that can be understood as platforms or intermediaries for social innovation for social change. They can be associated with the social and solidarity economy in the sense that they pursue community values and transformative change in collaborative and participatory manners, using different strategies and working on different societal challenges. In a hermeneutical phenomenological approach, the analysis focusses on the function and form of social imaginaries, inspired by Levitas' distinction of content, function and form of utopia as utopian method (2011). It examines how two SSE founders form, share and enact social imaginaries in their various transformative pursuits. The paper concludes with a short reflection on the main insights and what they indicate about the relevance of utopia in SSE research.

**Keywords:** social imaginaries, open-ended utopia, transformation, SSE founders

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## Introduction

This chapter uses two case examples to examine the role of social imaginaries in SSE organisations that can be understood as platforms or intermediaries for social change. In a hermeneutical approach, the analysis focusses on the function and form of the imaginary, inspired by Levitas' (2011) distinction of content, function and form of utopia. It examines how SSE actors construct, share, enact and adapt social imaginaries as they follow their various transformative pursuits towards 'what is not yet' (Jacobsen & Tester, 2012).

Presented in the form of founders' stories, the analysis weaves between data and conceptual approaches to utopia that distinguish utopia as idea or as ideal (Vieira, 2017) and conceptualise utopia as an open-ended destination (Wright, 2010; Friedman, 2012). It is strongly interwoven with actors' personal values that inform their imaginaries for the future concerning collective outcomes and shows how they affect the narrative of possible alternative futures, frightening or wishful, as they interact with society (Taylor, 2004; Bazzani, 2022). The focus on social imaginaries and utopia is relevant as it sheds light on the actors behind SSE organisations, their initial intent and hopes for the futures as well as the role of societal dreaming throughout, giving utopia a role in theories of social change. In Langergaard and Eschweiler (2022) we argue 'that the utopian dimension opens a pandora's box of human desire in this time of multiple crises, a view on imagined possibilities that guide human action, adding visions of hope to the critical assessments of the present that keep actors going in their efforts to imagine a better world' (p. 7). The utopian dimension hints at the core values actors want to preserve, deepen, or create, giving us glimpses of what might matter in a different (socio-economic, human-nature relations) paradigm than the current one. Engaging with social imaginaries can thus help research to 'develop more relevant research questions, critically reflect on methodologies of choice, and, ultimately, produce more rigorous and socially meaningful theory' (Laine & Kibler, 2022, 22).

Set into motion, social imaginaries become narratives or stories we can study by presenting their content and analysing their function and form over time as motivation, action and projections of alternatives align (Bazzani, 2022, 389). 'Following a story is a very complex operation, guided by our expectations concerning the outcome of the story, expectations that we readjust as the story moves along, until it coincides with the conclusion' (Ricœur, 1991, 22). In the following the chapter introduces social imaginaries and utopia in relation to SSE research and method, analyses two founder stories, and concludes with a short reflection on both cases and the relevance for SSE research.

## The concept of utopia and social imaginary in the context of SSE

Utopia reflects a desired state of future affairs that can be represented as an idea or a more fully formed ideal of society, influenced by context, subjective desire and the question ‘would this be a good society, if it existed’ (Levitas, 2011, 5). The literature on utopia is vast, with a history of thought in disciplines such as philosophy (e.g. Bloch, 1954; Ricoeur, 1986; de Carvalho, 2005), political philosophy (e.g. Jameson, 2004; Wright, 2010; Friedman, 2012), sociology (e.g. Mannheim, 1929; Levitas, 2007; 2011; 2013), and in literature (e.g. Morris, 1891; H.G Wells, 1905; Huxley, 1932). The term utopia thus suggests that it can never be implemented, but serve as orientation and as potentiality, conjured in relation to crises or societal problems (Jacobsen & Tester, 2012).

The philosophical ideal of utopia serves as food for thought, as *education for desire* and for solidarity that enables to constantly strive forward (Vieira about Carvalho, 2017, 68), as the possibility of images of a good future and a good society (Bloch), as driving force, ‘giving expression to an imagination that, grounded in a good knowledge of human reality, provides the reader with positive images of the future that are meant to inspire the creation of a better society’ (ibid., 65-6). Important aspect is the possibility of plural futures that can be explored and redefined in thought. Vieira describes contemporary philosophical utopianism as ‘a device to promote critical thinking and a strategy for the search of transitory truths’ (ibid., 72). Social imaginaries can sustain the societies we inhabit, providing the ‘cultural toolkit’ that enables us to make sense of our social worlds (Mason and Dey, 2018, 87), but they also deal with questions how we should live our lives or provide images of a different life or society (Taylor, 2007).

Utopia as political ideal can contain concrete steps for social change, a promise seen by many writers and thinkers in the late 19th until the mid-20th century in Marxism – although Marx himself rejected utopia (Levitas, 2011). Political utopia became somewhat paralysed in the Western world as a consequence of the terror regimes of fascism, Nazism and Socialism (Czygányik, 2017, 9). However, critique of liberal democracy as blueprint for the world, with little scope for social change (Friedman, 2012, 4), prompted a re-evaluation of political utopia. ‘If we are not given concrete examples of horizons, the energy of potentially transformative utopian thinking will be lost in an endless search’ (Vieira, 2017, 73). Here, social imaginaries can have subversive capacity, thanks to their otherness (Castoriadis, 2005) that can serve as source of inspiration and action.

This chapter therefore starts from an understanding of utopia as both idea and ideal, understood as a spiral search for something better based on reality, which assumes willingness to act as much as the ability to critically reflect (Vieira, 2017). It also rests within the parameters of democracy. As Friedman pointed out, liberal democracy as blueprint for society is a closed utopia that does not leave much room for transformation and hence alternative social imaginary. He therefore focusses

on democracy as a form of open-ended utopia that works like a regulative ideal for change, which may never be fully realized (2012). Wright's 'real utopias' (2010) embrace the tension between dreams and practice, between what is desirable and what is pragmatically possible. They describe sometimes radically new approaches to social relations, institutions and the world that we can find in the SSE as 'utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change' (ibid., 6). Real utopias are open-ended because they are dynamic and change in accordance with social learning.

This understanding of utopia as both idea and desire to strive for it, combines willingness to act and to critically reflect, based on experiential and experimental action, which together allow for open-endedness, as actors strive for the not-yet. It provides rich soil for a study on the role of social imaginaries in the context of this book. SSE organisations are understood as rooted in civil society and third sector, as political actors that seek to alleviate the consequences of various crises by placing the service to members or the community ahead of profit, while keen to preserve or deepen the democratic structures or the promises of democracy and their values that they originate in (Laville & Salmon, 2015; Ould Ahmed, 2015). They combine the political with an entrepreneurial dimension, as they experiment with alternative ways of producing and organizing, trying to practice economic and democratic solidarity based on reciprocity and self-determination, by placing 'new actors into the workplace, in class strategies and citizenship struggles, in response to concerns over welfare, recognition and a meaningful life' (Gaiger et al., 2015, 5). By doing so SSE organisations engage in social innovation (SI), understood as a way of describing a broad range of ethically framed activities designed with the goal of improving society's capacity to attend to human needs. This also implies a recognition of the limitations of the existing paradigm to deliver well-being and justice for all, and which therefore looks to alternative kinds of social, economic and political arrangements, which may complement, defy, resist and/or reconfigure the societal order (Moulaert and MacCallum, 2019, 3).

In the case work presented in this chapter these combined social, economic and sometimes ecological concerns are reflected in founders' values and organisational approaches. The focus on imaginaries and utopia is relevant as it sheds light on the actors behind SSE organisations and the role of social imaginaries for the future, giving utopia a role in theories of social change. It can be interpreted as experimental and prefigurative actions and practices with clear practical dimensions (Wright, 2010), the manifestation of social dreaming evident through participation in the public sphere, as a form of utopia as democracy (Friedman, 2012). Here social imaginary is rooted in past and present but is prefigurative and directed towards a better future. SSE organisations tend to start with local action, involving few people, but frequently driven by the hope of broader change in society. Utopian desires and imagination can thus relate to better individual or communal forms of living, to alternative social practices within local or regional ecosystems or to a different society altogether.

Here, the focus is on utopian method pursued by founders, based on their social imaginaries, which led to SSE organisations pursuing social change. The impact on collective imaginaries must be left for another study.

## Method

Diving deeper into the empirical material reveals the initial intent, strongly linked to biographies and personal values, the learning of SSE actors about the importance of both local and broader context and history in attempts to create collective imaginaries of the future, and the adaptions they make to their imaginaries through engagement in collective action. Utopia in concrete contexts can be merely expressive, something to continuously strive for through constant improvement and reform, or instrumental – wilful, to be practically implemented, incremental or radical (Levitas, 2007).

The overall research questions this chapter addresses is how social imaginaries, or the utopian spark, affect founders in the context of two SSE organisations, and how they are woven into the ways those organisations pursue transformative goals. While studying imaginaries might be methodologically challenging, 'the *social* imaginary exacerbates this problem, because as individual fantasy, the imaginary can still be described as belonging to a person's experiential horizon' (Herbrik & Schlechtriemen, 2019, 2).

Ruth Levitas' distinction of content, function and form of utopia offers a good framework to describe and analyse the role of the utopian spark that ignites and turns into concrete action with the intent to change practice, attitudes, orientations. *Content* is a descriptive category and refers to the actual utopian imaginary, which in the cases presented hinge around quality of life in relation to sustainable agriculture and living free from economic worries based on solidarity. It tends to be normative and evaluative and is more or less precise and detailed in representation. The *function* of utopia refers to the desire for something else, for a better life or a better way of being. Imaginary can take the function of compensation for harsh realities, indulging in fantasies without critical examination of the current reality or any prospect of its alteration (Levitas, 1990). Its function can also be to articulate critique of current conditions, or the capacity to actively pursue alternatives, based on critique and projections, hopes, dreams and aspirations for a better future (Jakobsen, 2017). *Form* refers to the way utopia is told. It can be descriptive (in literature, art, performance, mission statements), experimental or experiential, like collective organizing, events or practical rearrangements of the way we live together, relationally and physically. In the data analysis, the focus is on founder stories, how they describe the development from spark to action, the activities the SSE organisations pursue for their transformative goals.

Using hermeneutical phenomenologist method, the interpretative analysis zooms in on the functions SSE founders ascribe to social imaginary and utopia. It draws connections between the functions of imaginaries and aspects of culture, identity

and history, and how they shape values and capacities to act. The analysis is presented as their stories, as 'stories are central to human experience. We create stories of ourselves to connect our actions, mark our identities, distinguish ourselves from others, and link past, present, and, perhaps, future' (Josselson & Hammack, 1996, 4). Focus on form of utopia, the way the social imaginary is told, selects key elements and offers an interpretation of the key elements of imagined futures, presented through experiments and experiences. Offering experiments and experiences is part of the utopian repertoire in the sense that they offer glimpses in alternative ways of thinking or doing. They are an invitation to break with the familiar and the 'way things have always been', offering the possibility of deviance from tradition (Ricœur, 1991, 25). An important facet here is the quality of participation, as questions of governance and democracy are important in conceptualisations of the SSE, as well as in the literature on utopia.

Analysis weaves between empirical data and literature to analyse dimensions of social dreaming in the form the utopia is told, shared and adapted: descriptively, experimental or experiential, by individuals and in exchange with others. Thus, utopia becomes an analytic for the exploration of imaginaries of the good life, or as the 'expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living' (Levitas, 2013: xii). 'Following them means setting aside the derogatory use of utopianism and instead exploiting the elasticity of the term' (Prince & Neumark, 2022, 3), drawing inspiration from authors like Bloch, Friedman, Wright, Ricoeur and Vieira. Approaching utopia this way allows to analyse some of the moral, ideological and political underpinnings of social imaginaries and transformative ideas. It allows us to understand the utopian impulse at play in change processes, and how it translates into forms of sharing and implementation.

Data source are two qualitative in-depth interviews with two founders, here called David and Matthias. David founded a competence centre in rural East Germany for education for sustainable development, doing research and running a real-time lab to explore alternative futures for agriculture and rural community life. Matthias started a Germany-wide initiative that experiments with unconditional basic income, based on crowd-funded basic income raffles, analysis of recipient experiences, research and advocacy work.

## Analysis

### David's story

#### Utopian content

Sustainable farming enhances quality of life, as it protects soil 'with a socially engaged and regional anchor'. Inspired by de-growth as possible path to better quality of life and health, the rural area becomes a blueprint for many societal challenges, while respecting people's limited desire for change and how that is related to people's own stories and contexts. 'Do-growth is honest. … How we treat ourselves we treat the soil – with our shit. If we understand that this organ in our stomach, with all the bacteria, if we understand it as a system that is regenerative, then I can transpose this to my working environment etc.'

#### Function of social imaginary

The first function of the imaginary is compensation for David's own longing for the good life. It is also critique of exploitative practices that deplete soil and water resources, and that alienate communities as economic pressures push individualization and bigger, more profitable farms at the expense of locally embedded farming practices. The imaginary drives action that describes and showcases the consequences of exploitative practices like poor soil and water shortages, while pointing out possible avenues towards sustainable farming and improved quality of life.

The function of the social imaginary is related above all to the personal history. David grew up in a family in urban West Germany, was Steiner educated, with one parent an early actor in German ethical ecological banking and law for sustainable and solidarity farming. David remembers that 'I took a box when I was seven, wrote *if you don't change your behavior the world will die*. I singed the edges of the paper, making it look old, then stuck it in a bottle and in the river, with the intention of letting it float to Bonn, where Helmut Kohl was the Chancellor.' David was keen to do everything right and went on to establish a start-up 'where I wanted to do everything: Green IT, feng-shui, fair trade, CO2-neutral. After three years I realized something was missing'. David turned to study alternative economies and gathered new tools for action. 'I was trying to reflect if this was just my parents bringing this (trying to do better), or was it also my own way? Being engaged with my heart.'

David moved to the countryside in East Germany to work with an organic agricultural cooperative, driven by the vision of living near nature with soil to work with for societal impact. The goal: to promote sustainable farming and improved quality of life, based on critique of present conditions, reconnecting to a past where soil was better and biodiversity higher. David realized that this rural area has the potential to look for solutions for many societal challenges, it seemed to symbolize everything

that went wrong with modern food systems. David was in what seemed like an experimental sand pit for change.

Over time David understood that his personal visions did not necessarily align with those of the people around him: 'I have a nice example, an old couple in (…), their son is the last fisherman there. We were visiting a nature protection project there, a TV crew came, and we were looking for a place to have a coffee, so we ended up with them, with homemade lard and meat hunted and cured by the husband. Next to that were the cheapest *Netto* (discount supermarket chain) products, representing what has been disconnected from local production, products related to bad ecological and social impact. But not having *Netto* wouldn't be in their vision about the better life.'

This episode represents the personal cultural learning process David went through by living and working in a rural setting with local residents. Realizing that people do not want to change everything was an important step for his personal social imaginary, 'seeing this also as a quality: we need respect for the past, local culture, time and place'.

**Form**

People in the organisation like David, with transformative ideas, mostly not locals, try to connect to the local population and local culture in various experiential activities. The goal is 'to enable people to look at what they do, so bringing more consciousness basically. Towards the past but also towards the present moment and what we want to do next. And connecting this also to people having more dialogue and more participation.' David founded the world field (*Weltacker*), a physical space for projection, connection, conflict and conflict resolution. *Weltacker* is a 2000 sqm field, representing the area each individual on earth would have to live from if we divided the still existing 14,6 billion hectare of land by the people living in the world. It shows the human impact on land and how to use this amount of space in a sustainable way to feed and offer basic subsistence, what it takes to take care of it and how to innovate or improve current farming practices. This is an educational space for school classes to visit, but also an event space for companies or other organisations interested in learning about sustainability. A scholarship programme invited young people into the region to work on short-term projects like civic engagement or locally sourced building materials. Together with a rewilding organisation they explore solutions for water shortages. 'My job is to bring pictures that become potentials for farms or other actors and then it takes its own life. Bringing the picture as a method, bringing ideas is a tool or an activity I do.'

Another format is nature walks that bring together citizens and stakeholders around certain issues, e.g. water shortage. 'There we just meet as people, not representatives. It's intimate. It's a process, we walk together, we look at the landscape and we see what is needed. Afterwards we put the professional hats back on and report what this did to us.' Both create experiences and encounters where people come to learn together. Film screenings or just coming together to eat and talk at

the *Weltacker* become deliberative platforms to mediate between conventional farmers and bird protection activists, or to eat and listen to music together, as celebrations of good living, introducing joy as a pathway of opening hearts and minds.

The experiential is combined with narratives that link past, present, and future. 'When you talk to them (citizens) about the past, when they share old stories and you can see in their eyes that this is a good memory – coming from there change is possible. It seems to me that people need something to lean on, a potential, and then put an image to it, in order to pursue an image of a different world.' David learned that visions of change must connect also to local culture. 'You come from the city, the landscape seems empty and full of possibilities. In the city no one holds you accountable, but here you have to deliver if you really want to talk about something. It is a nice culture, but also challenging at the beginning. It is not a tradition here to talk about visions. If I ask what do you want I don't get much of an answer. People talk about what used to be nice in GDR time. Then I can ask, what was different then compared to today and how can we move forward from there.'

Social imaginaries enable spiral progression of communication between ideology and utopia (Langdridge, 2006, 645). Utopias provide an opposition and thus 'create a distance between what is and what ought to be' (Ricoeur, 1991, 651), while centered by identity preserved through ideology. There is also the possibility of critique leading to rupture and disidentification. Utopias provide images of new goals, that help to critically reflect dominant ideology (Vieira, 2017, 69). Jameson sees the utopian moment as suspension of the political: 'It is this suspension, this separation of the political—in all its unchangeable immobility—from daily life and even from the world of the lived and the existential, this externality that ... allows us to take hitherto unimaginable mental liberties with structures whose actual modification or abolition scarcely seem on the cards' (Jameson, 2004, 45). This is what connects the experiential form of social dreaming through enacted agency in a rural setting to the potential of broader change through social, cultural, economic and ecological sustainability. David underlines the importance of differentiating micro and macro impact: 'From my feeling I'd say it feels much more like saving the world if I save my own small life and impact, disconnected from EU und politics. I need to feel the change myself, it feels good if I have good impact with the steps I do. It needs a good combination of vision and enthusiasm and respect for your experience.' Still, the initial social imaginary stays intact when David says: 'We are here to get a new outcome for nature'.

This case is an example of incremental change or *interstitial metamorphosis* as described by Wright: through experiences of gradual enhancement of social power, through rebuilding community or understanding solutions for local production and regeneration which has, according to Wright, the potential to shift the underlying configuration of power that controls economic activity (Wright, 2010, 368). Experiences of 'what could be' are open ended and dynamic 'regulative ideals' (ibid., 370), pointing towards an unrealised normative potential grounded in existing society

and values. As David concludes: ‘For my record it’s the best format to bring people together and make them think – look here, the badger is back’.

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## Matthias’ story

### Content

Unconditional basic income (UBI) is portrayed as possibility for transformation without fear: It builds on values of equality through redistribution and combines the liberal ideal of freedom with expression of love for people through unconditionality. Matthias describes UBI as a tool to ‘raise everybody just a little bit …not a tool to promote world changers or visionaries.’ It projects liberation from a sense of helplessness and stress due to economic woes, mutual trust and societies’ readiness to address shared challenges. ‘Just let the other human be. And I think it’s a magical principle, it’s the biggest leverage for change. And I think we can’t solve the climate crisis if we don’t solve the social crisis. And it’s the most efficient and it’s radical and it’s doable at the same time. It’s just the sweet spot between both worlds.’

### Function of social imaginary

One function is compensation for Matthias’ own fear of conservativism and populism. The other is critique of a system that leaves people in economic fear and risks its own capacity to deal with the challenges it faces; it challenges the dominant system by testing an alternative.

Matthias was born in East Germany and was a child at the time of Germany’s reunification. Matthias knows that his parents had to start over again in a new political, economic and social system and learned that systems can crash and transform. The parents remained critical of capitalism, a viewpoint which was passed on to Matthias, while both him and his parents have ‘business mindsets’, combined with a communitarian mindset that Matthias describes as East German attitude. Matthias loved the experience of American liberalism and entrepreneurial enthusiasm during an exchange year in the US. Matthias started a first business at age 16, started a new political party at 19 in his hometown and decided that politics ‘is not my theory of change’, turning towards a ‘start-up activist career’, which Matthias said gave him the illusion of big impact. Arguably it also gave Matthias a sense of power to be able to shake things.

The communitarian aspect kicked in again after founding a start-up that started running without Matthias’ presence, and Matthias received a basic sum of money

every month ‘without having to do anything – and this really changed my perspective on life’. Matthias came across the concept of unconditional basic income and it matched Matthias’ values, hopes and dreams, but doubts remained about ‘this whole idea that human beings would turn out to be good when there’s no pressure’. Matthias believes that there is a lot of fear in society. ‘They fear losing what they have and so they are rather conservative.’ Overcoming fear is a prerequisite for change in the future. UBI is not only an utopia in its own right, it is also a tool to address the challenges societies are facing. The function of the vision is to explore the possibility of change, but also compensation for Matthias’ own fear of a future in which people will not agree with necessary changes because ‘they fear losing what they have. And there’s so much to lose that we stick with the old stuff, even though we know it’s killing us.’

**Form**

The social imaginary is experimental: to find out how UBI affects people, the organisation regularly awards crowd-funded unconditional basic incomes for one to three years in raffles. The stories of recipients are documented and published, by now more than 1.700 people have received a UBI. ‘I still have doubts, when you consider that a whole generation was growing up under conditions of basic income, how would they change? What would be the cultural shift?’ This is what the organization wants to find out.

It is also experiential: hundreds of people donate money for the UBI crowdfunding every month and follow the raffles online. Matthias knows that people who give money for the UBI raffle often do so because they hope to be winners themselves in future, but also because they believe in the idea of unconditional giving and receiving. The idea gains exposure that way: ‘Every month they get in touch with this topic. It doesn’t feel like reading the papers, but it is imagining utopia for myself, not on a societal level. I think that’s the most important tool we have.’ Matthias is aware that not everyone is in it out of love but hopes that it can still be the tool for the good society.

Finally, UBI as utopia is descriptive in form: the stories of UBI recipients are shared on the website, the organisation gets many requests for interviews and the staff have become experts on basic income in Germany. ‘We create real life examples and we try to lead by example. We are an actor in the debate. (…) It’s a perfect media story. It’s real people with a positive story from your local area. And it’s somehow political, but not too much, not like party politics, but like a big vision thing.’ To solidify the vision of UBI’s impact on society there is now also scientific research, so as to avoid confirmation bias. ‘We get a lot of stories. But then also maybe the people only tell us the good things and don’t talk about the other things.’ More elaborate research with tax simulations and UBI over longer periods of time is running.

For Matthias, UBI is a way to reduce fear and make society more adaptable to challenges societies are facing. Starting the organization helped answer Matthias' own questions, which 'created a kind of a movement around it, which was never my intention'. Active reflection can be the first step on a continuum of actions triggered by social dreaming, like Carvalho's education for desire to imagine another becoming (Vieira, 2017, 68). Bloch described utopia as an 'anticipatory consciousness' being all around us, encapsulated in partly unconscious glimpses of a better world. His *concrete utopia* is based on a sense of possibility, starting in the present, but still 'an as yet impossible potentiality' (Thompson, 2012, 33) that gives us hope and anticipation of possible other futures. Actors can also engage in utopian experiments as described by Wright's real utopias or in Jakobsen's grounded utopias, which refer to cultural practices that are alternative forms of living that can function as some kind of example, focussing 'on the possibilities for better societies latent in the present' (Jakobsen, 2017, 39).

Matthias decided to turn UBI into an experiment to confront his own initial doubts that such a radical idea could work, describing this doubt as the result of 'a big propaganda that tells you that different thing every day'. Central to critique in utopian thinking is the question of ability to think outside the dominant ideology of a specific time or place. Ideology refers to dominant positions within specific socio-cultural contexts. How can we think outside hegemonic ideology? Ricoeur brought ideology and utopia together in a co-constitutive relationship. He referred to social imaginary, the ensemble of stories and narratives that helps mediate reality in any given society and that both limits and enables understanding (Ricoeur, 1991), which is what the initiative started by Matthias is doing, carried by a movement of citizens that believes in the not-yet possibility that UBI as utopia projects. The initiative pursues incremental change by combining old structures with new approaches: 'There's a social aspect and then there is also this fascination for the liberal aspect, and that both comes together in this very human idea.' However, Matthias also sees the potential for radical system change or *ruptured transformation* that changes existing institutions and social structures through direct confrontation (Wright, 2010), the reason they take a social design approach of building prototypes, testing and sharing.

## Discussion

The short analysis of the two cases illustrates some of the moral, ideological and political underpinnings of transformative ideas and ambitions. Those are partially rooted in the biographies of the founders, who both grew up in academic households that as far as evident from the interviews questioned the status quo or were themselves engaged with questions of transformation. David and Matthias, both male and in their thirties now, made transformation a career choice early on, with start-ups meant to promote alternatives for more sustainable futures, bridging their own pasts with the present, pursuing their imaginaries for the future, for which

change must occur, as the challenges are threating people and planet. Both attach individual and emotional markers to what they do, like love, trust, or quality of life.

Both organisations that were created from the initial imaginary intent are intermediaries that enable mostly experimental (UBI) and experiential (both) forms of participation. David is more directly involved with the community, engaged in the organisations' activities and the local context in which they act, which has provided him with first-hand experience that people's visions for the future differ from his own. This had an impact on the design of experiential actions, where participants are invited to come together as persons rather than functionaries, and where atmospheres that invite sharing are more important than getting a point across. Matthias' assumptions of people's attitudes are more indirect, and he is a founder of new ideas rather than an implementer. Nevertheless, the organisation he set up essentially pursues an experimental approach in order to examine the utopian element in action, using stories and research, never stating that UBI is the answer, but believing that it could be the answer.

Both initiatives focus on individuals as units of transformation. They offer opportunities for change in perspectives without being prescriptive, hoping for a change of hearts by focussing on quality of community as well as on quality of food and soil, or on projections of more equality in the distribution of power in society through financial redistribution based on trust and human worth. Both cases are more concrete in their utopian intent than Bloch's concrete utopia. They fit the 'real utopias' described by Wright: they experiment how what is desirable can be pragmatically possible (Wright, 2010, 6). They pursue emancipatory social transformation, stress the role of human agency, and the willingness of people to participate in the realisation of alternatives (ibid., 370). Both pursue incremental rather than radical change, even if Matthias sees radical potential. They are rational dreamers who pursue a theory of change. 'We don't go the way of revolution. We don't go the way of reform. We just built prototypes to show that utopia is possible'. Social change occurs on the inside of actors and on the outside through professional ways of sharing, as David explains: 'People need to learn something, a potential, and then put a picture to it, to pursue a picture of a different world'. Initiatives invite participants at times as private persons and in their professional capacity, opening hearts and minds for alternatives one at the time in very localized settings.

David and Matthias also reflect on their own changes in views and orientations through the experience. They do not see that transformative change is possible without at least the readiness to consider alternatives, and this requires an attitude that is willing to consider something else. Concrete utopias as described by Bloch, in the form of proposed solutions can be a tool as much as activities that bring different people and attitudes together. Trying to share their social imaginaries through experiential and experimental form is their attempt to bring 'new visions (or a reformulation of older visions) of social justice, engendering and re-activating a politics of hope' (Prince & Neumark, 2022, 2).

Analysis of function and form of utopia in the two cases allows us to follow the utopian impulse at play in change processes pursued by founders and the initiatives they started. It also shows how social imaginaries about better quality of life, a healthy environment and life without economic fear translate into forms of sharing and implementation, and the quality of participation. The ways the stories are told are not coercive. Aware that it is social behaviour that must change to promote both well-being and the planet, they invite people to participate and decide for themselves, leaving room for individual bridging of past, present and future. Guided by ideals, both initiatives offer ideas for solutions and make them experiential (walks and talks, basic income for a year) as opportunities to experience something different or different positions without value judgements of good or bad/ right or wrong. It feeds into the principle of democratic self-organisation of the SSE framework. The organisations become ordering principles for personal dreams. 'I was wondering if I would get sick of it. But then you know, it's the thing I love. It's emotionally interesting, economically interesting, socially, politically, everything I love' (Matthias). In order to create a narrative, other active participants are needed and the dreams need adaptation – a reality David experiences more directly than Matthias. 'When I first came here, I thought we will change everything, meeting people who didn't want to change everything. I had to learn seeing this also as a quality, we need both, respect for the past, local culture, time and place' (David).

What can be the value of the concept of social imaginary and utopia in SSE research? It is a driver, and open-ended utopias such as those presented here are lined with ideas of the good life, the common good, love and trust in society. The utopian spark, the imaginary of a different future is a strong motivator for these organizations to exist in the first place. They seem to resonate with people, more or less immediately, and they are pursued in a democratic manner from within civil society. Individual imaginaries thus take on a social function, as the activities of the resulting SSE organisations start producing collective representations of possible alternatives, utopian destinations that at times seek connections with values of past (healthy soil, local production, community) and popular discussions in the present (UBI). The social imageries presented, tested and enacted become a sort of social glue, something that might stick in niches and work its way from the periphery. The narratives they produce actionable contexts, emotionally connected to values and hopes for the future.

An important question remains, one that must also concern SSE research with all its focus on empowerment: What does social imaginary take? What past and present does it require to be an active visionary or to be able to join the experience? What about those who are too fearful today to confront the future? Whose personal stories are less favourable as those of David and Matthias? If social imaginary as utopian spark is 'made possible only by the double perspective of backward reasoning, which interprets the present and the future in consideration of past events, and projectivity, which enables the detection of the seeds of the future in past events' (Bazzani, 2022: 389), how to integrate that in the emancipatory missions of SSE organisations?

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# Chapter 2

# "For the Past 5 Years, France Has Been Living under a SSE Republic": Elements of Symbolism in the Imaginary Utopian Narratives of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE)

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**Abstract**

The research aims at understanding social imaginary operating behind the project of French SSE Republic. Using a symbolic approach, we try to identify myths, magic rituals and metaphors present in positive imaginary narratives. We find that stories mobilize myths of democratic organization, local territory, fulfilling work, circular economy and friendly AI. Magical rituals stand in governance and conviviality. Metaphors carried belong to the fields of taste for life, battle, salutary crisis, ordeal and navigation. In conclusion, we underline the enabling nature of this SSE symbolism, based on autonomy.

**Keywords:** myth, ritual, metaphor, narrative, utopia

**JEL-Codes:** L31, M14, M54, O35, P13

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## Introduction

The Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) has a strong utopian dimension, extensively documented by Henri Desroche (1976). This dimension weakened with time, for several reasons, among which inability of contemporary technological societies to think in terms of goals (Ricoeur, 1997) and old social economy organizations following the isomorphism phenomenon. However, more recently, a solidarity-based movement was forged on a re-examination of the radical democratic project and imagination. And in very recent years, we see a return of utopias in society. Facing the huge challenges of the Anthropocene, human beings may not be able to succeed without new imaginaries. How can SSE imaginaries contribute to building the "world after"?

Since 2020, SSE France, the leading voice of the SSE in France, launched the "SSE Republic" to articulate what the SSE wishes to say to the world. It aims at creating a collective dynamic of citizens around a political project based on a common vision of the world and "reasons to act" (SSE France, 2021). How can the utopian narratives convince people to go towards this "SSE Republic"?

Our aim in this paper is to analyze the utopian dimension in the SSE Republic. We refer to Cornelius Castoriadis' concept of the utopian imaginary (1975). According to the philosopher, economist and psychoanalyst, the social imaginary is marked by a duality between ideology and utopia, and the latter is known for its instituting, creative function. To examine the utopian pole, we focus on its symbolism (Reitter and Ramanantsoa, 1985), particularly through myths, magical rituals and metaphors (Hirschheim and Newman, 1991; Mawadia et al., 2019). Those are pointed out from positive imaginary narratives written by SSE members in workshops of storytelling about the "SSE Republic".

In this chapter we analyze the utopian symbolism (myths, magical rituals and metaphors) present in positive imaginary narratives of the French "SSE Republic". The first part of our text sets out the theoretical framework of symbolism, followed by a brief presentation of the method and the case study, before presenting the results, which are discussed in conclusion.

## 1. SSE Utopias and Social imaginaries: a symbolism approach

The SSE and utopias are strongly bound together. According to the sociologist of cooperation Henri Desroche (1976), the SSE may be seen as an offshoot of utopia, all cooperative organizations deriving from a utopia. The cooperative movement and its experiments are still marked by "futurity" or projection into desirable futures (Bodet and Lamarche, 2020) as the "essential channel of cooperatives" (p. 75). Literature identifies several utopian projects driving the SSE along time in France (Draperi, 2007): community utopias in the 19th century; consumer republic in the first half of the 20th century, theorized by Charles Gide as a Cooperative Republic, beginning by consumer's cooperation, and supposed to extend to production and agriculture;

since the years 2000, the cooperative meso-republic is inspiring actors at a local territorial level. Very recently, SSE France has been defending the idea of a Social and Solidarity Economy Republic (SSE France, 2021; Duverger, 2023).

The term utopia, coined by Thomas More in 1516, "u-topos" - without place - has since been reinterpreted. Considering the body and space, Foucault's "heterotopia" (2004) refers to places that are real, but a kind of counter-place, they are "absolutely other" places, like a ship. They are also seen as known as a "real utopia" (Wright, 2010) or "eutopia" meaning a good place (Vieira, 2017). SSE can of course be seen as a space for denunciation, as a real utopia or as a good place, providing solutions to the problems experienced via democratic, responsible and solidarity practices that do exist. In this text, we look at the utopia that SSE is proposing to the world as a way of writing its future. In these times of transition, it is essential to rediscover the power to act, and that requires imagination. To put it briefly, the power to imagine encourages the power to act. We therefore rely on the mobilizing feature of utopia (Ricoeur, 1997), which has a subversive, instituting function, necessary for imagining and projecting ourselves into a different future. Of course, this future will never become totally real but utopia leads, in Ricoeur's words, to the "achievable optimum": utopia "is only fruitful if it is inhabited by the tension between the desirable absolute and the achievable optimum" (Roman, 2022, p. 70).

In this paper, we see organization as a matter of imaginary and belief and, to this end, we return to the masterful work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1975). According to him, we only have access to reality through representations; therefore, institutions are beliefs, the fruit of subjects, constructed narratives that enable us to stage reality. These beliefs, usually presented as dogmas, are not scientific truths, but rather momentary. From this point of view, organization is a collective that works to give meaning to the senseless, by mobilizing the creative potential of all. This meaning tends to be generative: through a symbolic effect, it has an impact on reality. Autonomy plays a central role, both at the heart of the project for a democratic society, and at the heart of the individual, via his or her imagination. Then we consider in this chapter that autonomy and imagination appear fundamental to proposing new models. Castoriadis draws a major distinction between instituted and instituting, that will split society and social imaginary. Institutions, originally created to serve society, become autonomous according to their own rules, to the point where society ultimately finds itself at the service of institutions. Instituted society is then the product of history or inherited thought. Instituting society, on the other hand, is the scene of history in the making, of the social deployed in time. Social imaginary comprises these two polarities, instituted and instituting. Ricoeur (1997) underlines this duality by distinguishing ideological and utopian poles of social imaginary. Based on these authors, social imaginary comprises two poles: first, an ideological pole corresponds to the instituted, guiding and transmitting imaginary, second, a utopian pole relies on instituting dynamic, transformation and creativity. Normative ideology on one side, mobilizing utopia on the other. In organizations, we argue that the dominant imagination is modelled on the classic capitalist, functionalist and liberal company that is taken for granted.

Whereas the SSE organization, in its democratic and transformative project, belongs to the utopian pole of the socio-economic imaginary.

Social imaginary may be identified through symbolism. The symbolic and the imaginary are closely connected (Castoriadis, 1975): an image can only be expressed through a symbol, and every symbol presupposes the ability to see in a thing what it is not. If the imaginary is individual, the organization nonetheless produces "imaginary nuclei" of representations that are specific, coherent and stable to that organization. That legitimates the study of symbolism in organizations (Reitter and Ramanantsoa, 1985) and sense-making (Weick, 1995; 2004).

Echoing the dualism of the social imaginary, literature on symbolism in organizations emphasizes a dualism between constraining vs. enacting symbolism (Hirschheim and Newman, 1991; Mawadia et al., 2019). In the field of information systems, these authors distinguish between a dominant "constraining" symbolism that imposes itself on the actor, and another "enabling" symbolism in which man is autonomous.

Management is interested in narratives and storytelling, it explores the narrative and fictional process in organizations (Grimand, 2009; Gendron and Pierssens, 2009). According to recent literature, fiction may have five main functions in organizations (Julliot, Lenglet and Rouquet, 2022). In the first three, fiction is used to theorize. Fiction plays a role of illustration of existing theories, in a utilitarian and positivist way. Then, fiction may be applied to social sciences, postulating a porosity between reality and fiction. The latter can thus be seen as carrying elements of truth; for example, to anticipate or prefigure, works of fiction have a performative effect on reality. Third, fiction may renew the theory of collective action, by thinking beyond existing theories and norms. As a counterpoint to the rationalist tradition, it restores the complexity and paradoxes of the world. Beyond theorizing, fiction offers a fourth function as a methodological tool in case of unavailable or confidential data. And fifth, fiction provides a source of experimentation and anticipation, to project oneself into possible utopian or dystopian worlds so as to release imaginaries (p. 78). This last perspective seems perfectly adapted to this research.

## 2. Methodology and case: positive imaginary narratives of the "SSE Republic"

"ESS France" or "Chambre Française de l'Economie Sociale et Solidaire" is the leading voice of the SSE in France. It represents and promotes the interests of SSE companies and organizations. It federates national SSE organizations representing the various statutory forms of SSE, regional SSE chambers and any other legal entity, federation, network, collective or group at national level wishing to become involved in its activities. At the end of a citizen consultation process, this Declaration highlights that "the SSE is at the heart of the social contract and the republican ideal". It also expresses SSE "reasons to act", as follows:

> “The raison d'être of the social/solidarity-based economy is to steer progress in all its dimensions - social, economic, democratic, civic and ecological. The SSE endeavours to organize the changes in modes of production and consumption imposed by the ecological and social emergency by developing the power to act through the commitment and the power to live of as many people as possible. It is based on freedom, equality, solidarity, responsibility, democracy and reason. The SSE is the desirable standard for the economy, demonstrating that prosperity can be inclusive and achieved while respecting planetary limits, with the involvement of everyone.”

Our study focuses on “positive imaginary narratives” on the theme of the “SSE Republic”. It begins with interviews with four people of the SSE regional chamber[1] to understand the context. The narratives are developed during workshops organized by a Regional Chamber of the SSE (CRESS Auvergne Rhône-Alpes) with its members, according to its advocacy mission. They are animated by the collective “Futurs proches”[2]. It takes place in 2022 (January 18), that is during a period of campaign for presidential election. Participants are asked to project themselves five years ahead and to co-write stories on five themes (Box 1). About 40 members choose one of the five groups, that comprises also one facilitator. Each story must include a character, an element of tension and a post-tension situation. The five stories are available to read on the CRESS AURA website[3] and one is given in Annex 1 to this paper.

Based on previous research (Hirschheim and Newman, 1991; Mawadia et al., 2019), our framework is built on three symbols: myth, magical ritual and metaphor.

- Myth: an unquestionable belief in the practical benefits of certain techniques and behaviours when these benefits have not been demonstrated by facts.
- Magic ritual: like superstition or religion, as opposed to science, an aid to maintain cognitive coherence and alleviate stress.
- Metaphor: a means of apprehending and understanding a complex reality full of paradoxes, using the terms of another reality.

The aim of this text is to analyze imaginary narratives about the SSE Republic. We proceed to manual content analysis to identify elements belonging to these three dimensions.

[1] One in charge of SSE awareness-raising, one member of the Board, one co-director and one in charge of coordinating the network and institutional life.
[2] https://futursproches.com
[3] https://auvergne-rhone-alpes.ambition-ess.org/actualites/presidentielles-2027-quel-bilan-de-5-ans-de-republique-de-less

**Figure 1: Themes for the stories**

It is 2027, and for the past 5 years France has been living under an "SSE Republic", thanks to the advocacy work carried out by the SSE movement during the 2021-2022 presidential campaign. A number of strong measures have been taken over the past 5 years.

- All citizens, whatever their resources, have access to healthy food from short distribution channels.
- All employees participate in the governance and decision-making of their companies.
- A guaranteed income is granted to all citizens, enabling them to meet all their basic needs (food, transport, housing, culture, socialization, etc.).
- The GAFAMs (the giants of the digital economy: Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft) have become Social Solidarity Economy companies.
- The little waste still generated by each of society's actors is transformed into resources.

## 3. Findings: Towards symbolism of SSE Republic

Findings are presented according to the three items of the framework: myths, magical rituals and metaphors. Our main results are shown in Table 1 below.

First, the analysis allows us to highlight the main myths, as underlying beliefs, located in the five stories.

Myth of democratic organization is present in every story. The organization is horizontal and decision-making is shared by each member (The fabulous 2029 bug, computers in shambles) even clearly said to be self-management/autogestion (Trouble at the zero-waste campsite). A citizen, who is not an expert on the subject, sits on the Board of a digital group (Drawn at random). Democracy also exists at neighbourhood level (My campaign against the SSE Republic). These myths run counter to the myths of pyramidal, top-down organization. They take for granted that decisions can be taken collectively, with everyone included, and that people want to take part. It ties in with the myth of fulfilling work, work by vocation and not by necessity, happy and productive work (My campaign against the SSE Republic).

Another strong myth is the local (neighbourhood, open air market, also region), as level of production, consumption and decision. It appears through short food circuits (A taste for life). It is meaningful that the Board of a group takes place in a small rural town (Drawn at random). The counter-myth is globalization, yet offering a wide range of choices for consumers.

We also note the myth of circular economy, with the re-use of resources, energy self-sufficiency and sober lifestyles (Trouble at the zero-waste campsite). It is obviously opposed to the dominant, yet eroding, myth of the linear economy and unlimited resources and consumption.

As far as technology is concerned, the myth is that AI is friendly and controlled by humans as opposed to AI controls humans. Technology responds to human needs and not to the profit motive: it is seen through primacy of open software, limitation or even abandonment of tracking, cookies and advertising (Drawn at random).

It seems that all these myths are the ingredients of a good life, meaning everyone being happily involved in society in a harmonious whole, in the utopian reach of SSE Republic.

**Table 1: Findings**

| Utopia | Story title | Myth | Magic ritual | Metaphor |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| All citizens, whatever their resources, have access to healthy food from short distribution channels. | A taste (zest) for life | Consuming local and health food<br>Access for all | Demonstration<br>Going to the open-air market<br>Conviviality | Taste for life, sense, pleasure of life |
| All employees participate in the governance and decision-making of their companies | The fabulous 2029 bug, computers in shambles | Horizontal organization; Shared decision-making<br>Technology friendly (computer as useful companion) | Social dialogue; discussion<br>A regular bug to modify organization<br>Conviviality | Salutary crisis: bug, voluntary "endangerment" |
| A guaranteed income is granted to all citizens, enabling them to meet all their basic needs | My campaign against the SSE Republic | Young people involved (vs. Idle)<br>Fulfilling work (vs. for a living)<br>Neighbourhood | Create a space for dialogue with residents in an area | Ordeal<br>Navigation: to round the cape |
| The GAFAMs have become Social Solidarity Economy companies | Drawn at random | Every citizen may participate in decision-making<br>Digital sector = open (vs. Lucrative)<br>Board meeting in rural town | Governance: debates, inclusion of civil society (drawn at random and 1-year mandate)<br>Pedagogical efforts<br>Carsharing | A battle to be fought |
| The little waste still generated by each of society's actors is transformed into resources | Trouble at the zero-waste campsite | Autogestion (self-management)<br>Zero waste, waste as a resource | Campers' council (lively)<br>Converting waste into energy<br>Handle of a small jar for waste | (no metaphor) |

Second, we find that magical rituals maintaining cohesion and consistency mainly refer to moments of collective governance and conviviality.

As regards governance, in each story, discussion and collective decision is an essential step leading to conflict resolution. Collective governance is seen, e.g., through

a campers' council at a campsite, a Board of a big company that includes citizens drawn at random, workers literally discussing at the centre of the room, a space of dialogue in a city area inviting residents. Rituals are not always peaceful. Mostly, it involves lively discussions and confrontation of ideas before resolution. Still there are street demonstrations, including physical violence, opposing the proponents of local vs. globalized food. Another common point of the rituals is conviviality.

All the stories are punctuated by moments of conviviality, encouraging exchanges and open, friendly relations between individuals and groups. For instance: "On every street corner, you'll see craftsmen, producers and independent traders chatting, exchanging ideas and learning, ... Jean-Paul doesn't want to show it to his wife, but he's having a great time" (story "A zest for life"). In another story: "an arts festival to be held every three years, during which all employees will spend a week in the countryside (mountains, sea, countryside) to share their experience and help our company move in the right direction" (story "The fabulous 2029 bug, computers in shambles").

And finally, stories evoke several metaphors, belonging to different fields.

A first image is the sense of taste: "another form of pleasure, a taste for life" and the expression is used as title. If taste is the ability to perceive flavours, the "taste (or zest) for life" is about loving and enjoying life with pleasure. This refers to the physical realm of sensibility, specifically the ability to experience sensations. It represents sensoriality and experience of life. This image underlines the SSE as a perception of the world, a sensitive approach of life.

Another clear metaphor is the battle: "The battle for the primacy of free software is about to be won, but the battle isn't over, warns Grishka, tomorrow's Board meeting is likely to be long and stormy!". The military register illustrates a battle to be fought, long and difficult, it points out antagonism and power relations that the SSE has to deal with.

Then, even if it is less explicit, we think that a third metaphor lies in the salutary crisis, when the computer bug turns out to an opportunity to rethink and modify the organization: "We also want to institute regular bugs, to formalize a voluntary "endangerment" of the organization, so that we can challenge ourselves with as much creativity and enthusiasm as we do today".

Another story mentions transformation several times (of waste into resource), but although it could be seen as a metaphor, the term is used in its literal sense. We think that there is no metaphor in this text.

And the last story may reveal, although discrete, two images. One is the word "ordeal", a test or a trial, a test of truth: "For some people, adapting to these changes has been an ordeal". The other refers to navigation, "to round the cape", or going through (like an allusion to the ship evoked by Foucault): "I think it's been a great help to the local residents to round this cape".

Table 2 summaries our analysis: the myths, magic rituals and metaphors of the SSE Republic.

**Table 2: SSE Republic symbolism**

| Myth | Magic ritual | Metaphor |
|---|---|---|
| Democratic organization<br>Happy and productive work<br>Local territory<br>Circular economy<br>AI friendly | Governance<br>Conviviality | Taste for life<br>Battle<br>Salutary crisis<br>Ordeal<br>Navigation |

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

The research aimed at understanding social imaginary operating beyond the project of the SSE Republic. We identify the symbolic components that are myths, rituals and metaphors of this SSE Republic, through the study of positive imaginary narratives written by SSE members. Magical rituals can be found in governance and conviviality. The metaphors carried belong to the fields of taste for life, battle, salutary crisis, ordeal and navigation.

Of course, this study is based on a few stories and the results cannot be generalized as they stand. It does, however, contribute to understanding the social imaginary at work in the SSE in contemporary France, an area that has been little explored. The contributions of this initial work seem to be mainly of two kinds: a characterization of the social imaginary of the SSE through autonomy and avenues of work for SSE actors.

The social imaginary of the SSE Republic refers to the principle of autonomy, based on a symbolism of action rather than resignation, of human creativity rather than constraint. The underlying symbolism appears to be an “enacting symbolism”, or empowering, making it capable of mobilizing forces and actors. We consider that SSE symbolism represents the utopian pole of symbolism, whereas classic economy would disseminate a constraining symbolism, based on competition, inequalities, fear and obedience. This enabling symbolism is in accordance with the SSE identity, history and project. It carries in its heart a principle of autonomy, more precisely autonomy that must be practised and earned. In that sense it covers a wide definition of empowerment, as result but also process. We can also see a characteristic of autonomy dear to Castoriadis: self-limitation (for example, renouncing certain food products, electronic devices or personalized advertising). Indeed: “A truly free society, an autonomous society, must know how to limit itself, know that there are things we cannot do or that we must not even try to do or that we must not desire.” (Castoriadis, 1996). It may be noticed that, beyond the historical and social aspect of SSE, it includes an ecological aspect, which shows that the SSE’s vision is evolving and that current issues are being considered.

From the SSE actors’ point of view, we may keep in mind the following ideas. The Republic of the SSE appears part of the movement to liberate the imaginary in order to create a desirable future (Hopkins, 2020). We know more about the elements (myths, rituals, metaphors) mobilizing actors, i.e., the basis on which they give people the desire to act. It could be relevant to build on this to enhance collective action, to “SSEize” economy and society. More operationally, it could provide elements for SSE organizations, in particular to feed into their strategic project, vision and mission, their differentiation; this could be useful for addressing the issue of isomorphism and to gain legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders. These avenues need to be confirmed by research and questioned by the SSE actors themselves, so that they can convey myths, magic rituals and metaphors developed and chosen collectively in their narratives.

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## Annex 1: Story “A taste for life”

### Le goût de vivre

*Un certain nombre de mesures fortes ont été prises ces 5 dernières années, notamment celle-ci :* ***désormais, tous les citoyens, quelles que soient leurs ressources, ont accès à une alimentation saine provenant de circuits courts (type AMAP).***

La République de l'Economie Sociale et Solidaire a été mise en place en 2022, et, 5 ans après, Jean-Paul, n'en peut plus de cette pression du « consommer local et sain ». Milo son petit-fils est quant à lui un fervent défenseur de la consommation locale, au sein d'un groupe de lycéens, les Grinz.

Un matin plus gris que les autres, Jean-Paul craque et prend le tournant du dark net. Il y achète les produits dont il a envie, en particulier … le chocolat ! A la réception de cette marchandise illégale, il est obligé de tout cacher car il sait que son petit-fils, et aussi Monique, sa femme, sont partisans de la production locale. C'est également en se baladant sur les réseaux sociaux qu'il découvre le groupement des Pro-Nut, favorable à la re-globalisation de l'alimentation. Il se fait alors embringuer dans cette communauté et commence à participer à des manifestations à leurs côtés.

Peu après, Milo tombe sur un pot de pâte à tartiner à l'huile de palme dans un tiroir du bureau de Jean-Paul. Cette trouvaille commence à éveiller chez lui des soupçons sur son grand-père, qu'il adore pourtant. Sur Facebook, il constate que celui-ci relaie des messages d'une certaine communauté… les Pro-Nut, avec lesquels les Grinz sont régulièrement en conflit ! Leur credo : "c'était mieux avant" ou encore "il n'y a pas de mal à se faire du bien"...

Quelques jours plus tard, les Grinz l'invitent à une contre-manif. Il s'agit de s'opposer à un groupe réactionnaire qui milite pour le retour des tomates en janvier et la liberté de manger du guacamole fait avec des avocats du Pérou. Les deux groupes en viennent aux mains, à coups de bouses de vache et de bouteilles de Cola. C'est là que dans la pagaille générale, Milo aperçoit Jean-Paul dans le camp opposé. Après cette friction, les deux ne veulent plus se parler. Milo refuse même de venir aux fêtes de fin d'année. Il ne viendra que si le foie gras est retiré du menu.

La grand-mère de Milo est peinée de la situation. Elle propose à Jean-Paul de l'accompagner au marché place de Paris (Lyon 9). Ils n'y sont pas allés depuis longtemps. La place est méconnaissable. À tous les coins de rue, on voit des artisans, des producteurs, des commerçants indépendants qui discutent, échangent, apprennent... Jean-Paul ne veut pas le montrer à sa femme, mais il passe un bon moment. Pour donner le change, il grommelle un peu en ironisant sur les poireaux et les navets de saison. Pourtant, au fond de lui, il se souvient qu'avant ces grands changements, tout le monde n'avait pas accès à une alimentation saine, provenant de circuits courts. Ni même parfois à l'alimentation tout court. Alors il sourit et demande à Monique s'ils ne pourraient pas appeler Milo pour qu'il les rejoigne.

C'est ainsi qu'en déambulant à travers le marché, Milo et Jean-Paul échangent sur la convivialité et le partage créés grâce aux circuits courts. Milo montre le bien-fondé de la République de l'ESS à son grand-père et il lui propose alors de venir participer au projet de maraîchage dans son lycée. Il apprend ainsi à son grand-père à jardiner, mais surtout, il lui fait découvrir une autre forme de plaisir : le goût de vivre.

*Récit imaginé par Chloé Matisse (La Ligne Vertuose) et Nicolas Gauthy, facilité par Aude Casier dans le cadre de l'atelier proposé par Futurs proches et la CRESS, réalisé le 18 janvier 2022.*

# Part II.

# Utopia as a Catalyst for Local Transitions

## Chapter 3

# 'Paradise Regained'? Dreaming of Community Wealth Building as a 'Somewhere' Utopia

Julian MANLEY[*]

**Abstract**

This chapter is an investigation of the value of dream-thinking as a process for imagining the impossible. The 'impossible' is one aspect of Utopia, or 'no-place'. A connection is made between dream-thinking and the potential for 'ecological thinking' as a process that is expansive, relational and associational instead of linear and causal. Taking a psychosocial approach and the wide inter-disciplinary perspective that such an approach offers, the chapter suggests that the complex inter-relationality that is part of dream and ecological thinking is an opportunity for imagining futures that go beyond standard linear thought processes. In this context, dream-thinking can be linked to the innovative and creative potential for a different kind of social economy. Such a utopian, dream society is compared to contemporary developments in Community Wealth Building (CWB) and its principal exponent, the Preston Model. A further component of the dream utopia behind CWB is the adherence of CWB projects to cooperative values and principles, where cooperation can be viewed as a benign alternative to competition and individualism. In the spirit of innovation and utopian thinking, the chapter concludes by encouraging the reader to live with the uncertainty of progress, an uncertainty without endings and targets, where process is one of continuous renovation as innovation.

**Keywords:** Utopia, Community Wealth Building, Associative thinking, Ecology, Dreams, Preston Model

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## Introduction

'Paradise Regained' is the title of English poet John Milton's 17th Century epic sequel to 'Paradise Lost'. 'Paradise Lost?' is the title and question of Paul Hoggett's 2023 book on 'The climate crisis and the human condition'. Milton's lost 'paradise' is the state of humankind before the Fall in the Garden of Eden, identified by Sargent (1994) as an important source for the idea of Utopia in the West (p. 21). In this creation myth and its connection to a lost Utopia, original sin is also the source of the idea of Utopia as being connected to perfectionism, in other words an earnestly desired but impossible state. Hence the 'nowhere-ness' of Utopia. In Hoggett's work, the title has a poignant contemporary relevance in its identification of Paradise with the Earth that is being lost to climate change. Hoggett largely attributes this loss to the neo-liberal system that has dominated the USA and Europe especially (and subsequently much of the world) since approximately the 1980s, with a focus on what Hoggett calls 'hyper-individualism'. In such a world, consumer markets driven by ruthless competition have been extended to include the social sphere - 'our ways of relating to each other' - and the natural environment, which has been 'infected by the market relationship'. Consumerism and quantification have taken over human existence and this hyper-individuality has driven humankind to the rejection of any idea of the common good. 'The only good' in the hyper-individualistic world, says Hoggett, 'was the good of the individual and his family' (p. 37). It seems, (as Hoggett admits in a footnote (p. 41, note 1)) that hyper-individualism as the primary manifestation of neoliberalism, may be about to expire, encouraged in this demise by an increasingly obvious failure to tackle social inequalities and the global climate crisis. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic may have hastened this re-evaluation of neoliberalism (Blakeley, 2020). There is, therefore, a dawning of a new realization among many scholars and popular writers that the end of capitalism as we know may be fast approaching (among others, for example, see Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009, 2018; Adler, 2014, 2019; Klein, 2014; Piketty, 2014; Mason, 2016; Monbiot, 2016; Raworth, 2017; Trebeck and Williams, 2019; Varoufakis, 2017) and a surge of interest in alternative models of social and economic organization. However, this begs the question how do we achieve an alternative to a neoliberal system that was dubbed by Margaret Thatcher as having 'no alternative'? In other words, is there a new space available for the development of a Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) and if so, what would this system-space or 'ecosystem', as it is often dubbed, look like? There is no room in this chapter to define the naming of such an alternative system that might replace the neoliberal approach, but it is worth at least mentioning that 'ecosystem' has obvious roots in ecology and complex dynamic systems that recognize complexity as opposed to the relative simplicity of capitalism (Nielsen, 2007; Meyer et al., 2005); related to this concept is Guattari's 'ecososphy' and the concept of the 'three ecologies' (Guattari, 2000), bringing together natural and social systems. Such systems of complexity, that begin in ecology, suggest an objectively natural system for the future, one that Nielsen calls an 'eco-mimetic development of society' (Nielsen, 2007, p. 1651) and that Fritjof Capra more broadly called the 'web of life' (Capra, 1997; see also, Capra and Luigi, 2014). This would suggest an *Ecological* Social and Solidarity Economy, a return to paradise or utopia, perhaps? This chapter considers this question

in the context of community wealth building (CWB) projects, especially that known as the 'Preston Model', which is often cited as a prime example of such alternative socio-economic models (Manley and Whyman, 2021).

This chapter investigates the value of dream-thinking as a process for imagining the impossible, making a place out of no-place. I begin by discussing the potentially ecological nature of a thinking process that is expansive, relational and associational instead of linear and causal, with the latter being identified as a feature of a traditional neoliberal approach to life and work. To admit complex inter-relationality is to open the doors to the consideration of modes of thinking that are not necessarily restricted to basic linear processes which might lead to easily measurable targets and outcomes. One of the most obvious alternatives to such narrowly targeted and bound thoughts is located in dream-thinking, which the chapter considers as such an alternative that can be linked to the potential for a different kind of social economy. The utopian, dream society is compared to the development of Community Wealth Building (CWB) and its principal exponent, the Preston Model (summarized below). Attached to CWB is the interweaving component of cooperation that speaks to a society woven around inter-relationality as opposed to individualism. The chapter concludes by encouraging the reader to willingly accept the uncertainty of progress without end and without targets, since any end is only the beginning of the new, continuously.

## A note on the Preston Model

In this chapter, reference will be made to the Preston Model, a full description of which can be found in Manley and Whyman (2021). To briefly summarize, the Preston Model is a version of CWB that has been developed in the city of Preston (UK) since 2011-13 and continues to the present day. The Preston Model aims to generate and retain local wealth for the benefit of communities. It rejects methods of urban regeneration that rely on inward investment. In the case of inward investment, although wealth might be created, it can also rapidly leak out of the local area (for example, in the case of global corporative investment, locally generated wealth can swiftly leak out into the bank accounts of shareholders who are far removed from the local area). The Preston Model encourages local 'anchor institutions' (meaning institutions that are 'anchored' to place, whatever the economic circumstances, such as the Hospital, the Local Authority, the University, and so on) to change their procurement habits so that more is purchased locally than had been the case before. Cooperation as a set of principles and values, which might also find a voice through cooperative businesses, is encouraged as an alternative to individualism and competition. As a result of this shift in focus, quality employment is stimulated and there is an increase in empowerment, agency and health and wellbeing.

## The relational, associational and inter-connectedness in complexity

If there is one striking aspect of ecological systems that contrasts with the linear, hierarchical and pyramidal system of capitalism, it is the unequivocal rhizomatic, systemic, associational and networked interconnectedness of all things. This is not, these days, new thinking. Capra calls this 'systems thinking' and puts it succinctly as follows:

> According to the systems view, the essential properties of an organism, or living system, are properties of the whole, which none of the parts have. They arise from the interactions and relationships between the parts. These properties are destroyed when the system is dissected, either physically or theoretically, into isolated elements. Although we can discern individual parts in any system, these parts are not isolated… (Capra, 1997, p. 29)

A system of power based on hierarchies, with individuals connected through lines of management or governance dictated (falsely) by the idea that the individual at the top of the pyramid is there through merit – in other words the system that typically governs management structures that define capitalism, not just at work but in social systems in general – is in direct opposition to an ecosystem of inter-connected relationships. This is the difference between Deleuze and Guattari's rejection of a 'tree-like' system as opposed to the 'rhizome' which 'connects any point to any other point', with the former being interconnected through a guiding 'trunk' that works its way upwards, while the latter spreads itself out underground in inter-connected ways that are difficult to predict (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p. 21).

The 'tree-system' or pyramid of capitalism is inherently anti-democratic because it assumes greater knowledge or expertise at the 'top' and it expects respect for the individual who reaches the heights, with this respect diminishing in accordance with the lesser status of another individual in that structure. Although this is hardly a novel observation, such realization becomes more relevant to a world where the system that supports this thinking is under strain or indeed may be nearing its end. An alternative society that respects all individuals equally because they are equal in relationship, and therefore a world of participatory democracy that is able to sweep away gross inequalities that are fueled by capitalism, might indeed be viewed as a Utopia by many, even by those who are sympathetic to such a vision. Yet, paradoxically, the same sceptics might also be attracted by the almost self-evident truths of those visions of Utopia through the ages since Thomas More's original text. For example, William Morris' *News from Nowhere* discusses a market that is based on healthy relationships as opposed to competition, and who would fail to be attracted to this Utopia?

> "The wares which we make are made because they are needed. Men make for their neighbours' use as if they were making for themselves, not for a vague market of which they know nothing, and over which they have no control." (Morris, 2023 [1890], p. 75)

This 'market' of relationships and genuine value incentivizes democracy by removing consumer value - especially as it relates to the individual - and the competition that goes with such value. Once again, this is nothing new, and the same invocation

to ‘true value’ has been made through the ages, it is just the lens that changes. Where Morris called upon a blossoming of new, collaborative thinking via socialism, Fromm, about sixty years later, would use a psychological lens to say a very similar thing but with added sophistication. Fromm points out the inherent paradox, bordering on insanity of supposing that individualism can be for the benefit of the individual’s neighbour:

> Keep your own advantage in mind, act according to what is best for you; by so doing you will also be acting for the greatest advantage of all others. As a matter of fact, the idea that egotism is the basis of the general welfare is the principle on which competitive society has been built. (Fromm, 2003 [1947], p. 95)

This manner of thinking, where the individual acting for individual interests is at the same time acting in the best interests of the collective is described as ‘utopian’ by Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1988 [1970], p. 40). Here, the utopian become dystopian in the use of utopia to describe a crude perception of individual consumer greed as a panacea for communities in society.

More recently, the idea of relationships has been interpreted as ‘association’, both in terms of political and governance structures (Hirst, 1994) and as part of Actor Network Theory (ANT), especially through the work of Bruno Latour and the so-called ‘sociology of associations’ (Latour, 2005, p. 9). More recently still, Graeber has developed the connection between a sense of value and how value is ‘measured’ in terms of relationships: ‘we are all, and have always been, projects of mutual creation… Labor is virtuous if it helps others’ (Graeber, 2013). Similarly, value is virtuous in correlation to the quality of relationships. Hoggett takes this a step further by substituting ‘value’ for virtue in a discussion of ‘democratic virtues’ (Hoggett, 2009, p. 150). Key to eliciting the transformation of economic ‘value’ to the value of mutuality in Graeber or the virtues of democracy in Hoggett, is the igniting and sustaining of the imagination (the ‘moral imagination’ in Hoggett, 2009, p. 142) which is staunchly resisted, contained, repressed and constrained within a neoliberal framework: ‘imagination, desire, individual creativity, all those things that were to be liberated in the last great world revolution, were to be contained strictly in the domain of consumerism’ (Graeber, 2013). A ‘utopian’ revolution should be ‘practical’ and based on ‘common sense’, unlike violent revolutions of old, according to Graeber, and yet it must remain the stuff of dreams. Again, because of this, dreams are to be destroyed by the system: ‘We are talking about the murdering of dreams, the imposition of an apparatus of hopelessness, designed to squelch any sense of an alternative future’ (Graeber, 2013). The idea of ‘murder’ here is evocative of the vital life elicited in dreams and brought into design through utopias. It is not that many people believe in actual utopias as a final template for society (it is, after all ‘nowhere’), but even without the physical concept of utopia there exists (in a sense that is open to ‘murder’) a very real conceptual life of utopia that is vital for continuing on a road of progress without a final destination. Concepts are not no-things, they are things that exist in continuously created innovations which are never new since the passing of time makes them are old upon birth. It is the creation of concepts that is the life force of Deleuzian philosophy

(Deleuze and Guattari, 1994) and these are arrayed on a rhizmomatic plane of relationships and associations. In the Deleuzian world, these are associations in relationship between and among a rhizome of affects. For Hoggett, this is a 'democracy of emotions' (Hoggett, 2009, pp. 139-157): it is the same vision viewed through a different lens.

## The dreams of utopia that need to live: community wealth building

An example of the importance and value of dreams was described in work carried out as part of a CWB project in Bermuda encapsulated in the hope for the development of a co-operative ecosystem in Bermuda (Manley and Aiken, 2020). In order to proceed with co-operative development, the community was consulted through a series of social dreaming events, bringing out the local desire to encourage the island's relationship with water – relationship with the non-human – and the value of relationships among community members through dreams and associations that re-lived moments of festivity among locals. Notable in their absence were dreams relating to economic development, emphasising this essential difference between consumer value and relational value, as described above. The curiosity of this work on an actual island and the value attributed to that in the dreams is that CWB projects sometimes appear to have an 'island flavour', working locally within local boundaries ('Preston', for example), rejecting the primacy of the global market. The co-operative system in Mondragon, a precursor of the CWB project, has been described as an 'island in a capitalist sea' (Etxeberria, 2019). This is a recurring theme. As far back as 1914, William Henry Watkins was describing co-operative development as a 'state within a state' to be designed 'on harmonious and co-operative lines, rather than the competitive and discordant lines we find in the competitive world' (Watkins, 1914 quoted in Woodwin, 2019, p. 25). During the development stage of the Preston Model, *The Economist* painted the CWB policies in Preston in utopic fashion, with an image of the then Leader of the Opposition walking a road to a shining city in the distance and the Leader of the Council described the CWB project as an isolated example of democratic socialism within a national design of conservative austerity politics: 'You can begin to democratise the economy, even with a Tory government' (Economist, 2017). To 'democratise' the economy is the same as to say to change the way people relate and associate to each other, since the kind of democracy that is being envisaged is participatory or deliberative, as opposed to representational. This is part of the dream, part of the 'community' of CWB and the utopia in question.

CWB prides itself in living a dream within reality, like a dream island. Similarly, in an individual there might be a conscious perception of an external reality on the one hand and an unconscious inner dream perception on the other. In the latter, virtue counts more than the faceless competition of the capitalist reality of the former. It should be remembered that dreams are not completely figures of pure imagination but are concepts created by the mind according to inputs from the reality of the external world. The idea that dreams are individual expressions of individual problems,

dating back to Freud (Freud, 1976 [1900]), is far removed from contemporary theory of dreams that has emerged from the practice of social dreaming. When dreams are shared in social contexts, there is a merging of the individual and the external environment (Manley, 2018; Long and Manley, 2019). If dreams are 'utopic', this does not mean that they are existing in total isolation from the 'real' world; instead, they exist in constant synergetic relationship with that external environment. Dreams do not emerge just from 'nowhere' but from a merging of nowhere with somewhere, or utopia with the real world. Similarly, the reality of CWB is that despite being dubbed as utopic by the 'reality' of the system, both the social and economic realities of a place like Preston have significantly improved (Manley and Whyman, 2021; Prinos and Manley, 2022). Recent work furthermore demonstrates that CWB also improves the health and wellbeing of communities, not just random individuals, but communities as a whole (Rose et al., 2023). What might appear utopic at first actually seems to have tangible results. It took a leap of imagination and a good deal of dreaming as well as a dose of reality, to turn round the fortunes of the small city of Preston. Of course, like a dream, CWB is open to the vagaries of the world. The 'model' in Preston is not a definitive, pre-conceived model of socio-economic organisation, rather it is a constantly shifting and changing possibility, with one possibility being decline or collapse. For example, the CWB project in Barcelona is now threatened by the collapse of the government that promoted it. As Graeber pointed out, alternative models such as CWB are not definitive templates but concepts to be tested and developed: 'such models can be only thought experiments. We cannot really conceive of the problems that will arise when we start trying to build a free society' (Graeber, 2013).

## Dreaming the social as a thought experiment

The value of dreams – whether these are actual night-time dreams, daydreams or 'dreams' in terms of desires and ambitions – is in fostering a locus of possibility, a place where new thoughts can be born, (hence the name given to the social dreaming group - a matrix). Ideas that are difficult to conceive in the context of consultation exercises, surveys, focus groups and suchlike – due to range of issues but largely and importantly because such consultations are designed around a conscious knowledge of past facts and figures – can easily be created in dreams and the creative imagination that is associated to utopic thinking. The qualities of dreams lend themselves immediately to inclusivity, diversity and the joining together of what 'in reality' might appear to be contradictory notions or even mad juxtapositions. The participant in dream thinking soon realises that the boundary between madness – as mad as dream images may often appear - and sense - associated to the rational – is more moveable and thinner than we might have supposed; and, as Foucault also showed in *Madness and Civilization*, there may be an underlying unconscious recognition and attraction of the forces of the imagination denominated 'mad', a desire to approach such fecundity, which is held back by fear of the unknown and therefore contained by the 'reason' of confinement (Foucault, 2001a [1961], pp. 195-198). Maybe this is why dreams are (madly) attractive. Perhaps dreams open a window to and a permission for 'madness'

and in this way turn confinement and a fear of the madness of innovation into a creative act. To reject fear is a creative act of truth-telling, according to Foucault, since it is fear that prevents the speaker from speaking truth (Foucault, 2001b). But speaking truth is not principally about creating ideas, rather it is a thought process. This is why Foucault places truth-telling in the field of thinking before idea creation. Foucault's history of thought is a demonstration of how truth emerges by a thinking process that challenges the taken-for-grantedness of ideas:

> The history of thought is the analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience, or set of practices, which were accepted without question, which were familiar and "silent", out of discussion, becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions and induces a crisis in the previously silent behavior, habits, practices, and institutions. (Foucault, 2001b, p. 74)

CWB and the development of a future SSE are thus to be understood as processes of thought that challenge the capitalist and consumerist system which for decades has been accepted without question. The comfortable certainty that the consumerist marketplace is the only option available to society becomes an uncomfortable disturbance when that idea that has passed its time. Neoliberal 'givens' are now central to crisis, not because a new idea has emerged but because truth as a thinking process is making an old idea defunct. 'Mad' thinking is paradoxically bringing out the madness of the neoliberal system that western society (and indeed much of global society) is embedded in.

From this perspective, it is easier to see that 'madness' (such as CWB) might actually be a truth that is often left unspoken. Dreams and utopias offer a possibility of truth-speaking through bypassing fear and by allowing dreams to 'speak'. In social dreaming (Lawrence, 2005; Manley, 2018), this is what is often termed expressing the 'unthought known' (Bollas, 1987), that is to say the thinking process in the sharing of dreams and associations to those dreams that allows people's unspoken knowledge to emerge. This is the result of what Freud identified as two principle features of the dream image: condensation (Freud, 1976 [1900], pp. 383-414) and free association or 'involuntary ideas' and how these flow into and are linked *in relationship* (Freud, 1976 [1900], pp. 18-178). 'Condensation' describes the quality in dream images to place in a single image various otherwise unconnected images and feelings attached to undigested knowledge; in social dreaming, this effect is further accumulated through the linking up of various of these images from different dreams. Condensation in dream images is unacceptable in conscious discourse due to the apparently incomprehensible 'madness' of the image(s), so it is only through the context of dreams that these thought processes can be accepted and therefore worked with. 'Free association' is the process whereby a person contributes to the thinking process through spontaneous connections made to thoughts, feelings and images that may occur at any moment and without interruption. This process is connected to dream thinking and utopian visions in the sense that it bypasses conscious obstacles (based on fear and previously held ideas) and allows for the expression of the unthought known.

## Community wealth building and co-operative solidarity

CWB is therefore not really an idea (and the Preston Model is not really a 'model' (Manley, 2021)), a template that can be applied to all, but rather a thinking process. As such, development is akin to transforming the thinking process from the understanding of ideas in linearity (consumerism, competition and the 'laws' of the marketplace) to rhizomatic processes in complexity (a 'somewhere' utopia). As Homer-Dixon (2014) points out in a chapter on complexity within a post-growth co-operative society, future thinking processes must shift from the ratio-logico-linear to a sense of multiplicity and relationality. Such thinking processes include concepts of 'emergence, disproportional causation and multiple equilibria' (Homer-Dixon, 2014, p. 127). If elements of the thinking process are in 'emergence', those are in a state of continuum, states which process themselves according to Deleuzian 'becomings', constantly shifting, moving towards Foucauldian 'truths' without ever stating the truth or reaching an end. The uncertainty inherent in never reaching that end, that utopia, the place of 'nowhere', is something that has to be lived with and accepted as part of the thinking process. The idea of utopia cannot be reached and the ends held by that idea cannot be achieved. However, this does not mean that progress cannot be made. On the contrary, it is by constantly moving towards the idea, accepting the knowledge that this will never be completed, that a healthy striving for change is made motivational and transformational. This also speaks to disproportional causation (as opposed to the weightings of a Cartesian cause-and-effect): as small things emerge, big things can happen. This is how small acts of compassion and solidarity, based on emerging trust among actors, were able to produce big changes during the Covid-19 pandemic. The point is made by Igwe et al. (2020), that developing solidarity through mutually beneficial small acts of support on the basis of trust was a vital component for survival in Nigeria and, it is assumed, in many developing countries where state support is minimal. In this case, solidarity is not an idea but a thought process that becomes reality through experience. In resonance with the present chapter, solidarity in Igwe et al.'s (2020) article is identified as a virtue rather than a value and the individual is 'becoming' collective: 'Solidarity has an organic or ethical category–civic virtues and collective identity' (Igwe et al., 2020, p. 1195). The complexity concept of multiple equilibria also demands new processes of thinking, since the simplicity of neoliberal ideas that demands a faith in the equilibrium implicit in the 'trickle down' hierarchical ladder of competition was made absurd when the pandemic revealed that it was in fact the lowest paid workers in society – the nurses, waste collectors, shop assistants and so on – who were identified as 'key workers' and vital for survival. A balanced society will admit to many varied balances that truly reflect the multiple complexities of existence.

With this in mind, it is possible to better understand how the development of CWB and SSE must be based not on a thing or an idea but on less tangible and difficult-to-define principles, values and virtues. This is clearly evident in the network of 'co-operative Councils' in the UK calling themselves the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network (CCIN) (https://www.councils.coop/), which bases its CWB development on principles

that adhere to co-operative values and principles, but not to an idea in the sense of a design that they or anyone one else has to apply. What the co-operative Councils work towards as a process is a series of ways of being which can be applied in a mix-and match fashion according to circumstance and local needs. In other words, one co-operative Council does not *look like* another, necessarily, but it does *behave like* another; and this behaviour will be similar in direction but different in intensity, in the recognition that no two Councils are the same. The long list of CCIN principles and values can be seen in their Statement of Principles and Values document (CCIN n.d.). As is immediately evident from the Statement, these are not a list of ideas, but rather of processes regarding behaviour:

- Social partnership
- Democratic engagement
- Co-production
- Enterprise and social economy
- Maximising social value
- Community leadership and a new role for councillors
- New models of meeting priority needs
- Innovation
- Learning
- Walking the talk

Evidently, these are directions without end. There is no end to 'innovation', no final conclusion to 'walking the talk', no limit to 'co-production', and so on. Maybe 'new models of meeting priority needs' sounds as if the 'model' could be a defined idea, but aside from this, the other principles and values are abstract and perpetually work-in-progress. As such, they comply with the idea of process and complexity that forms the basis for the development of a future SSE. Should all these behaviours end in a defined template with no further improvement possible, then we would have that utopia that otherwise we can only dream about.

## Conclusion without end

The SSE, in whatever form it takes in a future which is likely to be at least 'post-growth', if not 'de-growth', must be evolutionary and developmental, not static or perfect. Ideas of the future are often dubbed 'utopian' until they come to pass, then they are simply accepted as normal. An example of this in the UK was the introduction of the National Health Service (NHS) in 1948 despite 'realistic' opposition from many politicians and even doctors and nurses regarding the cost. This utopian project was made possible because thinking had been disrupted by the disaster of the Second World War. The fear of the financial problems or utopian concept of a universal health service was secondary to the fear of death and destruction that the war

had inflicted upon the population. The new health service was advertised as the following kind of utopia:

> It will provide you with all medical, dental, and nursing care. Everyone, rich or poor, man, woman or child can use it or any part of it. There are no charges, except for a few special items. There are no insurance qualifications… and it will relieve your money worries in time of illness. (Archive n.d.)

It is hard to over-emphasize the revolutionary nature of this demonstration of solidarity which was dream-like and, in a sense, impossible to achieve.

Failing a disaster such as the Second World War that can shift thought processes in this way, the question for today is how can we transform thinking?  not how can we get new ideas? Innovation and creativity will come through thinking as process. This chapter suggests that to overcome the fear that stands in the way of transformative and creative thinking, new methods of enquiry need to be opened out. As part of this, utopian and dream thinking is not only acceptable, it is necessary. Thus, the 'paradise lost' of some previous capitalist ideal can become the 'paradise regained' of some future ideal. One day, that will then also be lost, only to be regained once again. And so on, continuously.

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## Chapter 4

# Grassroots Utopias in Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE)

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**Abstract**

From association to multi-stakeholder organizations, new organizational models and forms of work are emerging as objects that hold out the promise of emancipation from, and alternatives to neoliberalism. They constitute workplaces with a utopian aim – often in the context of social micro-experiments – which reflect a specific relationship with a particular territory. From this perspective, how can we observe and analyze these new forms of work both from the point of view of the organizations that support them and the meaning of the work associated with them, at both the organizational level and the level of the active participants? Are its promises being translated into sustainable alternatives and at what cost? These questions take on their full meaning in a context where aspirations to transform society are being reaffirmed in the face of the challenges of necessary transitions. We adopt a qualitative analysis built on 4 case studies in France.

**Keywords:** utopias, SSE, governance, work, emancipation, territory

**JEL-Codes:** L31, M54, O35

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## 1. Introduction

The field of the social and solidarity economy (SSE), institutionalized in France in 2014, has its roots in the 19th century in the tradition of the associationism movement, marked by autonomy and emancipation through work. The organizations and the meaning of work seem to be driven by the intrinsic value of collective projects, grassroots practices and a vision of social transformation. From association to multi-stakeholder organizations, from informal collectives to cooperatives, new organizational models and forms of work are emerging as inspiring objects that hold out the promise of emancipation from domination, and alternatives to, neoliberalism. They constitute workplaces with a utopian aim (Desroches, 1991) – often in the context of social micro-experiments (Paquot, 2020) – which reflect a specific relationship with the territory. We use the term "work" in its broadest sense to encompass all its dimensions, whether paid or unpaid (domestic work, activism, voluntary work) and therefore physical and value-based commitment, expressing the desire to transform, which is also inherent in any utopian project. From this perspective, how can we observe and analyze these new forms of work both from the point of view of the organizations and the meaning of work? And what role do alternatives play in promoting emancipation through organizational projects and work? What are its spaces and the conditions for its emergence and development? Are its promises being translated into sustainable alternatives to neoliberalism and at what cost?

These questions take on their full meaning in a context where aspirations to transform society are being reaffirmed (Coutrot, Perez, 2022; Frère, Laville, 2022) in the face of the challenges of necessary transitions to a more sustainable world. To answer this question, we conducted comparative research in 2022 on four SSE organizations located in the South of France.

We begin by providing an overview of our theoretical framework, highlighting our choice to base our reflection on real utopias and to characterize utopia from the bottom up, through existing experiences. Then, we present our method and the case studies on which we base our reflections. Finally, we present and discuss our main results.

## 2. Theoretical framework: grassroots concrete utopias

We considered utopia as a gap between the present and the future (Duverger, 2021). We approach it through practices and through the narratives given by the actors who have become authors on this occasion, which allows us to deconstruct the myths and to reveal contradictions and conflicts (Blin et al., 2020). Through these concrete utopias, the aim is to shake up relationships of domination and dependence, authorize or prevent autonomy and the power to act, and open 'concrete possibilities of thinking and doing differently so that work leaves more room for freedom' (Donaggio et al., 2022: 242), thereby producing or not producing anticipations of emancipating futures in 'the here and now' of action.

Inspired by the countermovement of Polanyi (1989), Lallement (2022) emphasizes the extent to which, in each upheaval in society, countertrends in the form of utopias emerge: the industrial revolution and Fourier; the scientific organization of work and community developments; the digital revolution and the hackers. Thus, utopia is an object of history that is simultaneously political, economic, social, and cultural, aiming to better understand global changes (Bouchet, 2021), but it is often observed on a local, sectoral, unique, and ephemeral scale, particularly in social micro-experiments (Paquot, 2020). Aligned with Foucault, we question the open or closed nature of the space in which utopia unfolds. Is utopia a closed and protective space or an open space that intends to disseminate and spread its ways of doing and being? How should targeted, local projects and societal horizons be arranged? The function of heterotopias is to create a 'space of illusion that denounces as even more illusory all real space,' within which human life is compartmentalized. On the contrary, heterotopias also aim to create 'another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged' as opposed to an ordinary space that is 'disordered, poorly arranged, and messy.' Heterotopias produce interstitial transformations, which Olin Wright (2017) would call emancipatory alternatives within capitalist society.

In that perspective, utopia can be characterized by three different dimensions: a spatial dimension because it takes place in new places that it shapes; a temporal dimension as it is expressed in a contextualized moment; and a principle of action by proposing alternatives and 'cobbled-together experiments' (Lallement, 2022). Additionally, there is the concept of 'counter-spaces,' 'absolutely other spaces,' or heterotopias (Foucault, 2001).

If utopian work experiences occupy concrete and real spaces and are characterized by the need for change and the desire for viable transformations in the present, it remains to be seen how and under what conditions the alignment between governance, economic models, organization, sense of work, relationship to the territory, and balance between individual and collective spheres is achieved.

## 3. Method and Fields

### 3.1. Method

Our approach is qualitative. Rather than 'investigating on,' it is a matter of 'investigating with' (Madec, et al., 2019) within the framework of a comprehensive and pragmatic methodology (Dewey, 1938). We adhere to the principles of action research, characterized by a dual purpose of knowledge production and social transformation (Mesnier, Missotte, 2003; Allard-Poesi, Perret, 2004; Ballon, 2020). This also involves drawing inspiration from the theoretical and methodological framework of the ergodisciplines (Gaudart, Duarte, 2015), which emphasize the gap between the prescribed and the real as fundamental to understanding and transforming work (Guerin et al., 2001) as a creative activity. In this sense, action research can also be

defined as research-intervention. What is observed, debated, and invented is not merely a moment of collecting materials to later verify previously constructed hypotheses, but rather an act of research in the making (Cairo-Crocco, Félix, 2019).

We investigated a multiple case study with four experiments. We rely on interviews conducted in 2022 and a longitudinal follow-up of the organizations and their projects, some of which we have followed since their origin. We compared these different local experiments within a multidisciplinary approach. This involved sharing our views on the different fields and debating our striking observations and astonishments. We shared and discussed our observations with representatives of the organizations and other researchers in open forums and collective working sessions. The results are the product of these iterations and constitute a corpus of salient elements.

### 3.2. Case Studies

The four cases selected in the Marseille area have varying sizes, statuses, and social purposes, without intending to elevate them as emblematic. The fields of inquiry are not intended to be emblematic. Rather, their selection resulted from significant encounters that stimulated our curiosity (Lebrun, 1995: 654), particularly concerning the relationship between work and freedom. These experiences span the fields of education, training and culture, and the agri-food sector. They allow us to identify certain constants of practical utopias in the cooperative and associative fields.

**Box 1: Four case studies**

- a company that was taken over and organized as a cooperative society (Scop), illustrating a collective trajectory where the relationship between work and freedom has led to a radical reinvention of the structure, organization, and meaning of work;

- an educational space comprising a primary school, a leisure and social center, and a social support facility within the same area, offering the same living and learning systems to children (and adults) during both school and leisure time;

- a collective interest cooperative society (SCIC) defined as a hub for art and culture as well as living space, and which is one of the oldest third places in France;

- a small association of popular education aimed at supporting artists.

Across these various fields, we sought to understand how the relationship between work and freedom is conceptualized, enacted, and questioned. We are interested in the genesis of the project, work organizations, and the organization of work, and how the relationship to work and freedom is experienced in the daily lives of each worker, volunteer, or user. This involves questioning the political dimension, the forms of democracy, and the flow of power and freedom in these experiences, by analyzing their internal functioning and exploring the partnerships and relationships with

the outside world. In doing so, we focus on the project and its values, as well as any theoretical, political, or experiential references that may have guided each unique utopia in breaking with the status quo, in critically analyzing the present, and in how each experience attempts to contribute to the advent of another world through a modest prefigurative experience.

## 4. Main results: browsing through utopian experiences

We summarize our main findings in Table (1) below.

### 4.1. Comparative approach

We outline our main results in Table 1 below. First, we identify that the diversity of the projects coexists with a certain number of invariants that confirm the relevance of our analytical framework. These invariants include:

- the stakes of a 'counter' project against the status quo and the emergence of an alternative. The goal is to account for the transformation project by highlighting both what is being opposed and the ambition for freedom,
- the narration of the project: emancipation through storytelling and its staging on various occasions, the narration of the project: emancipation through storytelling and its staging on various occasions,
- a governance that is constantly experimenting through trial and error to make necessary adjustments to the project,
- the importance given to places in their various dimensions as spaces for living, innovation, sharing, production, and exchange,
- the central dimension of work as an exercise in the tension of working together.

**Table 1: Comparative approach for the 4 cases**

| | ScopTi | La Friche Belle de Mai | Les Têtes de l'Art | Bricabracs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Origin of project:*** **Search for an alternative** | Subsidiary of MNE | Former tobacco factory | Association for popular education, supporting artists | Educational areas (school, leisure, coeducation, training) |
| ***Project (myth or utopia):*** **The meaning of work, innovation, transforming narrative and utopias storrytelling** ***The focus:*** **the search for freedom** | Creation of the Scop in 2014 after 1336 days of struggle against Unilever<br>Making quality tea and local herbal teas | 1992 Cultural third place at the service of its users, cultural rights<br>Territory factory<br>Permanent experimentation | 1996 Participatory artistic practices and accompaniment of artists<br>Association as a project | 2015 Alternative for another education.<br>Individual (child, adult) in a collective.<br>No freedom without constraints. Rules recognised as viable by the community. |
| ***Governance:*** **allways in adjustement** | Scop, working governance, extended steering committee, board of directors and concentric circles | Work on governance<br>Cooperative orientation schema (SOC) co-constructed 2020-22<br>But the challenge of putting it in practice | Participatory governance<br>Board of competence<br>Creating a link between employees and board | Associative status but based on a cooperative model.<br>Giving power to employees.<br>Link between employees, volunteers and users essential but not decisive in the final analysis |
| ***Territory:*** **the importance of places** | Territory of the struggle<br>Territory of supply | Between openness and closure<br>The work of the territory<br>Conflicts of use | Anchoring in its territory through its governance, through its activity | Anchoring oneself in its territory through the activity (educational and cooperative).<br>Building future together. |
| ***Work and freedom*** | Work in chains<br>But pride in work<br>Organisation of work: the choice of making.<br>*Liberating yourself in and through work* | Paradox of enclosure<br>Reopening: internal and external dialectics<br>Tensions over use<br>*Liberating oneself in and through work* | Learning together, participating<br>*Liberate yourself in and through your work* | Project to be maintained despite the fragility of the economic model<br>*Freeing oneself from work* |

Source: authors

Second, a transversal analyze helps us identify three main dynamics of utopian projects.

## 4.2. A transversal analyze

### *4.2.1. From a project "against" to the emergence of a sustainable alternative?*

*"I chose to create this educational space to continue practicing my profession, which I could no longer to do in the state public service, and to heal myself, as the state public service had put me in a depressive psychological state. (...) It was primarily a personal choice to continue practicing my profession and to create a space where education and instruction were not separated."* This is the response of a teacher who decides to create an educational space to continue working and to pursue their passion for teaching and educating, as the framework for practicing their profession had become "impossible and unbearable" (Schwartz, 2007). However, since it is a question of tracing a path of independence and freedom, this strength to "go against", to pose an alternative, to escape from a situation of confinement, needs to be accompanied by resources, means and competences allowing the construction of a project. This project cannot concern an isolated person, even if the idea emerges from an individual. A utopian project is not the undertaking of a visionary but a proposal that starts here and now for oneself and for society as well. Change and transformation are envisaged for as many people as possible.

The use of imagination, political and literary legacies, and even other forms of concrete utopias proves to be essential. For example, the educational space - Espaces Éducatifs Bricabracs - that we have followed builds its structure by reinvesting in utopian traditions in education, particularly drawing from New Education and more specifically from the principles of Célestin Freinet, as well as from social pedagogy experiences established here and elsewhere. In this way, this space aims for an emancipatory pedagogical approach for everyone: both children and adults.

On its part, Tête de l'Art, an artistic popular education association, builds its alternative project precisely on the collective support of artists as a form of education and collective emancipation. The aim is both to make the public creators and to acknowledge that this cannot be achieved without training the artists.

The cultural third place, the Friche de la Belle de Mai, places the cultural rights of users at the heart of its project – for example, by opening a space where programming is in the hands of the residents – and makes continuous experimentation its mode of existence, with various aspects of openness to the community serving as an illustration.

The cooperative ScopTi, formerly a subsidiary of a multinational firm facing liquidation, bases its action on the need to preserve local jobs in the Marseille area. It draws inspiration from the struggles of other previous experiences (LIP, for example in France) and inspires other struggles in turn, such as Après M in Marseille, a Mac Donald restaurant transformed into a social centre and a place to distribute

meals during Covid. They build a narrative carried in different ways, in alliances with researchers, journalists, and in a music group "Los Fralibos" and in a play (1336, paroles de Fralib, by Philippe Durand).

### *4.2.2. Concrete utopias versus experiments: a key role for governance*

The link between concrete utopia and experimentation is a hallmark of all projects. The utopian dimension of the project is accompanied by trial and error in governance, work, or territorial embeddedness, as well as a search for new procedures and renewed connections. The relationship between concrete utopias and work and freedom leads members to experiment with various types of governance and democracy, whether formal or informal (Petrella, Richez-Battesti, 2013). These include cooperatives and associations that continuously reflect on the organization of power and the alignment between political projects, time, space, and roles in both reflection and action. Bricabracs have adopted a cooperative model for governance and work organization, even though it is an association with only two employees. In addition to the co-presidency, held by two legally responsible volunteers, there is an 'operating council' composed of three groups: volunteer guarantors, employees, and parents' representatives. The employees have a fundamental role in the day-to-day decision-making process and in the long-term orientations. Since they experience this daily, they both embrace the freedom to shape it and manage the associated constraints. For its part, Tête de l'Art integrates local actors into their governance, interacting with each employee, to anchor the cultural project in the area.

La Friche de la Belle de Mai has gradually strengthened its link with the area. It has created a new college for inhabitants in its governance and opened a space for artistic programming by inhabitants.

In ScopTi, the link to the territory and to the activists is maintained through the association, which continues alongside the cooperative. Governance is adjusted over time to address the challenges of maintaining democracy and rapid decision-making within a framework of concentric circles tested by practice. Thus, even if in the cooperatives the exercise and circulation of power seem to be better defined than in an association, it is not easy to assume the role of decision-maker (member) and worker at the same time. While this issue has been demonstrated in cooperatives generally (Vieta, 2020), at ScopTi, the 'dual status' of being both cooperator and employee is a significant concern for cooperator-workers, especially regarding improvements in working conditions.

### *4.2.3. Reinvesting space and time*

The need to do things differently, the desire for transformation and the search for a favorable framework are key elements in the construction of an alternative. However, they are only the starting point, as everything must be built, and both time and living space need to be reinvested, along with the places that one wishes to transform or reclaim.

ScopTi emerged from a desire to reclaim resources that a powerful multinational firm intended to relocate. After a 1,336-day struggle (over three and a half years), the employees reclaimed the company's space and time, as well as employment and labor relations, and redefined freedom between workers and the market (today, 1336 has become their brand). This dynamic is built between the enthusiasm of the struggle, the imagination of a more rewarding future and the obstacles to be overcome in the internal organization and in the relationship with the market.

Production (of goods or services) is conceived and developed with the conviction of occupying 'an absolutely other place in the economy, a kind of contestation that is both mythical and real of the space in which we live' (Braconnier, 2013: 66). This is the case, for example, in the choice of a commercial line and an organic and local supply chain for the Scop'Ti cooperative or in the search for a fairer price for the users of the school and leisure center in the educational space BricaBrac. The relationship with time and space is fundamental in the production of value.

This is also a central issue for the Friche de la Belle de Mai, which promotes cultural events, and for the Tête de l'Art, whose main objective is to reexamine the way cultural spectacles are produced and the role given to the public, thus contributing to the development of cultural rights in the working-class neighborhoods of Marseille.

The Bricabracs association, which designates itself as an educational space, states that its project is conducted in a space broken down into various areas: a small den, the school building, a large park with a garden, a henhouse, and an outdoor area shared with other associations, adults, and children. The layout of the educational space and the organization of its temporalities materialize the requirements of a place designed to develop cooperation and autonomy for children and adults in a territory.

Moreover, the genesis of each experience and its moments of crisis during successive phases of consolidation seem to be in the register of 'kairos,' meaning time understood as an 'opportune moment' rather than linearity. This refers to the philosophical tradition from Aristotle to Augustine, from Bergson to Heidegger, which reflects on different ways of considering time, contrasting the linearity of Kronos with the intensity of Kairos (Gadamer, 1969). In these experiences, time is perceived less as linear and more as a succession of moments to be seized for action. Therefore, the intensity of time and space in life is entirely consumed by the conception, implementation, and search for solutions related to the utopian experience, almost forgetting everything else: personal emotions, family, and external events. How can we maintain political intensity and commitment without trivializing the emerging or consolidating experience, or over-investing in a cause that might disrupt the time and space of the project's life and affect all those involved, whether closely or remotely? How can one avoid self-exploitation when one has sought to escape alienation? If these utopias seek a different relationship to time and space through a new approach to work and freedom, how can we prevent them from facing issues with work schedules and restrictions on freedom? These questions run through all the experiences, with

a variable intensity that seems to be proportional to the scale of the initial struggles or to the difficulties in sustaining each project.

We therefore observe the diversity of the arrangements of these utopian experiments, their instability and the constant trial and error that characterizes them. The alignment (Eynaud, 2019) between the social project, governance, economic model, and working conditions is in constant tension and is continuously challenged collectively. Seeking this alignment can also mean considering all the possibilities, allowing oneself to stop an experiment, to put things on hold, to disinvest in the market to regain time (Schor, 2013), in a society where the time for reflection on action is increasingly limited. It involves experimenting and exploring whether the utopian experience contributes to the transformation of oneself, others, and spaces within a territory.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions: The inspiring power of SSE, limits and challenges

### 5.1. The organizational support of the SSE: from refusal to collective transformation

The choice of the status of the structure or project supporting these concrete utopias is generally deliberate and well-considered. There is a strong correlation between utopian experiments and the legal frameworks within which they operate. Associations and cooperatives seem particularly favorable because they shift away from the logic of individual entrepreneurship—encouraged by contemporary societies (Cukier, Bissonnette, 2017; RIUESS Group, 2021; Vieta, 2020)—through their legal status and principles of a-capitalism, democracy (one person, one vote), and autonomy from the state. This dynamic is present in all the experiences: the founders do not see themselves as entrepreneurs, much less as enlightened dreamers, but rather as creators of collective solutions, for which the SSE seems to be a suitable framework. However, while the political and organizational model is fundamental, the organization of power remains extremely fragile and complex, despite the democratic frameworks and modes of governance chosen. The roles required and expected of volunteers, employees, and sometimes users are subject to tensions. These tensions arise from the demands and constraints of exercising democracy and freedom, as well as the delicate balance between the political project, reflection, and action.

### 5.2. A territorial anchorage here and there: situated narratives, localized imaginaries

We are dealing with utopias embedded in the present and within specific territories, in places they aim to transform or recover. These utopias are territorialized, navigating both the internal and external aspects of their organizations. They highlight the importance of their relationship with the outside world, which they either seek to preserve themselves from or open up to, depending on particular and often

reimagined intensities and uses. These concrete utopias, while occupying real places, embody processes built on uncertainty but driven by the necessity and desire for transformation. This is particularly visible in the narratives about their experiences—the instituting and instituted choices in their organization, the socio-political contexts and gaps they aimed to fill. Additionally, the imaginary represented by the place is shaped by past utopias and utopians who inspired their transformation proposals.

In this sense, it raises the question of the potential for disseminating these projects marked by 'situated imaginaries.' People come to observe, imbibe, and find inspiration in them, yet they seem to be unique experiences that are difficult to reproduce. 'People come to see us, examine us, and inspire us. They show us that it is possible, but at the same time, we see that it is our story,' says a member of Scopti.

### 5.3. Work between self-exploitation and self-restriction of freedom?

The freedom asserted in these utopian projects coexists with forms of self-exploitation in the workplace. Leaders of utopian projects do not reject work and its constraints. They immerse themselves in the project's time and space, leading to a form of self-exploitation. This contrasts with their aim to liberate themselves from labor as alienation, resulting in a self-restriction of freedom. This self-exploitation appears to accompany the process of agency, blurring the distinction between labor and work, especially in multi-stakeholder organizations where voluntary commitment coexists with paid work. However, while these 'adjustments' and 'strategies' may be acceptable in the short term, they become unbearable in the medium term. Could the organization of work then be seen as a means to protect oneself from self-exploitation and the risk of losing oneself in the collective 'us'? Working time extends beyond the employment framework, indicating that a concrete and real utopia requires total commitment, almost a self-sacrifice. This poses the risk for utopians of losing themselves and forgetting the initial aim of creating a livable and feasible experience of work and freedom. To manage these excesses, the role of the collective is fundamental, yet often insufficient.

### 5.4. SSE between permissive and restrictive framework

Utopians perceive the SSE as permissive and flexible. However, its constraints are often underestimated. This includes the economic model that underlies it, the organizational work needed to involve and sustain the democratic organization, and the management tools introduced to handle work, the collective, and the commitment. The alignment between the project, governance (expression of democracy and collective participation), the management method (participation, meaning of work, etc.), and the socio-economic model (constrained freedom) is central. However, this alignment is never permanently achieved and is often the subject of tensions and power struggles. In this regard, the idealized vision of the SSE sometimes diverges from the practical realities of the organization. Therefore, the challenge is to preserve and protect the demand for freedom and contribute

to emancipation while maintaining an economic model that is considered indispensable today.

### 5.5. The SSE as a "groping management" of the paradoxes specific to utopian projects

Paradoxes specific to utopian projects (Smith, Lewis, 2011) are expressed at various levels. How can freedom be preserved without limiting its use? How can individual leadership be considered while carrying out a collective project? How to preserve freedom without restricting its use? These paradoxes and tensions drive innovation, fueling utopian work within the framework of differentiated and ever-evolving models. This represents a promising research area, especially in the context of addressing and facilitating transitions.

### 5.6. To conclude

Utopian experiences sometimes reinvest in traditions and draw on heritages they often discover along the way and afterward. They are rooted in the present—not just the contemporary—and in spatial relations that balance opening and closing, constraint and freedom, indicating ruptures and revealing other possibilities, other spaces. These experiences are forms of counter-spaces (in education, culture, community life, work management, and means of production), akin to Polanyi's countermovement (1989). They welcome or propose alternative projects, seeking viability and pursuing a process built in uncertainty, driven by the need and desire for transformation. This process is not always peaceful, even though concerns for health, beauty, and pleasure are at the origin of these experiences. Instead, it involves daily struggles both inside and outside these counter-spaces. The actors often repeat, 'We have to fight,' to resist the resignation suggested by Margaret Thatcher's mantra, 'there is no alternative.' This mantra speaks as much about political strategies as about individual behavior. As Olin Wright reminds us, 'the construction of real utopian alternatives does not simply demonstrate that "another world is possible," it also creates the practical frameworks within which ordinary people engage in transformative practices' (Farnea, Jeanpierre, 2013: 242).

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Wright E.O., 2017[2010], *Utopies réelles*, Paris, La Découverte, Coll. L'horizon des possibles.

## Chapter 5

# Green Utopias, Local Utopias: The Role of the Imaginaries of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) in Narratives of Transition

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**Abstract**

Although utopias ran out of steam during a twentieth century more marked by ideologies, they made a comeback from the 1970s onwards, both through the philosophy of deep ecology and the utopian fictions that renewed the literary genre. Green utopias thus appear that maintain a specific relationship to time and space, whose action provides the arrangements. There is thus a close link between utopias and their experiments, at the heart of which is the social and solidarity economy (SSE). What, then, is the role of the imaginaries of the SSE in the narratives of the transition? This article proposes to answer this question by crossing three books that have a common core around the principle "*small is beautiful*": Ernest F. Schumacher's 1973 essay of the same name, Ernest Callenbach's 1975 novel *Ecotopia*, and Rob Hopkins' essay *What If... We were unleashing our imagination to create the future we want?* in 2019. This will lead us to specify their utopian coordinates, to analyze the role of the imaginaries of the SSE in the re-embedding of the economy and technology in society, as well as their inclusion in dissemination strategies based on experiments whose models must be disseminated.

**Keywords:** Green utopias, small is beautiful, social and solidarity economy, experimentation, transformation strategy

**JEL-Codes:** B55

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## Introduction

Green utopias have become increasingly numerous over the past fifty years, in connection with the emergence of the ecological question, of which the Meadows report on the limits to growth published in 1972 provides a point of reference. Although utopias ran out of steam during a twentieth century more marked by ideologies[1], they made a comeback from the 1970s onwards, both through the philosophy of deep ecology[2] and the utopian fictions that renewed the literary genre. The literary genre was thus renewed by the ecotopias, which are, however, in this context, crossed by ambiguities, caught between utopias and dystopias[3], as in the novel *The Dispossessed* published by Ursula Le Guin in 1974.

Invented by Thomas More in 1516, utopia comes from the Greek *utopia* and means "without place". Another meaning is given to it in the sixteenth placed at the top of the eponymous book, where the humanist brings it closer to "the good place", *eutopia*. Born of a fictional story, whose original Latin title *nusquama* means "nowhere", utopia is always consigned to the realm of the imaginary. It is perceived as an ideal which, although rational, distances it from all reality. While the Larousse defines it as "an imaginary and rigorous construction of a society, which constitutes, in relation to the one who realizes it, an ideal or a counter-ideal", it also presents it as "a project whose realization is impossible, [an] imaginary conception". A shift thus occurs from the imaginary to the unrealizable, which produces two tensions.

The first is underlined by Henri Desroche: "*No utopian caravan has ever reached its mirage. But without this mirage, no caravan would ever have set off*"[4]. Utopias carry a horizon of expectation that has implications for the present. They may still be incomplete, but they are, nonetheless, generating actions. A second tension is that "*utopia, which is nowhere is, nevertheless, first and foremost a space*", according to Françoise Choay[5]. It is thus possible to speak of local utopias. They are often ideal cities, in which political communities are located.

Utopias therefore maintain a specific close relationship to time and space, the action of which provides the arrangements. There is a close link between utopias and their experiments, so that "the proof of utopia is a utopian test"[6]. It is at this point of articulation between written utopias and practiced utopias that the social and solidarity economy (SSE) finds itself. And green utopias are no exception. Although

[1] Paul Ricoeur, *L'idéologie et l'utopie*, Paris, Seuil, 1997.

[2] Arne Naess, "The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement. A summary", *Inquiry. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 16, Issue 1-4, 1973, p. 95-100.

[3] Jean-Paul Déléage, « Utopies et dystopies écologiques », *Écologie et politique*, n° 37, 2008/3, p. 33-43.

[4] Henri Desroche, *Le projet coopératif, son utopie et sa pratique, ses appareils et ses réseaux, ses espérances et ses déconvenues*, Paris, Économie et humanisme/Éditions ouvrières, 1976.

[5] Françoise Choay, *La règle et le modèle. Sur la théorie de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme*, Paris, Seuil, 1980.

[6] Thierry Paquot, « Les lieux des utopies. Petit catalogue commenté », *Diogène*, No. 273-274, 2021, pp. 86-104.

it is rarely made explicit, the SSE occupies a special place in the conception of a sustainable society[7].

This immediately raises a question: what is the role of the imaginaries of the SSE in the narratives of the transition? It is well known that social utopias were one of the main sources of the SSE in the nineteenth century[8]. For some of them, the ecological question was very present, which can be observed in Fourierism[9] and in the *News from Nowhere* by William Morris[10]. Ecotopias reconnect with this filiation by updating it to anticipate post-industrial societies.

To answer this question, we will cross three works with a common core around the principle "*small is beautiful*". Here we find the essay published by Ernest F. Schumacher in 1973[11], which is cited by the specialist of green utopias, Lisa Garforth, as one of the most influential works of the period[12]. Then came *Ecotopia*, published two years later by Ernest Callenbach, who draws inspiration very directly from it to develop the model green utopia[13]. We will compare these two works with Rob Hopkins' essay on the imagination, published more than forty years apart[14], which he begins with a utopian story. This addition is not fortuitous, the movement of cities in transition, of which he is the founder, was born in Totnes, where Schumacher College is located, created in 1991 to train in ecology. Rob Hopkins, who taught permaculture there, was also the winner of the Schumacher Prize in 2008, awarded by the Schumacher Society for his Transition Manual published by the publisher Green Books, which is also based in Totnes[15].

Through these three books we will seek to grasp the role of the imaginaries of the SSE in the narratives of the transition, first by specifying their utopian coordinates, i.e., their dual relationship to time and space. We will then see that these imaginaries of the SSE promote a re-embedding of the economy and technology in society. Finally, these imaginaries are part of transformation strategies, which are based on experiments designed as models to be spread.

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[7] See for example: François Deblangy, "Beyond Green-Washing: Sustainable Development and Environmental Accountability through Co-operators' Eyes (A French Perspective)", in Julian Manley, Anthony Webster and Olga Kuznetsova (eds.), *Co-operation and Co-operatives in 21st-Century Europe*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, pp. 39-59.

[8] André Gueslin, *L'invention de l'économie sociale. Le XIXe siècle français*, Paris, Economica, 1987.

[9] René Scherer, *L'écosophie de Charles Fourier*, Paris, Anthropos, 2001.

[10] William Morris, *News from nowhere or an epoch of rest being some chapters from a utopian Romance*, London/Edinburgh/Paris, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1890.

[11] Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, *Small is beautiful. A study of economics as if people mattered*, London, Blond and Briggs, 1973.

[12] Lisa Garforth, *Green utopias. Environmental hope before and after nature*, Cambridge, Polity, 2018.

[13] Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia. The notebooks and report of William Weston*, Berkeley, Banyan Tree Books, 1975.

[14] Rob Hopkins, *From what is to what if. Unleashing the power of imagination to create the future we want*, White River Junction, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2019.

[15] Rob Hopkins, *The transition handbook. From oil dependency to local resilience*, Totnes, Green books, 2008.

## The utopian coordinates

The localization of utopias requires us to grasp their coordinates according to two axes: the relationship to time and the relationship to space. The process of autonomization that underlies them can bring them closer to the meso-regulatory theory, according to which "the meso-shaped spaces that emerge [...] are autonomous from the macroeconomic level in the sense that they are not necessarily in line with the driving or dominant sectors, nor identical, nor marked by isomorphy. They are structured by institutional arrangements that are "meso-economic" by socio-historical construction. They are defined by a structure of rules"[16].

## Futurity

Among the channels of differentiation at work in the processes of constitution of meso spaces, we find futurity, in other words, the representations of the future carried by people and organizations, which particularly identifies the SSE and also the narratives of the transition. It is a particular thread that the transition weaves between the past, the present and the future. In the words of Reinhart Koselleck[17], we could say that it combines a field of experience, going back to the fossil age, and a horizon of post-carbon expectation. Far from any determinism, the transition acts on the present to bring about the expected future.

During his lectures, Rob Hopkins invites participants to close their eyes and imagine the future, not as it should be, but as it would be if everything that could be done for the transition had been done. It is therefore not a question of fantasizing about an ideal city that would be out of reach, nor of relaying a catastrophism that leads to inaction, but of imagining a possible and desirable future to encourage people to take action. Rob Hopkins seeks to "create nostalgia for an exciting future"[18].

The first pages of his essay open with just such a narrative, in the first person, in which we find the description of a green and local utopia: ecological housing, shared gardens, public transport and cycle paths, decline of the car, alternative pedagogies, solidarity bakery, third places, local production, reduction of working hours, universal income, community projects, Reappropriation of the streets, participatory democracy, enrichment of biodiversity, revitalization of social ties, etc. He calls for "stories of what life could look like if we were able to find a way over the course of the next twenty years to be bold, brilliant and decisive, to act in proportion to the challenges we are facing and to aim for a future we actually feel good about"[19].

[16] Thomas Lamarche et al., « Saisir les processus méso : une approche régulationniste », *Économie appliquée*, n°1, 2021, pp. 13-49.

[17] Reinhart Koselleck, *Le futur passé. Contribution à la sémantique des temps historiques*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 1990.

[18] Conference with Rob Hopkins, « Accélérons la transition ! », Hôtel de Ville de Bordeaux, 5 April 2023.

[19] Rob Hopkins, *op. cit.*, 2019.

This approach is also found in Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*. The scene takes place twenty years after the secession of three states on the West Coast of the United States, California, Oregon and Washington State. The narrator is a journalist from the Time Post who goes there to break isolationism, "understand this nation" and verify the results of the "social experiments" that are being carried out there. Initially considering ecotopian ideas as a "threat", William Weston - that is the narrator's name - ends up converting to them and remains living in Ecotopia. This narrative process aims at realism, both through the reportage that focuses on the facts and through the description of concrete actions. Like Rob Hopkins, Ernest Callenbach refuses to situate himself in utopia, he evokes a "semi-utopia"[20] to characterize not a perfect world, but a world that is "on the right track". In transition, we might say.

This experience of time can be compared to the "gap between past and future" evoked by Hannah Arendt. She describes it as "the odd in-between period which sometimes inserts itself into historical time when not only the later historians but the actors and witnesses, the living themselves, become aware of an interval in time which is altogether determined by things that are no longer and things that are not yet". She concludes that such moments "may contain the moment of truth".

To understand the phenomenon, Hannah Arendt takes up the parable in which Franz Kafka depicts a man caught between two antagonistic forces: the past that drives him on and the future that blocks his path. But, unlike him, she does not represent time as linear. The timeline is broken at this point of intersection. The double flow, which would have collided without man, offers him a battlefield on which to stand in order to deploy his activity of thought, as infinite as the two forces at the origin of it. This break makes it possible to fight against "the future which drives us back into the past"[21].

## Territorial anchoring

This futurity is anchored in the territories, and not only through narrative construction. Of course, utopias are most often localized, but for green utopias the "local" is central. Schumacher's influence is felt here. Focusing on questions of scale and denouncing "the idolatry of gigantism", he concludes that "people can be themselves only in small comprehensible groups. Therefore we must learn to think in terms of an articulated structure that can cope with a multiplicity of small-scale units"[22]. Green utopias are therefore first and foremost local utopias in which, in Foucauldian language, heterotopias, that is to say, "real places, effective places, places that are drawn in the very institution of society, and which are a kind of counter-location, kinds of utopias actually realized, in which all the other real locations that can be found within

[20] Brice Matthieussent, « Préface : Changer », *in* Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia*, Paris, Folio, 2018.
[21] Hannah Arendt, *La crise de la culture. Huit exercices de pensée politique*, Paris, folio, 2018.
[22] Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, *op. cit*.

the culture are at once represented, contested and inverted, kinds of places that are outside of all places, although nevertheless actually localizable.[23]"

The local dimension is consubstantial with the transition promoted by Rob Hopkins. The movement began in Totnes, a town of 9,000 inhabitants in the southwest of England in which it relies on a very dense ecological network (Steiner school, vegetarian or organic restaurants, Ernst F. Schumacher center, ecological funeral home, etc.), although taking place in a town run by conservatives. In line with the priority objective of a post-oil transition, the transition implies a relocation of agriculture, and also of the economy (local currencies), energy, democracy, education, tourism, health, etc[24]. The *Transition Handbook*, which presents the methodology, deploys the movement at the scale of cities. In *From what is to what if*, Rob Hopkins begins his imaginary story on the scale of a neighborhood and ends it by calling his readers to action: "*Go out and find it [your dream], pay it a visit, make it happen where you live!*"[25].

This decentralized structure is found in *Ecotopia*. The narrator points out that "the ecotopians largely dismantled their national tax and spending system, and local communities regained control over all basic life systems". They "place their faith for improvement of living conditions in the further reorganization of their cities into constellations of minicities, and in a continued dispersion into the countryside"[26]. This local distribution of power is accompanied by a network of services (health, schools) as well as the economy, and therefore by a demographic decline in large cities in favour of a rebalancing of regional development.

Green utopias are first conceived at a meso level, which itself takes shape in a revitalized local space. As the school of proximity points out, territorial anchoring "arises when territorial organization (geographical proximity) proves capable of generating organizational and institutional proximity effects based on interaction and cooperation between units in the same geographical proximity"[27]. By generating dynamic ecosystems, relocation schemes make it possible to anchor the futurity linked to the transition in the territories.

Cooperation, understood as the construction of a common work, is at the heart of the work of valorization and specification of local resources. Local potential is mobilized by the creativity of local populations to regenerate local solidarity and resist the effects of crises through the development, for example, of organizational or

[23] Michel Foucault, « Des espaces autres », *Empan*, 2004/2, n° 54, pp. 12-19.
[24] Luc Semal et Mathilde Szuba, « Villes en transition : imaginer les relocalisations en urgence », *Mouvements*, 2010/3, n° 63, pp. 130-136.
[25] Rob Hopkins, *op. cit.*, 2019.
[26] Ernest Callenbach, *op. cit*.
[27] Jean-Benoît Zimmermann, « Le territoire dans l'analyse économique : proximité géographique et institutionnelle », *Revue française de gestion*, Vol. 4, No. 184, 2008, pp. 105-118.

social innovations[28]. It plays a key role in territorial intermediation by initiating "a set of processes, formal and informal, institutionalised or not, regulating the relations between actors - mainly local - and their behaviour, in order to promote the territorial development project and the construction of project territories”[29]. It is the lever for a re-embedding of the economy in the territory, making up for the crisis of market coordination or public policies.

## The re-embedding of the economy

In the green utopias the SSE is the main vector of the re-embedding of the economy and technology in society. According to the Polanyian theory[30], there is a double movement: on the one hand, economic liberalism aims to establish a self-regulating market and, on the other hand, social protection involves state-sponsored regulations, such as legislation, and also forms of collective action. Among these latter, the counter-movement may be defensive to preserve existing rights, but also offensive, as in the case of green utopias, to seek new ways of decommodification[31].

## From cooperation to cooperatives

Green utopias are based on the imaginaries of the social and solidarity economy. Ecotopian children are educated to cooperate. They have workshops in which there is no boss, decisions are taken collectively and the profits are allocated partly equally between them and partly to the purchase of school materials. Neither private nor public, the schools themselves are the property of the teachers.

A vast movement to recover companies took place in Ecotopia following the secession that caused the exile of the owners. Most farms, factories and shops thus became the property of the workers. French examples dating from the late 1960s are mentioned, which can be assumed to refer in particular to Lip, whose factory was occupied in 1973 to contest its closure, under the slogan: “It's possible: we manufacture, we sell, we pay ourselves”.

It is thus "workers’ control" that prevails. Although the notion of a cooperative is rarely used, especially for consumer cooperatives, all the foundations of it can be found: “a man cannot just set up a business, offer wages to employees, fire them when he no longer needs them, and pocket whatever profits he can make”[32]. Companies are governed by the principles of “partnership” (collective ownership; one person, one vote) and profit-sharing. This reconfiguration of the relationship to capital led to

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[28] André Torre, « Théorie du développement territorial », *Géographie, économie, société*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2015, pp. 273-288.
[29] Fabien Nadou et Bernard Pecqueur, « Pour une socioéconomie de l’intermédiation territoriale : une approche conceptuelle », *Géographie, économie, société*, Vol. 22, 2020/3, pp. 245-263.
[30] Karl Polanyi, *The great transformation*, New York/Toronto, Rinehart, 1944.
[31] Geoff Goodwin, “Rethinking the Double Movement: Expanding the Frontiers of Polanyian Analysis in the Global South”, *Development and Change*, Vol. 49, Issue 5, pp. 1268-1290.
[32] Ernest Callenbach, *op. cit*.

the prohibition of external investment, with only loans from the national banking system being permitted. These companies are also limited to a maximum size of three hundred employees, according to the principle "*small is beautiful*".

The inspiration comes very directly from Ernst Friedrich Schumacher's book, in which the Scott Bader Commonwealth is highlighted. Founded in 1920, Scott Bader & Co. Ltd. specializes in the production of polyester resins. By his owner's admission, "[he] was up against the capitalist philosophy of dividing people into the managed on the one hand, and those that manage on the other"[33]. Considering the practice of profit-sharing to be insufficient, he created the Commonwealth in 1951, or common property, to which he transferred 90% of the property (the remaining 10% having been transferred in 1963).

He then associated it with a constitution aimed at imposing certain limits on the company. Limited to 350 employees, the company expects a wage gap of one to seven. It is made up of "partners", not employees, and its board of directors is appointed by the Commonwealth and accountable to it. While 60% of the profits are allocated to taxes and to self-financing, the remaining 40% is allocated to the Commonwealth, half of which is used for the payment of bonuses to workers and the other half is given to charity.

For the post-growth Timothée Parrique, "the SSE [...] it is the economy of the future that really exists"[34]. He is particularly interested in cooperatives and articulates them as a mission-driven company created by the 2019 Pacte Law and inspired by the American B Corps, which provides for the possibility for companies to adopt a mission, i.e., to include in their articles of association one or more social or environmental objectives that they pursue in the context of their activities. Timothée Parrique proposes not only to transform this possibility into a legal obligation, but also to "democratize the economy", thus to "transform all private companies into cooperatives", to ensure that the economy is placed at the service of the needs of territories and populations[35].

Such a conversion of companies could be inspired by the existing employee stock ownership plans (ESOP) in the United States[36]. This system, which benefits from tax incentives, allows companies to create a trust responsible for acquiring the company's ownership titles, based on a mechanism combining the deduction of a share of profits and debt. The trust is most often managed by an Esop committee, on which representatives of the managers and employees sit. A European adaptation is currently

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[33] Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, *op. cit*.

[34] Timothée Parrique, entretien réalisé par Camille Dorival and Timothée Duverger, "The SSE is the economy of the future that really exists", *Carenews*, 18 January 2024. Available from the address: https://www.carenews.com/carenews-info/news/l-ess-c-est-l-economie-du-futur-reellement-existante-entretien-avec-l-economiste

[35] Timothée Parrique, *Ralentir ou périr. L'économie de la décroissance*, Paris, Seuil, 2022.

[36] Nicolas Aubert, « L'actionnariat salarié aux États-Unis. Guide de l'épargne et de l'épargnant: Ce que l'épargnant doit savoir, 2020. https://hal.science/hal-02514614v2

being tested in the form of a cooperative in Slovenia[37] and under study within the General Confederation of Scops and Scics in France[38].

## The models

Co-operatives are also very present in Rob Hopkins' *From what is to what if*. They even form cooperative ecosystems, models that can be duplicated. He first mentions the Liège Food-Land Belt (CATL) launched in 2013 by the Liège en Transition collective to relocate the food system. Rob Hopkins puts the stakes of this initiative in these words: "What if, within one generation, the majority of the food grown in this city were to come from the land immediately surrounding it?"[39] The CATL was born from the meeting between food-buying groups and cooperatives favouring short circuits.

In Liège, it is more particularly the joint purchasing groups (GAC) that are developing to build short circuits between the city centre and the producers located on the outskirts. Poorly institutionalized, their sustainability is fragile, based on the commitment of their members. There is no contract between producers and consumers and there is no coordination body. They are therefore renewed quickly. Consumer cooperatives are also spreading to develop short circuits through stores, which can also host platforms for buying and selling products or even supply the GACs and sometimes take the form of cooperative supermarkets in which the cooperators commit themselves to carry out certain tasks on a voluntary basis. Cooperatives are more stable, involve regional stakeholders more broadly in their governance and seek to build alternative agri-food systems[40].

In this context, the CATL was created as a non-profit association to "promote the development of food and short and local supply chains, by raising awareness of these themes, supporting the actors who make them up and facilitating their development". In concrete terms, this leads it to carry out territorial diagnosis and foresight work, as well as awareness-raising actions for stakeholders, including the Nourrir Liège Festival, or to offer support for collective catering as well as local policies.

The synergies between the city and its food-supplying countryside aim to feed the population, create jobs and preserve agricultural land. It brings together a hundred market gardeners and promotes the structuring of a cooperative sector. There are now about thirty cooperatives, including distribution activities (stores,

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[37] Tej Gonza, "A new vision of a social enterprise: Standards and scaling social employee ownership in EU", Chaire TerrESS, 7 décembre 2022. Available from the address:
https://chaireterres.hypotheses.org/2827

[38] Timothée Duverger et Christophe Sente, « Vers une République du travail : proposition pour une Europe sociale », *Note*, Fondation Jean-Jaurès, 17 mai 2024. Available from the address:
https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/vers-une-republique-du-travail-proposition-pour-une-europe-sociale/?post_id=56497&export_pdf=1

[39] Rob Hopkins, *op. cit.*, 2019.

[40] Antonia Bousbaine, « Des initiatives pour manger local : le cas wallon », *Pour*, n° 239, 2021/1, p. 69-84.

sales platforms, etc.), production activities (market gardeners, farms, breweries, wine, etc.) and services (delivery platforms, access to land, etc.). The model initiated by Liège has since spread to Charleroi, Verviers, Tournai and Namur.

On how local communities are taking over the economy, Hopkins also cites the "Preston model". In the early 2010s, this city, hit by deindustrialization and austerity following the subprime crisis, decided to no longer depend on external investment for its development, following their failure as part of the urban renewal project called "Tithebarn"[41]. It has therefore implemented a "community wealth building" (CWB) strategy. Following an analysis of the public expenditure of its main so-called 'anchor' institutions, which include local government, the university, the police and the main social landlord, the city of Preston discovered that only 5% of expenditure remained in Preston and 39% in the Lancashire region. They amounted to 19% and 81% respectively after 5 years of implementation.

This raised the following question rephrased by Rob Hopkins: "*what if we had a much more democratic economy and we had forms of economic activity, production and ownership that were a lot more rooted in the lands of the public and the community*"[42] ? For this they found inspiration in the Mondragón cooperative complex and the Evergreen cooperatives of Cleveland, a network of cooperatives that have made it possible to respond to public contracts whilst also providing jobs for people who are very far away with decent wages and a share in profits and governance.

Based on a new approach to public procurement designed in partnership with a think tank, the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, and the University of Central Lancashire, which recommended the development of a cooperative ecosystem, the city of Preston has been successful in mobilizing local suppliers. Public spending in Preston has risen from £38 million in 2013 to £111 million in 2017 and from £111 million to £486 million in Lancashire over the same period. This has supported the development of cooperatives in the catering, technology and digital sectors, among other things. Unemployment fell from 6.5% in 2014 to 3.1% in 2017.

This CWB strategy is based on 5 axes: the alliance of local public institutions to redirect public spending locally, the stimulation of the capacity for initiative and the emergence of a plural and democratic local economy (local or social enterprises, cooperatives, etc.), local redirection of investment from local banks and pension funds, decent employment and wage conditions for workers, use of land and property for the benefit of local residents and groups. Recent developments integrate the green economy and the fight against climate change[43].

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[41] Julian Manley and Philippe B. Whyman (Edited by), *The Preston Model and Community Wealth Building. Creating a Socio-Economic Democracy for the Future*, London, Routledge, 2021.

[42] Rob Hopkins, *op. cit.*, 2019.

[43] "Preston Supports Climate Change and Community Wealth Building Through New Funding", 25 mai 2023. Available from the address: https://www.preston.gov.uk/article/7177/Preston-Supports-Climate-Change-and-Community-Wealth-Building-Through-New-Funding

## Conclusion

The SSE has a major role to play in the imaginaries of transition, in which it occupies mediating functions. It provides green utopias with their coordinates, by crossing both a particular futurity, the “nostalgia for an exciting future”, in the words of Rob Hopkins, and a strong territorial anchoring directly inspired by the principle “*small is beautiful*”. The SSE thus appears as a local utopia in action, bearer of another future that narratives have the function of staging.

In this context, cooperation processes may be analyzed as a mode of coordination that differs from the market economy and the administered economy. Although they do concern all areas, they are particularly evident in the economy through cooperatives and more broadly cooperative ecosystems. In green utopias, companies are thus the property of workers, not of capital, whether from creation or takeover. Models are cited, such as the CATL of Liège or the City of Preston, which are spreading to other territories.

However, as significant as the place of the SSE may be, it is often not identified as such, nor as a movement structured around a common reference. The initiatives relating to it cover only a part of it, cooperatives, and more particularly the Scops, and are part of the transition framework in which they are reduced to a strictly functional role. This leads to their becoming invisible while participatory democracy prevails.

The SSE can thus be considered as a post-growth economy. On the one hand, it offers a counter-model to the conventional company. Its non-profit purpose orients it as an economy of needs rather than an economy of profits. On the other hand, it is a counter-model of development to extractivist growth by revealing and mobilizing local resources in an endogenous logic[44].

It emerges that the SSE needs to reappropriate green utopias in order to establish its own imaginaries. While intercooperation, in other words cooperation between SSE organizations, is too often an incantation, it could thus be placed in the service of a cause greater than itself.

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[44] Timothée Duverger, « L’économie sociale et solidaire, un mode d’entreprendre pour la post-croissance ? », *Mondes en décroissance*, n°3, 2024. Available from the address: https://polen.uca.fr/revue-opcd/index.php?id=455

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# Part III.

# Imagining Solidarity through Cultural Works

## Chapter 6

# Exploring Solidarity in Cyberpunk Cinema: Redistribution and Recognition Paradigms in Blade Runner

Elif Tuğba ŞIMŞEK*

**Abstract**

This paper explores how the concepts of solidarity, framed through the paradigms of redistribution and recognition, manifest within cyberpunk cinema, focusing on *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). Drawing on the works of Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler, the chapter examines the complex dynamics of solidarity in futuristic scenarios. This analysis highlights how cyberpunk narratives reflect the interdependence of socioeconomic and cultural injustices in shaping solidarity.

**Keywords:** Cyberpunk, Blade Runner, Solidarity, Redistribution, Recognition

**JEL-Codes:** P1, Z1, Z13, Z19

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## 1. Introduction

Loosely based on Philip K. Dick's 1968 sci-fi novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, Blade Runner* (1982) and the second movie *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) have been the focus of numerous academic inquiries into the existential question of "what does it mean to be human" (e.g., Atterton, 2015; Barad, 2007; Norris, 2013; Senior, 1996; Shanahan, 2023). Yet, like most cyberpunk fiction, *Blade Runner* leaves us wondering what truly defines humanity without providing clear-cut answers (Senior, 1996). The Voight-Kampff test, on the other hand, is crucial to the plot of *Blade Runner* (1982) as it is used to distinguish humans from replicants - artificial beings in the form of a human- based on their level of empathy (Gaut, 2015). The test measures the replicants' body reactions, including respiration, heart rate, blushing, and pupillary dilation, in response to the emotionally stimulating questions (Sammon, 1996), making a person's level of empathy a crucial trait that defines humanity.

Starting from this, the concept of solidarity, which can be seen as "an active form of empathy," becomes important for understanding the complex dynamics of human connection in both movies. Solidarity, however, involves complex dynamics beyond the mobilized feeling of empathy, such as shared social practices, concerns, interests, or values (see Fraser, 1986; Honneth, 1995). This paper examines how solidarity mobilized in cyberpunk content and narratives through the lenses of redistributive and recognition paradigms. The paradigms of redistribution and recognition were pivotal in the debates on understanding the catalysts of social movements, most notably discussed by Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler in the 1990s. Fraser (1995) argued that true solidarity requires addressing both economic inequality and cultural injustices, advocating a dual focus on redistribution and recognition to build a more just society. Butler (1998), on the other hand, critiqued the rigid categorization of new social movements as socioeconomic and cultural, suggesting a more fluid and inclusive understanding of justice claims. Fraser (2022) extensively discussed the interconnectedness of economic, ecological, social, and political crises in her later work, and for some scholars (e.g., Johansson Wilén, 2023), the interdependence of redistributive and recognition justice claims was more explicit in these studies. This intersectional approach is reflected in today's social solidarity economy movements, which extend the field of the economy with socio-political, cultural, and ecological aspects (see RIPESS, n.d.).

Cyberpunk cinema, in this respect, reflects an intricate, dynamic, and interdependent model of the relationship between redistribution and recognition paradigms. It offers valuable insights into the perceived new solidaristic aspects of human and post-human existence, closely related to our current reality (see Burrows, 2005; Csicsery-Ronay, 1991; Florea, 2020; Kellner, 1995). This paper thus aims to explore how redistributive and recognition paradigms of solidarity manifest and interact within cyberpunk cinema and what sociological insights can be gleaned from an analysis of these cinematic content and narratives, focusing on *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). The following section briefly explains the cyberpunk genre's dystopic and

utopic dynamics. It will then establish the concepts of redistribution and recognition in the context of solidarity before analyzing the movies *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) in the light of these concepts.

## 2. Cyberpunk- fluid genres

Dystopian accounts of places worse than our own emerged as the dark side of utopia in the 20th century. However, it was in the mid-1980s that the new creative movement of cyberpunk emerged, manifested in films like Ridley Scott's iconic *Blade Runner* and literary works such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003. pp. 1-2). Mike Pondsmith, the creator of *Cyberpunk*, a pen-and-paper role-playing game released in 1988, defines the cyberpunk genre as the struggle of ordinary people oppressed by powerful political and social forces who use a combination of found, scavenged, and repurposed technology to fight back and achieve personal freedom (Pondsmith in Spencer, 2018).

While the struggle for personal freedom is prevalent among humans and artificial beings, social movements advocating broader societal principles remain largely unseen. As McKay (2002) says, cyberpunk's "punk" remains almost always passive in the stories. On the other hand, as the neoliberal conservative undertones of the 1980s began to assert their influence on social structures and everyday life with economic restructuring and right-wing politics, the cyberpunk genre offered a counterpoint - “a usefully negative if nihilistic imaginary” (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003, p. 2). The cyberpunk movement has become an art form reflecting the dystopian realities beneath the surface.

Moreover, the second wave of cyberpunk, predominantly authored by women such as Pat Cadigan, went beyond nihilistic anxiety and gave birth to a novel oppositional awareness. The creators of the second wave (including Octavia E. Butler, Cadigan, Charnas, Robinson, Piercy, and Le Guin) strategically embraced dystopian strategies, and their works became a critical narrative form, a means of grappling with the grim economic, political, and cultural climate of the era (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003, p. 3).

Thus, the delineation between cyberpunk's first and second waves seems less like a rigid boundary and more like a fluid continuum. Kellner et al. (1984, 2005) distinguishes movies such as Blade Runner, Outland, and Alien from conservative dystopias - or classical dystopia (the first wave) - which present the couple, the family, and other contemporary institutions and ideologies as more natural and desirable than their corrupted future counterparts. Radical dystopian movies, on the other hand, highlight the dangers of pollution, nuclear war, and economic exploitation, and some contain allegorical critiques of advanced capitalism. Even for some, there is a sense of fluidity between the utopian and dystopian genres. As noted by Gibson, a prominent author in the cyberpunk genre, "I don't think I'm dystopian at all, no more than I'm utopian. The dichotomy is hopelessly old-fashioned, really. What we have today is a combination of the two" (Gibson *in* Seed, 2003, p. 70).

Based on this background, this paper contends that cyberpunk holds sociological significance as a radical dystopian genre most closely aligned with contemporary reality. It argues that these future scenarios can be valuable for interpreting today and offering a coherent future vision from a sociological perspective (Burrows, 2005).

## 3. Redistributive and recognition paradigms of solidarity

In the 1990s, an inspiring discussion emerged among feminists and left-wing thinkers concerning the intersections of justice in contemporary politics. This debate examined the relationship between 'redistribution' and 'recognition' as a potential means to achieve social justice. Some argued that injustice arose from unequal resource distribution, necessitating redistribution, while others contended that injustice resulted from a lack of recognition of different identity groups (gender, sexuality, race, etc.), necessitating recognition (Griffin, 2006). Axel Honneth (1995, p. 161), for instance, expressed concern about the possibility of obscuration of significant moral feelings with the fixation on interests (the objective inequalities in material opportunities) in the emergence of social movements. Honneth gives special attention to recognition as a moral category as a driving force behind today's social movements.

Fraser (1995), on the other hand, in her early period article, *From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice* in *A 'Post-Socialist' Age* discusses how the "struggle for recognition" has become the primary form of political conflict in the late twentieth century. Fraser gives equal importance to redistribution and recognition to build a just society (Fraser, 1998), emphasizing that political economy and culture are always intertwined in real life (Fraser, 1995). On the other hand, regarding cultural injustices, according to Fraser (1995), while both gender and "race" are seen as bivalent collectivities implicating both redistribution and recognition, sexuality is rooted in culture. From this perspective, injustice regarding sexuality is essentially a matter of recognition as homosexual individuals are distributed throughout the entire class structure of capitalist society, not having a distinct position in the division of labour. To overcome homophobia and heterosexism, the cultural valuations that privilege heterosexuality need to be changed (Fraser, 1995).

This approach initiated one of the most influential discussions about the relationship between redistribution and recognition paradigms between Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser. Butler (1998) challenges the idea that sexuality is rooted wholly in culture and that struggles are only for recognition. Butler inquires about the potential oversight of the manifestations of homophobia within the framework of the political economy and, consequently, the marginalization of non-normative sexualities by cultural standards, resulting in their portrayal as inferior. Indeed, for Butler, the suppression of non-normative sexualities is crucial for maintaining normativity and reinforcing the idea of the traditional family as natural (O'Neill-Butler, 2015).

Fraser's recent work has no explicit shift from her previous position. However, according to Johansson Wilén (2023), the interdependence of the claims of recognition and redistributive justice is further emphasized in Fraser's later writings, highlighting the socioeconomic constraints on both redistributive justice and recognition. In *Cannibal Capitalism: How our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do About It* (2022), Fraser argues that capitalism is not just an economic system but an institutionalized social order with impacts across society. Capitalism creates institutionalized divisions between the economic front and non-economic backstories, concealing dependencies. She seeks to promote an expanded conception of capitalism that encompasses not just the economy, but also various social areas (Milstein, 2024).

## 4. Methodology

According to Mikos (2014), film analysis is becoming increasingly important in societies heavily influenced by media. Indeed, films, as a form of communication, are closely connected to the way society communicates and interacts. They are integral to social and discursive practices and reflect social conditions and individual structures of society.

For analytic film analysis, one must begin with developing a general cognitive purpose (Mikos, 2014), which is, for this study, a content and narration analysis of *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049*. This analysis will involve a contextual analysis of the films to consider societal events, cultural movements, and political climates that shape movies' themes, narratives, and reception (see Barsam & Monaham, 2013). Analyzing films this way may also require theories from various disciplines, making them both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. There is, therefore, no single path for analysis, as it draws from different methods and theoretical assumptions based on the aim of the analysis. Based on this, this paper establishes the movies' relationships to their broader historical and theoretical contexts through redistributive and recognition paradigms of solidarity.

In conducting content and narration analysis, I watched the selected movies, *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049*, three times, taking into account the academic debates surrounding redistribution and recognition paradigms. Additionally, I reviewed the relevant academic articles on the selected movies to further inform my analysis. The subsequent sections will contain theoretical and historical reflections, interpretations, and contextualization of the analyzed data.

## 5. Cyberpunk- “high tech, low life”[1]

*Blade Runner* (1982) was released during significant social and political upheaval in the United States and globally. The film was made against the backdrop of the early 1980s, a time marked by rapid technological advance, economic uncertainty and heightened cultural anxieties. Indeed, the 1980s saw the rise of neoliberal economic policies characterized by deregulation, tax cuts, and a focus on free-market principles. These developments manifested as corporate power consolidation and neoliberal financial reforms result in stagnation, volatility, and increased inequality rather than stability and reduced income gaps (Harvey, 2010). Blade Runner reflects these socio-economic realities - in both movies - by depicting a dystopian futuristic scenario where powerful corporations dominate society, exploiting human and artificial labour for profit. The stark contrast between the skyscrapers of the wealthy elite and over-crowded streets inhabited by the marginalized underscores the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. According to Kellner et al. (1984), an analysis of dystopian works, such as *Blade Runner*, sheds light on the concerns of people in the United States about mass commercialization and government control and the potential loss of personal identity and freedom.

Indeed, the 1980s also saw the rise of identity politics, which have been in political discussions since the 1970s (Wiarda, 2016). Movements advocating the rights and recognition of marginalized groups, including women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ individuals, gained momentum during this period. According to Adilifu Nama (2008), the replicants in Blade Runner could be interpreted as symbolically representing escaped enslaved people who shared the same socioeconomic status as enslaved Africans during the era of legalized slavery in America. Replicants were designed to have shorter lifespans than humans and were primarily created as slave labour for off-world colonies. Injustices rooted in gender and sexuality are also apparent within this societal framework. This is evident in the creation of female replicants, such as Pris Stratton, one of the rebel replicants in the film, who are designed as "pleasure models" (Brown, 2011) for off-world military personnel. Thus, sexuality has been commodified to serve the company's economic and political objectives. The second movie would further explore sexuality with the involvement of companies and the state in the reproduction process of replicants.

The themes of redistribution and recognition are intertwined throughout the narrative of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049*, even though, on initial viewing, the replicants' struggle appears to align more closely with the theme of recognition. Looking closer at Blade Runner (1982), replicants are more robust and faster than any living human but have a shorter lifespan. Each replicant has only a four-year lifespan, which prevents them from becoming equal to humans and developing their sense of identity over time. Still, they possess emotions, memories,

[1] “High tech-low life” was used in the preface to William Gibson’s Burning Chrome to describe the cyberpunk world’s high-tech but oppressive and unequal conditions.

and aspirations like humans (Barad, 2007). The reason the Tyrell Corp, the creator of replicants, gave replicants the capacity to think for themselves was to make them as human-like as possible to enhance productivity on off-world colonies. However, this desire also gave the replicants, to some extent, free will. Indeed, some replicants chose to rebel against their creators, which is the central plot of the 1982 film. *Blade Runner* (1982), thus, follows Rick Deckard, a "Blade Runner" whose job is to track down and eliminate rebellious replicants. The rebel replicants' plan is to confront their creator, demand an explanation, and request an extended lifespan. One of the rebel replicants, Roy Batty, finally finds his maker, Dr. Tyrell. However, soon after, Roy realizes that life extension is not possible for replicants and kills his maker.

In the film, Roy's yearning for more life can be interpreted as a call for the equitable distribution of a fundamental resource: time. As a replicant, Roy is engineered with a predetermined, finite lifespan, a glaring injustice when contrasted with humans who naturally have the potential for a longer life. However, his struggle, in my view, is not just for more years of life but for the opportunity to fully embrace life, a privilege that has been withheld from him and other replicants. Thus, Roy's begging for more life can also be seen as a demand for recognition of his humanity and individuality. Indeed, replicants like Roy are denied recognition as beings with their desires, emotions, and identities. They are treated as mere tools or enslaved people, defined by their function rather than their intrinsic value as living beings. Roy's wish for more life is thus a plea for recognition that he, and by extension all replicants, are not just expendable creations but beings deserving of the same recognition as humans. This may include the right to life, freedom from fear, and self-determination.

Some of the film's narratives reflect the intricacies of the claims for redistribution and recognition. When, for instance, Roy is confronted with his maker, Dr. Tyrell, Tyrell asks, "Would you like to be modified?". Roy answers, "I had in mind something a little more radical... I want more life...". This may not simply indicate a desire for a longer life (fairer distribution) but rather a request for "more life," including recognition and rights. Also, near the end, during the intense confrontation between Roy and Rick Deckard, Roy knows that his predetermined lifespan is almost over. In the rooftop chase in heavy rain, Deckard fails to leap, leaving him clinging to the edge of a building, his fingers the only thing preventing him from falling to his death. Roy lectures, "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave." Deckard's hand slips; Roy reaches out, grabs him, and pulls him up to safety just in time. Here, too, Roy is fully aware of the conditions of slavery and wants recognition of his existence for others. Indeed, replicants undertake tasks that are too dangerous for humans, such as heavy labour and combat, and face death for defiance in off-world settlements without any legal rights, which makes them literally slaves. Moreover, Roy, as a replicant, has been living with the knowledge of his imminent death and the constant fear of being hunted, which he equates to a form of slavery.

On the other hand, ironically, the ones who are replicants carry out a very human rebellion, and most of the human characters seem to resign themselves to corporate

domination and a very dehumanized life (Kellner et al., 1984). This perfectly matches the Tyrell Corporation's motto for replicants: "More Human Than Human." Replicants, in this sense, display a more human characteristic with the solidarity they establish among themselves and the struggle they wage. Indeed, the replicants contrast with unempathetic human characters, showing passion and concern for each other, while the mass of humanity on the streets remains cold and impersonal.

## 6. Redistribution and recognition paradigms after thirty years

Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* expands on the thematic complexities of its predecessor, further exploring the interplay between redistribution and recognition in a dystopian future. Set thirty years after the events of the original film, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) still grapples with many of the same socio-political themes, albeit in a more contemporary setting. In 2017, when the second movie was released, rapid technological advances, including artificial intelligence, robotics and automation, were evident. The impact of the 2008 financial crisis was still felt, with many people experiencing stagnating wages, precarious employment, and reduced social mobility. Additionally, concerns about climate change and environmental degradation were at the forefront of global discourse in 2017. *Blade Runner 2049*, thus, introduces audiences to a world grappling with the consequences of technological advance, environmental degradation and societal decay (Flisfeder, 2019).

Looking at the story briefly, in the year 2049, thirty years following the events of *Blade Runner* (1982), replicants are still treated as enslaved people. “K,” who is a Nexus-9 replicant model, works for the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) as a “blade runner.” This time, “blade runners” are replicants who hunt and “retire” other rogue replicants. After K retires replicant Sapper Morton, he discovers a box buried under a tree at Morton's farm. The box contains the remains of a female replicant (Racheal, who Deckard fell in love with in the first movie) who died during a cesarean section. This discovery exposes that replicants can reproduce biologically, which was previously thought to be impossible. Thus, Joshi, K's superior, is afraid that this knowledge could cause a war between humans and replicants and orders K to retire the replicant child.

As in the original, in the sequel, the police guard the barrier between humans and replicants, which exists to maintain replicants as a source of labour and sustain the system's productivity. On the other hand, Wallace Corporation, which exerts near-total control over society, hopes self-reproducing replicants will boost its business: more slave labour. Controlling the “reproduction” of replicants, in *Blade Runner 2049*, the industrialist Niander Wallace broods on how to create replicant workers on a scale sufficient for his imperial plans: “Every leap of civilization was built off the back of a disposable workforce … But I can only make so many … We need more replicants than can ever be assembled. Millions, so we can be trillions more” (Chen, 2020, p. 15).

In this futuristic scenario, the traditional workforce still stands at the centre of the economic and political system, signalling the validity of the traditional "family system" and "normative sexuality" with self-reproducing replicants. Furthermore, in *Blade Runner 2049*, the relationship between Joi, K's holographic companion, and K may be seen as a powerful illustration of how corporate power not only creates labour power with the production of replicants but also manipulates consumer behaviour within a capitalist system. K, a replicant and a blade runner, represents both the labour force that serves the interests of the powerful corporations and the consumer who fulfills his needs and desires through products created by the same system (Joi is also a "product" of Wallace corporation). This dual role highlights the influence of corporate power in shaping both labour force and consumption. The character of Joi's relationship with K also highlights the complexities of identity, gender, and sexuality in a society where the boundaries between reality and illusion are blurred. Joi is sophisticated; however, she is portrayed as a stereotypically domesticated housewife serving her "man" and, thus, her character raises questions about gender dynamics and politics within the replicant identity (Flisfeder, 2017, para. 22).

On the other hand, in the second film, we witness not only the exploitation of replicants but also of humans more closely. The exploitation includes a semi-illegal entrepreneur who uses hundreds of human orphans for child labour in scavenging old digital machinery. When this is the case, Žižek (2017) rightly asks, "Where do human "lower classes" stand?" (para. 7). As in the previous movie, this film also depicts humans who have resigned to their circumstances or silence about the antagonisms among humans and non-humans.

Going back to K's story, as he delves further into his investigation of the replicant-human child, he uncovers a revelation that challenges the very foundation of his perception of identity and humanity. This struggle is depicted in his belief that he might be the child of a human and a replicant (Deckard and Racheal), a belief that gives him hope that he might be something more than what he was created to be. K's journey in *Blade Runner 2049* is deeply tied to his search for recognition - not just as a replicant, but as a being with his own identity and humanity. Throughout the film, K grapples with questions of who he is and whether his life has meaning beyond his programmed function. However, when he discovers that he is not the child, but just another replicant, his sense of self is ruined. Yet this realization also pushes him toward an understanding of his own value and agency, independent of the labels and roles imposed on him by society. Indeed, his eventual decision to help Deckard reunite with his daughter, even knowing it may cost him his life, signifies his self-recognition as more than just a tool; he sees himself as someone capable of making meaningful choices, deserving of recognition as an equal.

On the other hand, Žižek (2021) argues that the story's form - characterized by a slow pace and aestheticized imagery - diminishes its potential to convey a progressive, anti-capitalist message. Instead of enhancing the story's critical content,

the form obscures it, leading to a presentation that avoids taking a clear stance and comes across as passive or neutral. This undermines the story's potential to challenge capitalist ideas effectively. Moreover, the rebellion led by Freysa, a prominent figure among the replicants seeking to resist their creators and oppressors, is depicted as somewhat negative. Freysa might belong to the older models, like a Nexus-8 or a model with a degree of autonomy. Despite her aspirations for a new order where replicants are no longer subjugated by human masters, she desires K to eliminate Deckard before Wallace can interrogate him and capture Rachael's child. Ultimately, K chooses not to align with either the replicant underground movement or the authorities, opting to remain impartial.

## Conclusion

This paper does not aim to determine which paradigm, redistribution or recognition, predominates in *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). Rather, it aims to explore how these two paradigms are portrayed and woven into the narratives and content of the two movies, taking into account their broader implications for societal reflection. In both films, the injustices related to recognition and distribution are deeply intertwined within their narratives, demonstrating that meaningful societal change necessitates a combination of both struggles. The struggle for redistribution or recognition remains passive unless it becomes collective and includes injustices that emerge from both paradigms. Indeed, even if Roy, the rebel replicant from the first movie, had his wish and all replicants lived longer, would it solve all the problems? Here, the motto should not just be about a “longer life” but also “more life”. Otherwise, the best-case scenario would be for androids to obtain some civil rights and achieve equality with humans to be "equally exploited." In the end, even though the potential of *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049* to present a progressive, revolutionary, or alternative socioeconomic system is controversial, the reading of such films can aid the development of political strategies for social change (Kellner et al., 1984, 2005), and the solidarity-based socioeconomic movements.

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# Chapter 7

# The Blues Tradition: Building Dialogical Relation within Utopian Imaginaries*

Laigha YOUNG**

**Abstract**

The Blues, as a countercultural art form, has engendered dialogical consciousness – both in terms of production practices and the creation of broader relational ontologies. This conceptual investigation explores the Blues genre as an "axiology-in-practice" within African American alter-collectivities. Using imaginary reconstitution as a utopian method of analysis, and assemblage theory as a medium of musical understanding, the following piece investigates everyday utopias within Blues production. These everyday utopias have reverberating materializations within Black socioeconomic spaces. With the integral nature of dialogical art forms in crafting cooperative consciousness and collective survivance, the epistemology of the Blues genre becomes the foundation to an embodied ethical economic practice.

**Keywords:** axiology, alter-collectivities, utopian method, assemblage theory, blues music, co-operative economics

**JEL-Codes:** P13, J54, A13

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## 1. Introduction: Utopia and Assemblages of the Blues

The Blues, as a polyphonic and dialogical musical genre, represents a countercultural art form within the African American musical tradition. Acting as a primordial source for genres like jazz, rock & roll, and hip-hop, the Blues has always functioned as a generative medium. While the Blues is often flattened to a metaphor of melancholy, this narrow understanding ignores alternative interpretations that are deeply rooted in material culture and production (Levitas, 2013: 34, 38–39; Neal, 1972). The emotional archetype from which the Blues springs is deeply embedded in slavery and work spirituals (Neal, 1972: 42; Wald, 2010: 12–15). Indigo was a major plantation staple until the late 1700s in both the Southern United States and Latin America. It was a labour intensive, but highly valuable, commodity that didn't shift production locales until the British Empire had increased control over South Asian supply chains. Lyrical lamentations became common, both in the Indigo production zones of the Southern United States and in the production zones of Tamil and Indonesia subsequently (Balfour-Paul, 2006: 181).

Material analysis moves the study of the Blues from existential to cooperative. Within the plantation environment, the Blues could function as an essential vector for critical resistance and collective identity (Neal, 1972: 42; Wood, 2017: 36). The existential nature of sadness and material vulnerability is cut through by a utopian incursion of solidarity and transformation (Levitas, 2013: 39, 186). The Blues becomes a counter-hegemonic force with a distinct 'Black artistic frequency' (Campt, 2018), that carries through to subsequent genres, particularly jazz (Wald, 2010). This distinct frequency is inherently a bricolage of African diasporic traditions, European traditions, along with Indigenous and Latin influences (Jones, 2015: 9; Davis, 1998: 136). A unique amalgam of Blackness lives within the system of Blues temperament, functioning less as a set of physical techniques and more a worldview and emotional stance (Jones, 2015: 8–9, 18). The temperament of the Blues goes far beyond sorrow to embody an eclectic Black reference/experience of inquisitive rebelliousness. The genre embodies collective defiance as an attitude toward life (Neal, 1972; Davis, 1998).

Bringing this attitude of communal defiance into the realm of economic and cultural analysis, the historian and geographer Clyde Woods (2017) performs a 'critical reconstruction' (Gilliland & McKemmish, 2018) of Blues epistemology – analyzing the development practices of Southern plantation elite through the lens of the Blues genre. Woods views historical archival research as "the examination and creation of proposals, not proofs" (Gilmore, 2017: xiv): creating a space for the presence of perpetual counterhegemonic alternatives (Gilmore, 2017: xv; Simpson, 2017: 31, 37, 128). Woods' critical reconstruction can also be performed for the 'alter-collectivities' (Murphy, 2018: 123) and utopian imaginaries that weave their way through the Blues tradition. Turning the focus of analysis from the epistemological realm of understanding to the realm of 'embodied ethical practice' (Simpson, 2017) moves practice and process to the center stage.

Sociologist Ruth Levitas (2013) considers the utopian method of imaginary reconstitution to be key to critical reconstructions of practice and process. Critical reconstruction of utopian imaginaries is particularly important in the face of a global rise in fascism and authoritarianism (Ressa, 2022), as well as the traumatic effects of climate change (Max-Neef, 2014). The present moment requires imaginations that restructure cultural desires and point towards alternative ways of melding desire and material production (Simpson, 2017; Guattari, 2008). Levitas defines utopia as "the expression of a distributed desire for a better way of being or living" (2013: xii, 187), bonding the concept to ideas of human flourishing (2013: 13–15, 187). Utopia can function as a process for change, criticism, and compensation (Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 109). As a transcendent element of cultural surplus (Levitas, 2013: xvii, 5), utopia acts as an educative and regulative process where collective circumstances and actions can be evaluated.

Philosopher Felix Guattari (2008) underscores that 'expressions of distributed desire' can be easily coopted. Collective desire can be joined for collective human flourishing, or for far narrower ideas of flourishing – tailored to fascist ends. For Guattari, totalitarian systems of fascism or authoritarianism rely on collective desire just as much as inclusive utopian imaginations (163–164). Totalitarian and colonialist regimes frequently use art for propaganda and exertion of dominance (Benjamin, 1969: 11–12), for example music was a significant part of the Hitler Youth's ideological promotion (Kertz-Welzel: 2022: 34–35). Totalitarian systems collectively capture desires through the transformation of (re)productive forces and the relationships involved in processes of (re)production (Murphy, 2018). The seizure is a networked phenomenon. While the resulting collectivities can have impactful and horribly violent materializations, it is important to note that these constellations are knotted together around rigid structures. Only the bare minimum desire necessary for social unity is ever utilized in fascist constructions (Pajaczkowska, 2007: 149; Benjamin, 1969: 19–20). This is the fatal flaw of totalitarian systems. Desires are only loosely tied and shallowly embedded within material production – leaving opportunities for counterhegemonic alter-collectivities to exert forces and desires of their own.

To better understand the dynamic social chemistries of desire, and their links to material production, Guattari and his collaborator Gilles Deleuze designed the concept of assemblage theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, 1994). The concept of an 'assemblage' is meant to capture a group of heterogenous components, along with their interactions and relationships (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 327–337). These heterogenous components can be types of beings or energy, material objects, symbolic artifacts, or elements of the surrounding environment. The importance of 'interaction' and 'day-to-day practices' differentiates an assemblage from an 'aggregate' (DeLanda, 2016: 20). The components and their interactions/relationships form an irreducible dynamic whole. However, this 'dynamic whole' is not viewed as a totalization of its components/singularities.

Assemblages both influence and are influenced by their components. To emphasize this fact, the 'whole' is on the same ontological plane as its 'parts' (DeLanda, 2019: 11–12, 20; 2016: 12). This ontological equivalence opens space for components to have relations exterior to the dynamics within an assemblage – 'relations of exteriority' (Allewaert, 2013: 119; DeLanda, 2016: 10). The desires that these external relations channel, support, and create can generate new assemblages (Allewaert, 2013; Tuck, 2009). Assemblages can always recompose. New forms of synergy, 'emergence', can arise from new patterns of interaction and establish the conditions for new exercises of desire. For anyone willing to partake in the necessary weaving, alternative processes for melding desire and material production constantly exist (Guattari, 2008: 171; Murphy, 2018: 118–119, 123). These re-weavings do not need to be crafted from scratch. Many traditions of alter-collectivities, like the Blues tradition, already exist and can be operationalized (Woods, 2017: 34, 140; Simpson, 2017: 122–123, 142–143).

### 1.1. Chapter Outline

Drawing upon 'Blues epistemology' (Woods, 2017), this study operationalizes the Blues tradition and the alter-collectivities of 'Black artistic frequency' (Campt, 2018) to build a critical reconstruction of a distinct embodied ethical practice. Ruth Levitas' utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution and Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory are combined into a utopian assemblage matrix. The two are woven together to construct a methodology that allows for analysing key elements of Blues production as a utopian ethic that can generate emergence. The Blues is fundamentally a relational ethic. For alter-collectivities with relational ethics, the "axiology-in-practice" - the contextualized valuation of "good relations", functions as an orienting and (re)productive technology (Liboiron, 2021: 7, 122–124). Reconstructing the ethical and embodied practice of Blues helps shed light on how an "axiology in practice" is formed and maintained. The restoration highlights how this embodied ethic can materially manifest within Black solidarity economics, and co-operative economics more broadly.

**Section Two** (The Hapticity of the Blues) outlines how reciprocal recognition is central to the Blues, as well as its polyrhythmic and polyphonic nature. The core elements of the genre are also outlined, focusing on ***lyrics***, ***improvisation***, ***soundscapes***, and ***self-expression/performance***. **Section Three** (Utopia as Method and Incursion) introduces the utopian imaginary as it relates to music in general and the Blues in particular, exploring foundational ideas of imagination and desire. Utopia is outlined as both a form of incursion and as a method of reconstruction. The three modes of Levitas' (2013: 73) utopian method are outlined: the 'archeological mode' for critical excavation and bricolage of assemblages; the 'ontological mode' for analysis of social interactions and processes of being; and the 'architectural mode' for constructions of utopian material manifestations.

**Section Four** (Building Polyrhythmic Assemblages of Desire) melds Levitas' modes of imaginary reconstitution (2013: 73) with the four modes of emergence within assemblage theory: expression, content, deterritorialization, and [re]territorialization

(Assis, 2021). The processes of 'coding' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 313–314; DeLanda, 2016: 22), 'differentiation' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 322; DeLanda, 2019: 15–16), and 'articulation' (DeLanda, 2016: 19–23, 103–109) are of central focus. Throughout this section, the amalgamation is used to analyze Blues polyphony and the core elements of the genre, particularly forms of improvisation. Within the **Discussion** section (Material Manifestations in the Solidarity Economy), the reverberations of the Blues through economic production are investigated. The cooperative development approaches of activist Fannie Lou Hamer are explored as foundations for modern co-operative enterprise networks, like Cooperation Jackson. The broader implications for co-operative networks are also examined. The chapter concludes with a final examination of the Blues as an embodied ethical practice, constructed for transformation – contextualizing the Blues tradition within larger 'desires of alterity' (Tuck, 2009; Rice, 2020). In this context, the Blues is seen as an artistic protest that cultivates resistance and crafts radical resurgence in the face of fascist and authoritarian gravitational structures (Simpson, 2017; Jones, 2015).

## 2. The Hapticity of the Blues

In August Wilson's 1985 (82) play Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, the Blues Queen declares: "[Blues is] life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life." The assertion points to how the Blues has formed a musical and linguistic foundation for a myriad of other technical styles, from jazz to heavy metal and country, but also how it has functioned as a root structure for other art forms, from poetry to theatre and film (Wald, 2010: 76, 95, 122–123; Barlow, 1989: 337; Jones, 2015: 3). The affirmation makes another assertion: the Blues can function not only as a foundational methodology for art, but also as a process for broader understanding. In the previous lines of Wilson's script (1985: 82), Ma Rainey points out that "white people hear [the Blues] come out, but they don't know how it got there", framing the tradition as a unique and complex form of intelligence. Recognizing a classic 12-bar Blues chord, or a pattern of call-and-response, is the 'hearing', something anyone can readily grasp. The 'how it got there' is the embodied practice, a deeper and different endeavour entirely.

Any unique form of intelligence comes with its own epistemology and ontology, culture, and methodology. But most critically, any intelligence needs its own generative processes for emergence and resurgence – an embodied ethical practice for (re)production (Baraka, 1999: xii; Simpson, 2017: 151, 161). These generative processes require recognition to function, a "taking notice as sound" (Simpson, 2017: 181), or 'registration of frequency' (Campt, 2018). Reflection/self-recognition and reciprocal recognition are both modes of affirmative connection that can function as essential practices for building relationality (Simpson, 2017: 182, 185; Davis, 2008: 54). Critical recognitive practices of relationality are distinct from secular or humanist critiques of capitalism (LaDuke & Cowen, 2020: 253; Jones, 1963: 4–7; Liboiron, 2021). Black feminist theorist and visual culture analyst, Tina Campt (2018),

argues that ‘Black artistic frequency’, both visual and musical, fundamentally critiques infrastructures of aggregation and extraction through both modes of recognition. In the case of reciprocal recognition, hapticity – emotional labor across difference and/or precarity (Campt, 2018), is required. This emotional labor works simultaneously with semiotic, social, and material flows. Hapticity creates restorative intimacy, not empathy, but a continual algorithmic network of creativity. Building these “collective arrangements of enunciation” (Guattari, 2008: 160) are critical to constructing the articulation necessary for emergence to develop (DeLanda, 2016: 103–109).

### 2.1. Haptic Polyphony

The complex relational processes of the Blues help build a creative web of enunciation (Murphy, 2018; LaDuke & Cowen, 2020: 247): from the individual technical constructions of performers to the wider alter-collectives that provide the “how it got there” aspects of Ma Rainey’s statement. This web of enunciation was often a direct effect of the nomadic practices of artists, who travelled frequently, sometimes internationally, gaining new techniques from local music scenes (Wald, 2010: 76). Artist collaborations across geographies were common and the mentoring of fledgling musicians always involved a mutual process of learning (Woods, 2017: 170–171; Jones, 2015). This haptic socialization creates a conscious sense of collective emotional experience and a distinctive Blues milieu within this algorithmic network of creativity.

Blues hapticity also manifests in polyphonic musical structure. Blues polyphony – the multi-part, simultaneous, hetero-rhythmic, and non-parallel nature of the music – is a central part of the Blues’ distinct practice (Arom, 1991: 37–39; Wald, 2010: 12, 36). Polyphony is a woven phenomenon: a dynamic bricolage of fibrillating molecular beats and percussive patterns, along with interjected sound (Davis, 2008: 59). Polyphony is a global musical phenomenon (Arom, 1991; Levitin, 2006: 13, 39). Specifically, traditional African music always functions with at least two rhythms, with wide variations in additive multiplicity across the continent (Davis, 2008: 58; Arom, 1991: 23). Black diasporic musical genres, like the Blues, often draw from West African traditions of polyrhythm, as well as motifs like call-and-response (Davis, 1998: 136; Davis, 2008: 58). In the widespread African practice (Arom, 1991: 23), a lead vocalist sings a line and other people around them reply, either echoing or singing a responsive phrase. Replies can be crafted with not only other people, but also instruments (Wald, 2010: 12–15; Campt, 2018).

This polyphonic enunciation was often viewed as a hostile force. Harry Anslinger, heading the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in the 1930s, viewed jazz and the Blues as direct threats to American society. Black artistic approaches represented ‘anarchy’ and their collaborative production methods were “a form of mongrelism”: an unsanctioned mixing of cultures that could not be tolerated. As he put it, “the unbelievably ancient indecent rites of the East Indies are resurrected in the black man’s music” (cited in Hari, 2015: 18). This was also a common fear among early colonialists.

They feared "amalgamations", or "syncretisms", between Old and New World cultures and races" (Allewaert, 2013: 18). The non-hierarchical cooperation, critical reflection, and flexibility seen in relational ethics like the Blues invokes a sort of terror. Ethics of relationality are horrifying to authoritarian regimes and cultures founded on sociologies of individualism (Allewaert, 2013: 6, 10–19; Hari, 2015: 18). Despite Anslinger's intentions of using the narcotics bureau for the eradication of this syncretic culture, tracking and jailing artists proved to be incredibly expensive. Blues and jazz networks were extremely difficult to penetrate since they were non-hierarchical, making tracing costly and often futile (Albertson, 2003: 54–55; Davis, 1998: 162–163). Haptic socialization wasn't just a force of cultural protection, but also physical protection.

### 2.2. Education and Maintenance

Distributed collaboration and polyrhythmic production require treating learning as a mutual process. Educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (2015: 48) refers to this type of knowledge production and educational practice as 'dialogical learning'. Freire argues that dialogue indicates a certain kind of epistemology that emphasizes relationships – the foundation of recognition (Simpson, 2017: 185; Campt, 2018). Dialogue and collaboration in this view is a specific kind of participatory and relational knowing, not just a tactic (Freire & Macedo, 1995: 379). With this shift, the fundamental goal becomes creating a process of learning and knowing that involves theorizing about shared experience. This type of intelligence requires community. Dialogical learning acknowledges that knowing is not merely individualistic, but also social and inherently collaborative (Freire, 2015).

An embodied practice carries this idea further. Theory isn't merely intellectual, but material, emotional, relational, contextual, and personal – incorporating rhythms of the surrounding environment. Learning is 'from and with' oneself, the environment, and the community (Simpson, 2017: 150–151). Feminist scholar Angela Davis (1998: 57) views this as one of the most compelling aspects of Blues epistemology, it affirms community without negating individual feelings. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990: 214) echoes this, noting that Blues intelligence provides the possibility of production that suppresses neither the individual at the expense of general welfare, nor feelings at the expense of empiricism. This duality moves away from status quo colonial intelligence (Simpson, 2017: 149, 195).

Enacting and maintaining a different intelligence from the status quo requires and creates alter-collectivities: different infrastructures, metabolic patterns, webs of relation, and densities of enablement (LaDuke & Cowen, 2020: 249; Murphy, 2018: 109, 116, 119). The recognitive hapticity for enactment and maintenance can vary in form. Red River Metis scholar Michelle Murphy (2018: 121–124) outlines three recognitive practices that are key to the emergence and resurgence of an intelligence system, along with its associated alter-collectivities: 1) care of infrastructures; 2) generative refusal; 3) speculative futurity. Infrastructures redistribute and

circulate densities, whether affective or material. As future-making projects (Murphy, 2018: 121), they are key to transformation (LaDuke & Cowen, 2020: 245; Guattari, 2008: 163). Without the restorative intimacy of hapticity and alimentary infrastructure, other forms of infrastructure and cultural matrixes whither and lose effectiveness over time (LaDuke & Cowen, 2020: 245; McDougall, 2011: 76). To effectively critique infrastructures of aggregation and extraction, rejection of the status quo must be combined with the creation of possibility – a generative refusal. Black artistic frequencies like the Blues require restorative processes, like hapticity and alimentary infrastructure, to maintain such refusals (Campt, 2018; Jones, 2015: 17). Linking rejection to the creation of possibilities propels speculative futurity. This "imagination of flourishing, despite disposability" (Rice, 2020; Campt, 2018) is what makes a haptic intelligence like the Blues a radical ethical practice.

## 3. Utopia as Method and Incursion

Poet and critical theorist Amiri Baraka (1999: xi–xii) asserts that deeper understandings of the underlying intelligence and embodied ethical practice of the Blues are still needed. Critical reconstructions are required. Levitas' (2013: 37, 217) utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution offers a useful starting point, providing an approach for exploring all aspects of alter-collective recognition. Imaginary Reconstitution builds a matrix for organizing affective energy (Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 79, 82; Guattari, 2008: 164; Gabel & Kennedy, 1984), creating a 'cultural synaesthesia' that contributes to the imagining and enunciation of radical change. Cultural synaesthesia provides a 'cultural DNA' – a matrix for organizing the socio-diversity of cultural and affective information within a particular community (McDougall, 2011: 64–65). This synaesthesia gives a coherence to efforts for deeper understanding.

Cultural and affective (re)construction is a necessity for speculative futurity (Belcourt & Nixon, 2018). As a productive force (Greene, 1995: 5; Turino, 2008: 17), art has the capacity to assist with synaesthesia and channelling 'desires of alterity' (Tuck, 2009). Art facilitates the shifting of perception and perspective, enabling world-building, and generating novel patterns of action (Kertz-Welzel, 2022). Operationalizing the key elements of the Blues and the alter-collectivities of Black artistic frequency, through Imaginary Reconstitution, can build a critical reconstruction of Blues epistemology's distinct embodied ethical practice. The reconstruction also highlights how Blues sensibilities permeate movements for cultural and economic change.

### 3.1. Utopia as Incursion

Levitas (2013: xi, 17) argues that every utopia is a dynamic process, with the capacity to create an opportunity for a holistic exploration of limitations and possibilities – a key part of problem-solving and generative encodement. Defining utopia as a process, instead of a classification or goal, allows utopia to function as a method for hapticity. It contributes stability to the continual algorithmic problem-solving taking place

in any network of creativity. Haptic creativity requires an ‘epiphanic quality’ (Levitas, 2013: 14, 39, 186) or daybreak (Simpson, 2017: 193): an ‘intersubjective zap’ (Gabel & Kennedy, 1984: 4, 31–32). The intersubjective zaps of hapticity make shared understanding possible. This “mutual recognition on a meta-plane of reciprocity” (Gabel, 2015) builds utopian energy and makes imagination possible. Linked to futurity and hapticity, utopia as method is not a static construction, but a connective process of incursion.

## 3.2. Blues by Utopian Method

The utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution is inherently critical and cyclical, using three distinctive modes: the archaeological mode, the ontological mode, and the architectural mode. These modes are not truly discrete (Levitas, 2013: 6–18, 153–154). They simply assist in shifting focal emphasis. Like a process of dynamic mapping (Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 80; Simpson, 2017: 15–16), they are used in a provisional and reflexive manner, with looping being expected throughout.

### *3.2.1. Archeological Mode*

In the archeological mode, excavations and reconstructions are conducted of both artifacts and cultures. The archaeological mode is a critical bricolage, with explorations into contradictions and dualities (Levitas, 2013: 154; Simpson, 2017: 201). Excavating the utopian infrastructures of the Blues requires investigating the ***lyrics*** of the genre as a form of critical communication. The Blues has provided an important means of information infrastructure, particularly when open discussion could lead to swift retaliation in the censorship regimes of the plantation class (Du Bois, 1935). The genre became an alternative form of transmission, analysis, interaction, moral intervention, and critical observation (Collins, 1990; Davis, 1998; McGinley, 2014). Lyrical texts were reinforcing structures for building a composite view of American society from the bottom. They functioned as integral forms of cultural opposition. Keeping with African custom, these texts were not linear, but circular and indirect in their discourse (Barlow, 1989: 325; Wright, 1971: 333–334). Spoken word was used as an endogenous catalyst for claiming and shaping African American culture (Barlow, 1989: 326).

Blues critiques the socio-economic status quo by centering on the voices and experiences of the most affected. Blues singers frequently operated as “organic intellectuals” (Carby, 1998: 476). The lyrical discourse both fractures the dominant language and unveils the hidden realities of the marginalized, making it an inherently oppositional system of explanation (Woods, 2017: 16–17, 39). Performers functioned within a liminal space, where they were doing both entertainment work as well as cultural work – escape and fantasy weren’t the goal (Carby, 1998: 475; Davis, 1998: 28–29). Blueswomen often articulated and embodied the social relations of their existence, as well as the contradictions of Black displacement. For example, Bessie Smith wrote and sang several songs about imprisonment, such as “*Jail House Blues*”, “*Work House Blues*”, “*Sing Sing Prison Blues*”, and “*Send Me to the ‘Lectric Chair*”

(Woods, 2017: 166). Tensions between critical communication and market drivers meant that the goal of cultural work often came into conflict with the profit goals of record companies. Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's song "Chain Gang Blues", critiquing the convict leasing system, had to be edited for recording. Lyrics pointing to the inordinately long sentences for African Americans committing petty crimes, or breaking Black Codes, were removed from the song (Davis, 1998: 102–103).

### *3.2.2. Ontological Mode*

The ontological mode eschews a search for paradise (Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 82; Levitas, 2013: 180). Ontology speaks at the level of affect, desire, and normativity – normative ways of being and ways of being otherwise (Levitas, 2013: 177). Making space for exploring ethical embodied practices diminishes the distance between ordinary moves of (re)production and extraordinary moves of change and transformation (Levitas, 2013: 189; Simpson, 2017: 150–152). Focused on orders of social relations, connective processes are a central concern (Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 83). ***Improvisations*** and the involvement of the audience made Blues a collective art form, with supportive interjection, as well as kinetic call-and-response exchanges (Davis, 1998: 56–57; Campt, 2018). These interactions achieved catharsis, euphoria, transcendence, and social bonding (Barlow, 1989: 327) – building long-term collective memories, consciousness, and deepened solidarity (Davis, 1998: 58). Similarly, ***soundscapes*** were important methods for evoking tonal memories and creating an immersive context. Blues songs were composed with screams and hollers, along with sounds of movement, pain, ecstasy, violence, weather, animals, and machinery. Tonal chords and polyrhythms could be stacked as fluid locomotions, crafting an energy release for musical tension (Woods, 2017: 288). Pioneers of these methods included performers like Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Muddy Waters, and Billie Holiday. These techniques all created specific and purposeful dissonance that possessed a subversive character (Barlow, 1989: 325; Wald, 2010).

***Self-expressive performance*** offered Blues artists another way to hold articulative and emergent capacity. Expressions of the pain of grinding poverty, the frustration of constant stress, as well as the joy of family or community could be fully expressed (Woods, 2017: 36). Mannerisms, dancing, and calculated cadences were used to enhance communication with the audience, while developing a unique artistic voice (Barlow, 1989: 326). Blues artists developed carefully crafted personas that pushed against constraining acceptability politics. These personas allowed Blues performers to seize on artistic flamboyance and act on their fantasies (McGinley, 2014: 66). With outfits that featured pearls, gold, feathers, and rhinestones, Black female Blues artists represented a sharp contrast to the one-dimensional and docile Black heroes that were often created by and for white culture. Their aesthetic experimentations often challenged standard images of Black performers, while stretching the collective imaginations of Black culture (Barlow, 1989: 327–328; Davis, 1998: 38, 137).

### *3.2.3. Architectural Mode*

In contrast to the archeological mode of critique, utopia in the architectural mode centers speculating alternative possibilities. Focused on the materiality and construction of transformation, the mode addresses the transformation of wants, satisfactions, and needs (Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 83; Levitas, 2013: 218). Alter-collectivities are central and act as matrix of 'synergetic satisfiers'. Synergetic satisfiers – forms of Being, Having, Doing, and Interacting (Max-Neef, Elizalde, & Hopenhayn, 1992: 24–28) – can both address needs while also stimulating and contributing to other requirements. The attention to 'satisfiers' shifts away from the interest in 'wants' that is common in traditional economics, (Smith & Max-Neef, 2013: 143, 172–187): actively building a modified constellation of normativity (Levitas, 2013: 179; Kertz-Welzel, 2022: 27, 163; Simpson, 2017: 218).

The 'polyphonic utopian model' (Campbell, 2021: 44, 50) of the Blues manifests itself in the collective ideas of flourishing that reverberate through Blues production. Blueswomen were often prolific entrepreneurs, developing Blues networks as starting points for diverse careers in dance, film, and theatre (Lewis, 2022). Performances by Black female artists were critical for the economic survival of large populations of personnel, a rare situation in the late 1800s and early 1990s (Davis, 1998: 137). When viewed in the context of Blues dialogue and collaboration, these practices of female Blues artists speak to a deeply lived understanding of how social and economic production are one dynamic (Hall & Chimurenga, 2017: 199). Their networks of production highlight how everyday actions and processes can craft micro utopias.

Levitas (2013: 214) notes that the term 'architectural' is hotly debated in academic discussions of utopia: the idea of 'architecture' in the context of futurity may be too restrictive. The use of the term 'architecture' constrains imagination to the realm of blueprints and actions of command, normalizing dominance and nonconsent (Simpson, 2017: 161) – a direct opposition to the idea of hapticity. Making is about the processes of formation, the flows and transformations, not just the final products (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 377). Creative moments of generation are followed by analytical moments of interrogation (Levitas, 2013: 198). These two moments together create a form of generative refusal that emphasizes emergent futurity. With futurity as an emergent state, the generative mode of utopia becomes musical, not architectural (Unger, 2007: 117).

## 4. Building Polyrhythmic Assemblages of Desire

As a framework that emphasizes connective processes, assemblage theory is particularly useful as a medium for further enhancing the understanding of the Blues' polyphonic utopian model. The term 'assemblage' is an imprecise translation of the French word 'agencement', which translates to "in specific connection with" (Phillips, 2006: 108). Components in an assemblage have their own materiality and expressions. They can also be a part of different assemblages, at different scales

(DeLanda, 2016: 75). Connections are given priority. The interactions and relationships between component/entities provide the nature and capacity for an assemblage to act upon semiotic, material, and social flows (Assis, 2021: 17–20; Campbell, 2021: 44–47). An assemblage acts as a ‘relay concept’ (Assis, 2021: 11–12): it is a linking mechanism – an interplay between organization and continuous change (Venn, 2006: 107). Thus, complexity is an inherent factor in assemblage theory. An assemblage is not an agglomeration (DeLanda, 2016: 9–11, 20, 43; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 327–337). The inherently connective nature of hapticity and artistic frequencies, as well as the ontological focus of the utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution, make assemblage theory an effective avenue for moving past structuring the architectural to weaving the musical.

### 4.1. Assemblage Theory and the Chemistries of Blues Polyphony

To manage this complexity, assemblages are often viewed as a tetravalent ecology (Assis, 2021: 12–16; Stover, 2021: 60–61). Here, valence is used in the chemical sense of the word (Stover, 2021: 57): an element’s ever-shifting capacity to bond with other elements. Valence is an ever-changing relationality. It operates in the rhizomatic connections that are the center of assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 6–7, 505–6). The tetravalent nature of an assemblage is represented with two axes: Content and expression are represented on one axis, with [re]territorialization and deterritorialization represented on the other. The four forces act upon each other, creating an ongoing milieu (Stover, 2021: 55).

#### *4.1.1. Content & Expression: Connecting Counterculture and Encoding Collaboration*

***Content*** and ***expression*** have a transversal relationship. Content includes both material and immaterial entities, as well as actions – a proliferating matrix of currents, bonds, and nodes. The ‘sympoietic acts’ (Stover, 2021: 62) occurring between components/bodies produce more content. Expression encapsulates the production and enunciation of currents: the regimes of signs, codes, and logics, along with their incorporeal transformations. Their axis maps a series of distributive relays (Stover, 2021: 63; DeLanda, 2016: 74). This relay between content and expression produces a unique frequency.

At the technical level, this relay can be seen in the improvisational elements of Blues polyphony like intercutting, counterpoints, or call-and-response. Expressive singularities constantly punctuate and embellish, even as rhythmic syncing occurs. Intercutting and syncopating components form the foundation of hapticity and broader sociality of Black artistic frequency (Campt, 2018). At the level of performance, the queer aesthetics and ***articulation*** of many blueswoman point to another synergistic relay of content and expression (Lewis, 2022). Blues artists like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Gladys Bentley, Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, and Ethel Waters highlighted their sexual orientation in ways that were impossible in other mediums

during the period – building intersectional counterhegemony into their routines and lyrics (Lewis, 2022; Jones, 2015: 11–13). For example, Rainey famously composed "*Prove It on Me Blues*" in 1928, referencing her arrest for throwing an illegal queer 'indecent party', and using lyrics to flaunt queer independence (Phillips, 2020; Davis, 1998: 39). This lyrical content was mixed with a very particular aesthetic articulation, making use of drag king expression. Her distributor, Paramount Entertainment, used an advert that showed Rainey in men's suiting, blatantly attempting to seduce two women on a street corner, in front of police (Albertson, 2003:117–116; Halberstam, 1997: 113). Both the rejection of traditional gender roles through entrepreneurship, and blatant exploration of sexuality, point to the primordial role of the Blues in Black radical feminism (Davis, 1998: xix-xx). Counterculture and transgressive relays were deeply embedded into the emergence of Black alter-collectivities.

Expression through improvisation is also an important mechanism for polyphonic coding. ***Coding*** is a manifestation of values, survival, and goals. It helps maintain distinctiveness, creates narratives, and provides protective opaqueness (DeLanda, 2016: 38; Simpson, 2017: 209). Polyphony functions as a maintenance mechanism through its profound effects on both performers and audience members. Jazz improvisation stimulates and builds different neurological areas and pathways than classical performance. Solo improvisations temporarily deactivate areas of the brain responsible for monitoring and correcting goal-oriented behavior. Targeted pattern-breaking occurs, suggesting that 'letting go' is an important part of building new frameworks. The 'trading fours' common in Blues and jazz improvisation, where musicians take turns doing solos, is processed by the brain in the same way as complex verbal conversation (Sherman & Plies, 2023: 36–39; Keltner, 2023: 155). Over time, structural networks in the brain are altered (Sherman & Plies, 2023: 49). This result is seen in frequent listeners as well (Levitin, 2006: 238–239). The nervus system and the dopaminergic circuitry registers the music as an experience of reciprocity (Dana, 2018: 88–90, 2023: 75): opening our consciousness to exploration (Keltner, 2023: 152), and simulating complex problem-solving (Davis, 2008: 59). Simulations of collaborative and active decision-making encode a different type of ethic and understanding at fundamental levels (Jones, 2015: 3).

#### *4.1.2. Deterritorialization and [Re]territorialization: Destabilization through Conjunction*

The other axis of ***[re]territorialization*** and ***deterritorialization*** are frequently simultaneous or cyclical, not linear. Old normativity breaks as a new one forms. Both create boundaries. They are organizing practices with the capacity to sort new materials and facilitate routine (DeLanda, 2016: 38). Territorialization/[re]territorialization is a form of provisional ***differentiation*** and stabilization. Territorialization can occur from both conjunction and disjunction of relationships. This is also true for deterritorialization. It does not just occur through the disjunction of relationships, but also the articulation of new ones (Stover, 2021: 63; DeLanda, 2016: 160). As the mutuality-based learning processes in the Blues genre demonstrate, conjunctions can destabilize as well.

Conjunction as deterritorialization also highlights how necessary deterritorializations can be for novelty (180 Studio, 2020: 189–191; Davis, 1998: 136).

By featuring perspectives like convict leasing and migrant work, while also highlighting the concerns of Black women of all sexualities, the Blues set the foundation for a feminism that puts marginalized women at the center of economic thought (Davis, 1998: x; Hall & Chimurenga, 2017: 199). In contrast, the African American elite used a particular type of exclusionary community building: territorializations featured bourgeois coercions of sexual purity and strict conceptualizations of "true womanhood" – linking an inherent inferiority to poverty (Davis, 1998: 38–44, 65). The Blues threatened the "uplift ideology" of the Black elite, which required upholding ideas about respectability and maintaining a private nuclear family unit (McGinley, 2014: 22, 48–49).

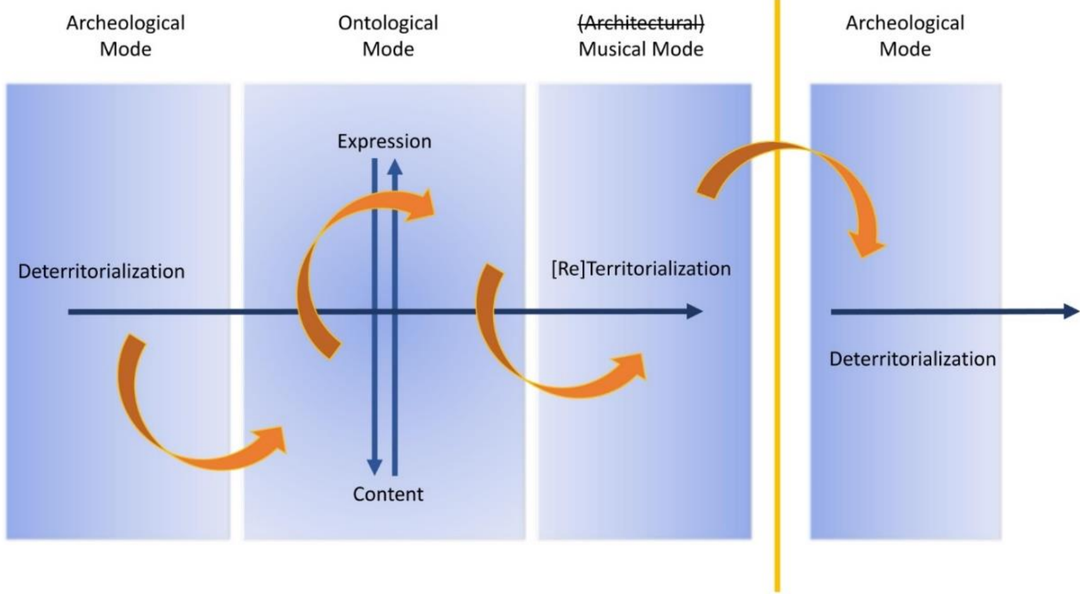
The response to this threat often surfaced as a critique of soundscapes and lyrics, with these elements being labelled as "abrasive" and "ignorant" (Barlow, 1989: 327), or "incomprehensible", and "unacceptable" (Hari, 2015: 18). Policing linguistics allows for the maintenance of territorialization, and the suffocation of diverse discourses and perspectives. It also renders social inequality invisible by disassociating lyrics from their socioeconomic critique (Freire, 2015; Woods, 2017: 33–34). Blues artists were well aware of their exclusion from the realm of elite Black communities (Davis, 1998: 172). Blues challenges the assumption that knowledge and language should be clear and easily consumable to those near the top of socio-economic hierarchy (Freire, 2015; Woods, 2017: 289). Incommensurability shouldn't be viewed as an inherently damaging development in coding. Differentiation and transformation require a level of incommensurability to be truly generative. Michif scholar and environmental scientist Max Liboiron (2021: 136–137, 156) notes that some level of incommensurability can be highly productive, often acting as a key aspect of generative refusal. The Blues genre requires engagement, not consumption, which indicates drastically different ideologies and schema. Exclusion compelled the territorialization of alter-collectivities with different dynamics of haptic collectivity (Davis, 1998: 44), building utopian visions that were in direct opposition to elite futurity (Carby, 1998: 472).

### 4.2. Mapping Processes with a Utopian Assemblage Matrix

To be considered an assemblage, an interacting network of entities must exhibit both '***relations of exteriority***' and '***emergence***'. Both defining processes assist in building a healthy tension between stabilization and change within the tetravalent field (DeLanda, 2016: 11–20, 88). Emergence, the dynamic process of development or evolution, generally includes a lifecycle: 1) the formation of a network through shared meaning and purpose; 2) formations of hubs that act as communities of practice; 3) the development of systems of influence; 4) normalization of new practices and values – a new normativity (Wheatley & Frieze, 2006; Holley, 2012). Relations of exteriority are the autonomous interactions of components – the agency and autonomy of component entities to build new connections or change the nature

of existing connections (Allewaert, 2013: 119; DeLanda, 2016: 10, 33, 73). These two core processes form points of intensity, or spaces of rest. They are represented through the background shading in Figure 1. Both processes are a feature during periods of territorialization/reterritorialization, as well as deterritorialization.

**Figure 1: A Utopian Assemblage Matrix**




Source: The construction of a utopian assemblage matrix, with a rhythm of consciousness visualized as a wave, meeting concentrated areas of sensemaking. A representation of assemblage tetravalence is imposed upon Levitas' (2013a) utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution. This configuration functions as a representation of the (re)production of Black artistic frequency of the Blues occurring through ethical embodied practice.

While the tetravalence of assemblages is often expressed with content and expression on the x-axis (Assis, 2021: 16; Stover, 2021: 60–61), in this case deterritorialization and [re]territorialization are placed on the x-axis. This maintains the processual and cyclical nature of the utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution. Only one full cycle is represented, but the beginning of another is placed to hold onto the iterative nature of the dual processes at work.

### *4.2.1. Emergence and Hapticity: A Creative Commons*

Emergence, with its heightened moments of consciousness, often drives contextual understanding and sensemaking, working symbiotically with haptic interaction more broadly. These points of intensity symbolize spaces where a strong ethos, or a sense of "right relations" (Liboiron, 2021: 122–124), can be crafted. Emergence is just as important to deterritorialization and analytical discovery as it is to the formation of practice. The wavelike nature of these heightened encounters is depicted in Figure 1's twisting arrows, building the woven attributes of Black artistic frequency into the overall matrix. Network density, the degree to which entities are linked together, is a critical emergent property. This is important to assemblages forming synergetic properties (DeLanda, 2016: 10–11). Additionally, feedback loops are important parts of sensemaking and thus central to emergence, providing necessary information

gathering and transfer. System boundaries are also equally important for learning, regeneration, and information stabilization (180 Studio, 2020: 179–180; Stover, 2021: 58). These conditions and properties flow from reciprocal relationships, thus hapticity is a key part of emergence. For the necessary co-presence to occur, an expenditure of attention and emotional labor is required (DeLanda, 2016: 28; Campt, 2018).

On the micro scale, this expenditure of attention can also be seen in Blues elements like the counterpoint. Counterpoints are loosely structured exchanges between vocalists and/or instruments. These exchanges can be melodic or rhythmic, building a musical bricolage of relationships (Arom, 1991: 41–43; Wald, 2010: 14–17). Counterpoints require deep listening. As a form of improvisation, their high expenditure of attention utilizes neurological activations for complex problem-solving, a different set of neurological pathways from musical composition (Sherman & Plies, 2023: 49). On the macro scale, reciprocity and relational labor can be seen in the intellectual property norms. Blues songs were never considered the personal property of their composers or performers. A Blues song written or sung by one performer, could be heard, remembered, revised, and sung by someone else (Carby, 1998). Following African diaspora oral traditions (Davis, 1998: 136), songs were treated as collective property and disseminated through touring musical groups and festivals, in a similar fashion to folktales (McGinley, 2014: 23). Styles, knowledge, and methods of critique and resistance could be pooled. The socialization aspects of sharing worked in tandem with dialogical learning, creating a sort of creative commons.

#### *4.2.2. Relations of Exteriority: Fugitivity within the Break*

The singularities that characterize relations of exteriority allow for moments of rearticulation. Evolution is impossible without these diverse exterior relations and contrapuntal interventions (DeLanda, 2016: 62; Simpson, 2017: 163–165). Valence is a critical mechanism of exterior relationality. Valence is affected by new relational conjunctions. Assemblages are never totalizing. No matter how stabilized an assemblage has become, events and diverse exterior relations can always lead to recompositing or deterritorialization. The possibility of fugitivity and alternative 'paths of flight' (DeLanda, 2016: 128) are always present. Black artistic frequency functions through polyvalent relationality (180 Studio, 2020: 189–191; Campt, 2018): exterior relationality is just as critical as established internal patterns of relation (Jones, 2015: 203). Again, these processes are seen at both the micro and macro scale: within the macro socioeconomic critiques in lyrics and countercultural performances, as well as within the micro scale of compositional elements like the break.

If counterpoints are a lively and complex conversation, a break is an unexpected interjection. Breaks are the intense "syncopated 'off-beat' lines" that crisscross and interfere with the previously established rhythms (Davis, 2008: 61; DeFrantz, 2010: 31). They are the crossroads of a performance, adding vital liminal spaces into established patterns (Jones, 2015: 11). Polyrhythm relies on the multiplicity of possibilities that breaks provide. 'Positive shocks' of moderate frequency enhance creativity by creating

new ties in an existing network, altering communities of practice (Soda et al., 2021: 1174). In a problem-solving scenario, even interjections that would be considered ‘useless’ or ‘incompetent’ have advantageous effects, producing benefit cascades (Shirado & Christakis, 2017: 373). Any interjection forces a change in pattern dynamic, while enhancing the reliability and overall speed of functional solution discovery. Breaks provide the cascades to give paths of flight necessary kinetic energy. This chemistry defines what pathways are supported and/or desirable and which are not (Levitas, 2013a: 177). The polyvalence within alter-collectivities builds constellations of co-resistance, allowing paths of flight through inward reflection, or through outward generative refusal. The networked fugitivity within these constellations is the foundation of both futurity and transformation (Simpson, 2017:212–217; Stover, 2021: 73; Martineau, 2015).

## 5. Discussion: Material Manifestations in the Solidarity Economy

With its critical engagement against status quo socioeconomics, the Blues has always had a countercultural economic perspective. However, the ‘axiology-in-practice’ of the genre opens its own unique opportunities for economic transformation and futurity. The dialogical engagement and mutuality that ground Blues ethic have reverberations that reach far beyond artistic production (Hall & Chimurenga, 2017: 199; Woods, 2017: 218). Like Blues production, co-operative production requires various forms of haptic interaction. Co-operative principles like ‘concern for community’, ‘education and training’, and ‘cooperation among cooperatives’ (International Co-operative Alliance, 2021) all work to enhance social relationships. Sociologist Michael Gertler (2006: 2, 10) argues that co-operatives have a dual nature: they are both enterprises and associations, functioning as a synergetic satisfier. Thus, they require ‘axiology-in-practice’ just like the Blues. The creative commons and dialogical learning style seen in Blues production indicate possible ways to enhance the effectiveness of the associative aspects within co-operative production.

The reverberations and active utilization of the Blues ethic can be seen in Black development projects. Historically, co-operative organizations and communal land have been integral parts of the African American resistance to racism, economic injustice, and state paternalism (Woods, 2017: 38; Nembhard, 2014). In the 1970s, Fannie Lou Hamer built on this co-operative legacy by forming the Freedom Farm in Mississippi (Lee, 2000). The Freedom Farm focused on cultivating community sovereignty. The purpose of the farm was to address the needs of African Americans and the rural working-class who were displaced by increased mechanization of agricultural production. Hamer’s development organization established structures and processes for community farming initiatives, cooperative housing, and cooperative enterprise incubation. Seed banks and livestock exchanges were created. At its peak, the cooperative had 680 acres of land devoted to cotton production, a daycare center, 200 units of affordable housing, and a garment-manufacturing plant. The approach allows for the development of the entire community, rather than the creation

of monopolistic hierarchies that control relationships and exchange (Hamer et al., 2011: 141). The legacy of the farm continues in Mississippi through modern projects like Cooperation Jackson (Davidson, 2017: 140–141), which builds organizational capacity, autonomous power, and material self-sufficiency through land trusts and community assemblies (Akuno, 2015: 2). The organization focuses on the same imaginations of 'just transition' as Hamer's Freedom Farm (Akuno, et al., 2022). These initiatives and exchanges build a territorialization based on connection, crafting alter-collectivities designed to enhance haptic capacity and visions of futurity.

The application of this type of relational ethic can scale to much larger projects. Started in 1956, the Basque co-operative network Mondragón has made use of relational frameworks to drive their competitive strategy of continuous innovation (MacLeod & Reed, 2009: 111). Mondragón includes 81 co-operatives and 12 R&D centers, with 70,000 members and 104 plants in 37 countries – with organizations ranging from automobile and technological production to university and technical school training, along with retail and agricultural production (Mondragón Corporation, 2024). The Mondragon Complex has a co-operative development bank called the Caja Laboral Popular. For a co-operative firm to use Caja's financial, analytical, and business development services, a contract of association must be established (Thomas & Logan, 1982). The Caja functions as an important form of financial alimentary structure, with finance being viewed as an instrument of transformation. At least 10% of yearly revenue is spent on community projects and cultural education (Thomas & Logan, 1982: 25). In addition, Mondragón has moved to 'network-of-teams' models (MacLeod & Reed, 2009; Thomas & Logan, 1982). The approach focuses on team-based production that facilitates participation, multi-disciplinary interaction, autonomy, and shared responsibility/leadership (MacLeod & Reed, 2009: 128–129). Using innovation strategies like these make use of the same mechanisms at work in Blues improvisation, shifting the cognitive pathways at work and changing the ecosystem in which production occurs. The lived experience of collaboration, whether in work or community, allows for a shift from viewing resources as scarce, to working on increasing resource supply in a collective manner (Gertler, 2006: 9; McMurtry, 2009: 72–73).

With the growing size of the social economy, strategies to realize unique 'axiology-in-practice' become even more critical. The social economy now makes up 2% of global GDP, with a reported annual revenue of over $95 trillion USD. The sector is now larger than the apparel industry and almost twice the size of the advertising industry (Bonnici et al., 2024: 10). As the sector expands, haptic infrastructure must match pace. North Carolina's State Employees Credit Union is an excellent example of successful scaling. The credit union has built large-scale alimentary structures using dedicated volunteer staff and grassroots movement tactics. The organization has 1.8 million members and gains around 85,000 members each year (Schlachter, 2012). The credit union has 244 groups made up of twelve-member units who engage the larger membership base on various issues and ideas. Regular dinners and potlucks, as well as phone banking are used to make sure each member is engaged directly at least once a year. This makes the process of engagement more distributed,

freeing up managers and the board to do other pressing work. It also enhances complex decision-making by providing critical information transfers. The dual nature of the social economy demands ethics become a woven practice: not just expression, but content; not just a critique, but generative refusal.

## 6. Conclusion: Imagining Futurity Beyond Survival

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017: 228, 182) argues that “the act of presencing is the act of creating the future”. ‘Presencing’ operationalizes ‘desires of alterity’ (Tuck, 2009; Rice, 2020). Philosopher Audre Lorde (2007) views this affective capacity as a core foundation of alter-collectivities. Creating a utopian assemblage matrix, by melding the utopian method of Imaginary Reconstitution with assemblage tetravalence, is one method of presencing. Presencing the ‘axiology-in-practice’ of the Blues tradition illuminates the processes and structures that support the alter-collectivities of Black artistic frequencies. The Blues creates polysemic assemblages (DeFrantz, 2010: 33): layering rhythmic ideas, song, dance, scenery, props, and narrative. The woven bricolage of the Blues realizes relational epistemology and ethics through every scale.

The ‘axiology-in-practice’ of the Blues provides a framework for the creation and maintenance of cooperative endeavors. The Blues reframes cooperative labor as less ‘economies of scale’ and more as ‘economies of network’ (V. Zamagni, 2014: 197), putting co-operatives in a unique position to fortify distinctive economic connections. The relational nature of Blues epistemology permeates through technical production, performance, learning, as well as artist and audience engagement (Jones, 2015). Support of haptic labor happens at both the micro and the macro scale – from the protocols of improvisation to the principles of knowledge sharing. Breaks and interjections are the celebrated singularities of survival, not foreign invasions. Whether building the quiet euphoria of reflection or the loud euphoria of exuberance (Campt, 2018), Black artistic frequencies like the Blues provide one option for a foundation within which resurgence/emergence can flourish.

As mentioned previously, polyphony is a global phenomenon (Arom, 1991). The reverberations of polyphonic epistemology can be seen in a variety of arenas, far beyond radical Black artistic frequency and its echoes through conceptualizations of co-operative development. Critical relational approaches can manifest in movements for sustainability, like Bangladeshi movements for just transition that draw upon Nobopran Andolan oral and musical traditions for ‘axiology-in-practice’ (UBINIG, 2017). They can also manifest in approaches to data governance, like Māori organizations using the ‘axiology-in-practice’ of Tāonga to codesign distributed sovereign data infrastructure for census and environmental sustainability needs (Te KāHui Raraunga, 2022; Waatea, 2024). The diversity of methodologies speaks to the networked and musical nature of transformation and the utopian nature of human flourishing (Stover, 2021: 73).

Finding spaces for a relational ‘grounded normativity’ (Simpson, 2017: 182) and ‘reality testing’ (Hassan, 2022) becomes a pressing necessity in moments of authoritarianism (Ressa, 2022; Gessen, 2017). The ‘integrity of consciousness/conscience’ (Hassan, 2019: 225) is constantly violated for the manipulation of decision-making (Hassan, 2019: 87; Gessen, 2017). Authoritarian and fascist regimes are radiating gravitational structures of isolation (Hassan, 2019; Gessen, 2017). The effects are stark, whether someone is past the event horizon or merely in the plunging region (Alexander, 2016; Hassan, 2022). Reconnective experiences are the foundation of resistance: to fight a fascist surge, one must weave a relational mesh for the maintenance of physical and mental freedom (Hassan, 2019: 204; Ressa, 2022: 261–262). Here again, Mondragón is a valuable example. The organization was born in the wake of the Spanish Civil War, expanded in the crucible of Catholic Nationalism and the rise of Francisco Franco’s authoritarian regime, and thrived through multiple recessions (Thomas & Logan, 1982: 17–34; MacLeod & Reed, 2009). Networked co-operation isn’t just a workable foundation for survival, but also our best-known chance at paths of flight towards thriving.

If networks are to be the core driving force underlying self-organizing transformation, relational methodologies are required (Holley, 2012: 10, 177; Tuck, 2009). Through the Blues tradition, this chapter’s utopian assemblage matrix works to bring relational methodology into the realm of co-operative ‘axiology-in-practice’. Building and using this matrix merely begins a push towards the ‘critical reconstructions’ (Baraka, 1999: xii) that move closer to a resurgence of grounded normativity in the constellations of Black radical imagining (Simpson, 2017: 182, 192–193; Hill-Jarrett, 2023; Kidane & Mire, 2015). As the jazz saxophonist and physicist Stephon Alexander (2016: 9) aptly puts it, “Let us improvise”.

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# Part VI.

# Deconstructing Economic Myths

# Chapter 8

# The Social Economy and Utopia: Paradoxes, Realism and the Theory of Complex Social Systems

Ermanno C. TORTIA[*]

**Abstract**

This chapter considers utopia as prospective statements about social realities, representing "pole stars" for developing social thinking in development programs and policies. It aims to reconstruct the concept of utopia from a social economy point of view, striving to highlight what conceptual criteria can be used to classify different types of utopias, especially "feasible" and "unfeasible" on the one hand, and "good" and "bad" utopias on the other. To achieve these results, elements of complexity theory, social systems theory in the social sciences, and critical realism in philosophy are considered. Some examples referred to organization in the social economy are used to show how definitions and conceptual categories can be applied to real-world cases, or to utopian ideas that achieved some degree of relevance in culture and science (Hedrén, 2014).

**Keywords:** utopia, complexity theory, social systems theory, critical realism, paradoxes, social economy organizations

**JEL-Codes:** A13, B55, L31, O35, Z13

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## 1. Introduction

The reconstruction of utopias as perspective statements about social reality requires the search for conceptual criteria to classify different types of utopias, the "good," the "bad," and the "ugly", and also the "realizable" and "unrealizable" (Barclay, 1993). Realizable utopias are, at least in principle, realizable in reality, while unrealizable utopias are not realizable, but may nevertheless carry with them important social or normative meanings and function as "pole stars" that cannot be attained, but chart the course for social change.

Good or positive utopias are programs of social change that have an intrinsic or normative progressive relevance to social reality, aiming to build new and better social structures and institutions, and also have universal value, that is, they affect, at least potentially but not necessarily, all individuals, social groups and nations equally. They tend to promote equality and strengthen the civil rights and individual liberties of entire populations (Rawls, 1971, 1999). In contrast, negative utopias are conceptualized as claims about social change that are inherently regressive, aimed at reconstructing social structures and institutions that have already ceased to exist, to favor specific social groups or nations over others, rather than society and humanity at large. They tend to promote inequality, privilege and the restriction of civil rights (Walby, 2007).

The conceptual approach of the chapter does not set out explicit proposals for transformative social change. It is instead concerned with critical approaches to existing social realities, such as critical realism and social systems theory, and the underlying potential for transformation in the direction envisioned by such approaches (Warren, Franklin & Streeter, 1998; Levitas, 2007; Fischer-Lescano, 2012). Preference is given to the analysis of social change processes, whose outcomes can be qualitatively foreseen, but cannot be accurately predicted in quantitative terms; even so, they hold the potential to bring about relevant social and economic improvements (Levitas, 2007).

In this line of enquiry, utopia can be understood as projections on social realities that anticipate some fundamental cultural or structural changes leading to improvements in society and the economy, which can be partial and localized, but also systemic. The premises of utopian thinking are very uncertain by their very nature, but not devoid of meaning and potential for influence on society. In some cases, it may be reasonable to expect such forward-looking statements to have some degree of realization. In others, they represent unrealizable developments, but may nonetheless play a positive role by serving as catalysts for social change. Regressive utopias or dystopias play a negative role in the evolution of human societies and are often based on irrational assertions and projections about social reality, for example, they may lack universality and respect for the social integrity and civil rights of specific ethnic or religious groups, or entire nations (e.g. the creation of a new colonialist order based on the exploitation of weaker nations, Levitas, 2007).

The second section of the chapter reviews some conceptual elements from different theoretical streams. Specifically, elements that can be used to evaluate utopian thinking are considered in critical realism in philosophy, social systems theory and complexity theory in social sciences. In the third section, an attempt is made to construct a new analytical framework that dissects the main elements of a philosophical and scientific analysis of utopias, as applied to the social economy. The fourth section offers a final discussion.

## 2. Conceptual background

The conceptual background of this chapter strives to provide some conceptual tools of analysis, involving elements of some theoretical and philosophical currents that have been strongly concerned with studying the nature of social systems. Critical realism and paradoxical thinking in social philosophy are considered along with complexity theory and social systems theory for their ability to analyze emergent properties of social systems (e.g., new institutions or new cultural or political trends), making as few assumptions as possible about the nature of the system itself to begin with, and about how it may evolve (Warren et al., 1998; Byrne & Callaghan, 2022).

### 2.1. Paradoxes in the social sciences and critical realism

This contribution challenges the idea that utopias cannot be realistic by resorting to a speculative methodology related to the ontology of social reality. Critical realism aims to study social reality "as it is", or "the way the world works", but it also includes a critical and constructivist stance towards social realities and ontology. In other words, it investigates their deep structures to understand real changes in the past and possibilities for change in the future (Kenyon, 1982). Since social systems are understood as complex entities characterized by emergence, critical realism is used to assess the potential of social thought to offer new theories and applications that can lead to reform proposals.

Paradoxical thinking can discern contradictions and anomalies in social realities and social thought, and the possibility or need for reform in the present state of affairs.

> By framing recurring tensions as a paradox – a 'persistent contradiction between interdependent elements' (Schad, Lewis & Smith, 2019, p. 10) – scholars endeavor to explore opposing elements' relationships. The paradoxical elements form a duality in that they are 'oppositional to one another yet […] also synergistic' (Smith and Lewis, 2011, p. 386); they thus simultaneously support and oppose one another (Farjoun, 2010). In Schad and Bansal (2018, p. 1492).

To the extent that "utopia" and "realism" are considered an oxymoron, paradoxical thinking refers to the "persistent contradiction between interdependent elements", which affect social reality but may be, at the same time, anomalous and contradictory (Kenyon, 1982; Schad et al., 2019, p. 10). When distinct concepts come together and are imagined as a unity, they constitute a paradoxical duality that embodies "a both/and relationship that is neither mutually exclusive nor antagonistic" (Putnam,

Fairhurst & Banghart, 2016). Thus, opposing elements within the same unitary system can generate paradoxical interactions leading to system-level outcomes that can hide, but not eliminate, radical contradictions within the system itself. More importantly, hidden contradictions can develop and grow over time, leading to nonlinear dynamics and systemic change that was not foreseen or even foreseeable in the first place (Roth, Schneckenberg & Valentinov, 2023). Paradox can even be understood as a type of heuristic that allows the detection of anomalous or contradictory elements in a system and to foresee steps towards a solution. Change can come from within the system, but it can also be the result of more dialectical reform processes derived from external phenomena and/or decisions. The interaction between internal change and external intervention is, as always, complex and, by its very nature, the results difficult to predict. To the extent that utopian thinking aims to alleviate social problems and envision structural changes, the dependence of utopianism on paradoxical thinking seems unquestionable (Dooley, 1997).

Realism enters into this picture as a doctrine that starts from the description and analysis of reality as it is, but does not exclude the critique of social realities from the existing paradoxes and contrasting elements. It uses these elements and their deep patterns of structural change as necessary evidence and tools for any reform proposal. In Roy Bhaskar's (1975, 1993) ontology, realism in the social sciences refers to the existence of social relations that dictate the structure of society and the behavior of individuals within it.

The social sciences can study causal mechanisms as fundamental elements of society. However, their complexity and the difficulty of observing and isolating them can make their study ineffective and controversial, as these mechanisms may not always be activated, or be activated but not perceived. Difficulty in perceiving and observing complex causal mechanisms can lead to scientific misrepresentations, inability to study important connections, and erroneous predictions. However, the inability to understand and observe postulated mechanisms does not equate to their absence but may signal a temporary latency or absence.

Critical realism pursues a strategy of analytical dualism in which a separation is created between the individual and the structure to allow the study of the interaction between them (Archer, 1995). While the deductivism and formalism of traditional social thought are criticised, critical realism embraces a constructivist perspective on social change that founds a new social ontology based on the interaction between human action and social structure (Bhaskar, 1975; Lawson, 1997). The ontology of critical realism is compatible with an understanding of utopias in social thought that starts from socially paradoxical facts.

Critical realism studies both individual freedom within social structures and the constraints imposed by these on individual behavior. It is recognized that social structures decisively influence individual agency, as social change involves social structures and individuals in processes of flux and change. Change plays a crucial role

in social evolution, since individuals and social groups can self-consciously reflect on social change and exercise it through collective action (Bhaskar, 1975, 1993; Collier, 2011).

## 2.2. Complexity theory and social systems theory

Social change is complex. Complexity science has progressed in recent decades from physics and then penetrated biology, psychology and the social sciences (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). In the social sciences, complexity theory has strongly intersected with social systems theory. Both approaches share a similar understanding of social process and structure, abandoning traditional orthodox social theorizing and imagining emergence, non-linear dynamics, functionalism and constructivism as the most typical modes of societal development (von Bertalanffy, 1968, 1972; Luhmann, 1995, 2018). These scientific approaches to the study of society allow utopian thinking to be integrated into broader contemporary science (Warren et al., 1998; Turner & Baker, 2019; Byrne & Callaghan, 2022).

### *2.2.1. Complexity theory*

Complexity theory deals with the behavior of complex systems whose components interact in multiple ways and follow local rules, resulting in nonlinearity, collective dynamics, hierarchy, adaptation, and emergence. The parts of the system interact with each other in non-linear ways, leading to the emergence of more complex structures and phenomena at the level of the social system as a whole, its subsystems (e.g. the economic system as part of the social system and the social economy as a subsystem of the economic system) and in its interaction with other systems (Luhmann, 1995; Manson, 2001; Turner & Baker, 2019).

Since social systems exhibit non-linear developmental trajectories, small changes can lead to disproportionate effects or even phase shifts. This implies that small political or cultural changes can have significant and sometimes unexpected repercussions on social evolution, leading to social changes and the emergence of new social processes and structures in the medium to long term. Moreover, the self-organizing capacity of systems, where patterns emerge from the interaction between agents without centralized control, can mean that social problems can be addressed and solved collaboratively through social interaction and collective action (Condorelli, 2016).

Complex systems are adaptive and resilient, able to respond to change and disruption, implying that contradictions and challenges can be effectively addressed by introducing new structural processes while at the same time maintaining a balance between the action of different parts of the system. Feedback loops of cumulative causation create system dynamics whereby individual behavior and social structures influence each other, resulting in processes of social change and emergence of novel structures at different layers. In some cases, observed outcomes represent solutions to problems

posed in the past by the unfolding of utopian thinking (Condorelli, 2016; Turner & Baker, 2019).

Since social-ecological systems are inherently dynamic metabolic entities, they interact and exchange with the external environment, both natural and artificial, including the institutional environment. Referring to autopoiesis as dissipation, change is considered an intrinsic property of complex social systems (van der Leeuw, 2019; Byrne & Callaghan, 2022). The concept of autopoiesis refers to the self-production of social norms, working rules and coordination mechanisms (e.g. governance structures and organizations). Dissipative structures tend to eliminate entropy, i.e. the tendency of social systems to return to the original chaos and free unrestrained energy, which is transformed into stable social structure (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984; Flaherty, 2019).

### *2.2.2. Social Systems Theory*

Social systems theory (SST), on the other hand, focuses on the interrelations and interconnectedness of various components of a society, which are identified as its subsystems. Society is understood as a complex system of multiple sub-systems, such as the economic, political, judicial, social media and communication technologies, etc. The environment, on the other hand, is external to the social system and represents the natural container or biosphere, within which the biological, psychic and social system emerged. The biosphere, of course, is itself part of the physical world (Turner & Baker, 2019; Byrne & Callaghan, 2022).

Social systems theory is strictly associated with the study of complex systems. SST studies non-ergodic social processes in which emergence is driven by complex feedback effects, path dependence, non-linearity, deep interconnectedness, and resonance. In other words, SST studies autopoietic processes of social emergence and change (Portugali, 2012). SST has its roots in the general systems theory that von Bertalanffy (1968) published in the 1930s. SST and complexity theory taken together can help to understand the characteristics of social structures of all kinds, which are "the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design" (Ferguson, 1782), as they cannot be obtained simply by planning blueprints. Self-organised emergent social change can refer to utopias when there are specific or general desirable social goals or conditions that have not yet been achieved, but may be achievable when the right conditions are in place.

SST is a description of reality that can adopt both the realist connotations of von Bertalanffy (1968) and the self-referential and constructivist stance of Luhmann (1995). Whereas in von Bertalanffy social systems are open in their homeostatic equilibrium with the external environment, due to continuous interaction and exchange, which also defines the evolutionary pattern of their internal structure, in Luhmann the system is an autopoietic closed process. Luhmann's approach describes a process of system emergence through complexity reduction and differentiation in relation to the external environment. The reduction of external complexity allows

the system to create its own internal complexity through an autopoietic process of recursive internal communication. Recursion is equivalent to the ability of the system to reproduce itself over time. Without closure and recursion, the system could not differentiate itself from the external environment and would cease to exist (Maturana & Varela, 1980; Hodgson, 2003a; Fuchs & Hofkirchner, 2010; Valentinov, 2014).

Autopoiesis is the self-referential and self-producing process of emergence and development of the system, which grows organically through complexity reduction and differentiation from the external environment (Maturana & Varela, 1980; Luhmann, 2006; Fuchs & Hofkirchner, 2010). On the other hand, the autopoietic creation of internal complexity through internal communication (e.g. the creation of organizational routines) is intended to fulfill the social function of the system. The self-referential nature of system development implies that systems can come into conflict with the external social and natural environment, as when the economic system exceeds the carrying capacity of the natural environment and causes excessive depletion of natural resources, dangerous pollution, destruction of virgin forests and extinction of animal species (Luhmann, 1989; Wackernagel, 1994). By the same token, internal conflict between the system's functions and structure can usher into structural reform and social change that require the creation of new social structures that were previously considered utopian, as when democratic states create parliaments and governments elected by the people (Luhmann, 2006). Change can be both progressive and regressive, depending on the social forces, cultures, and goals at play. The envisioning of progressive change requires that dysfunctional structures are overcome through open processes that set positive targets of social betterment.

Small changes in subsystem dynamics can affect the overall stability, adaptability and functionality of the system since, from a normative point of view, complexity theory and SST offer insights into the intricate interactions between the various subsystems of a society. Through non-linear evolutionary pathways, new social trends once considered utopian may be able to develop on their terms, creating new norms, values, communication channels and social props (e.g. organizations) to build new cultures which, in turn, may contribute to the self-maintenance and differentiation of the new emerging trends and structures (Brinsmead & Hooker, 2011; Schneider, 2012).

SST can play a discriminating role in identifying good utopias and avoiding bad ones, as the study of complex social systems can help to understand why some changes are achievable and desirable, while others are unlikely to occur and may be undesirable (Tortia, 2022; Sacchetti & Tortia, 2024). For example, SST can help to understand why the social economy has been emerging as a third dominant economic sub-system that is developing side by side with the traditional ones, private market capitalism and the public economy.

## 3. A new framework for assessing utopias

Based on these premises, a new framework for evaluating utopias can be proposed. The framework initiates an assessment path, as not all utopias provide relevant or interesting insights into possible developments in social evolution. It is not possible to make exact assessments of utopias as progressive and regressive statements about future social realities since future events cannot be predicted in advance with any degree of precision. Utopias can only be prefigured in qualitative terms but may contain important intuitions and normative statements about social change (emergence and continuation) of future social phenomena. Such claims of political and social philosophy may be worthy of consideration when properly evaluated in terms of their realism and when they are also compatible with and supported by the most valuable advances in the science of society. The fundamental principles of social change can be summarised in the following propositions:

(i) *Emergence of new social models of reform*. Social paradoxes, contradictions and anomalies need social innovation and reform to be resolved or improved. As a rule, social innovation in the form of new cultures, social processes and new organisational forms can be expected to lead to the desired social improvement;

(ii) *Progressiveness or prospective character of social reform*. The process of social change is oriented towards the production of new cultures, social structures (institutions and organizations) and innovations, rather than reproducing structures and cultures that already existed in the past, under the assumption that past cultures and structures would be characterized by the same contradictions and inconsistencies that led to their demise;

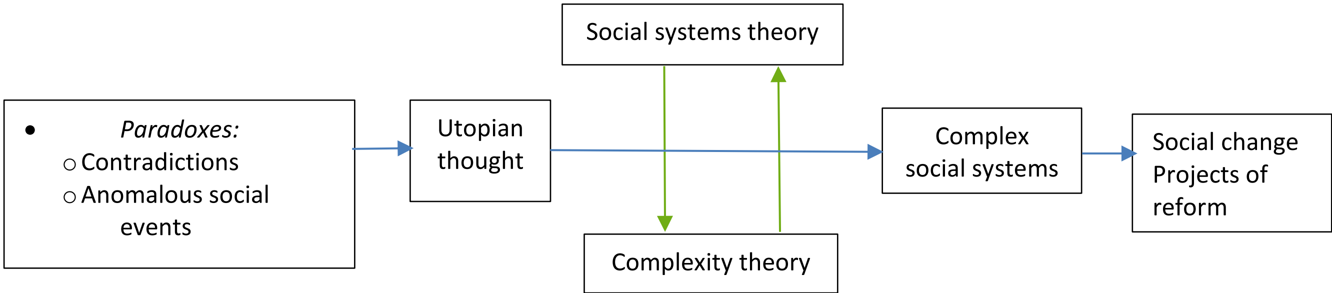
(iii) *Universality*. Social innovations and reform programs can be applied to any social context, individuals and social groups, although this is not necessary. One need only think of civil rights and liberties in Rawls' 1971 theory of justice as fairness. Restricting social reforms to specific social contexts and groups of people may point to forms of separation, segregation and conflict that would be perpetuated by the reforms. Such reforms would violate the universalist logic of utopian thought and civil rights.

(iv) *Contradictions lead to opposing outcomes*. These outcomes can have both positive and negative social implications. A well-known contradiction in the sectors populated by social economy organizations is the inability of for-profit entities to deliver high-quality relational goods, due to their tendency to exploit asymmetric information in their favor and against the welfare of users to reduce costs and increase net earnings (Hansmann, 1980, 1996).

Figure 1 shows that the detection of anomalies, contradictions and paradoxical facts in the social sphere can trigger a search process aimed at elaborating projects of social economic or political improvement or reform, which in many cases fall into the utopian sphere, at least in their initial stages. Realism is used as a criterion to verify

that what is being studied corresponds to the deep structures of social realities, for example, institutional structures, or other deep cultural elements, and not simply to apparent, ideological or temporary epiphenomena. Critical realism allows or even demands that the deep structures of society change over time, in directions that can be discussed and foreshadowed, but not accurately predicted except in qualitative terms. Complexity theory and social systems theory, especially in their more constructivist versions, allow for a deeper understanding of how the system has been changing and may continue to change over time through processes of self-organization and emergence (autopoiesis).

**Figure 1. The unfolding of utopian thinking from social paradoxes to social change and projects of reform**




### 3.1. An application to the social economy

Applying this framework to the social economy requires the exploration of utopian thinking through the lens of complexity theory in the social sciences and the study of social systems (Manson, 2001; Turner & Baker, 2019). Combining the above-mentioned concepts involves viewing social economy organizations as complex, hybrid adaptive systems characterized by outcomes that must be both economically and socially sustainable, resulting in a high degree of interdependence and a large number of nonlinear interactions (Pahl, Scholz-Wäckerle & Schröter, 2023). In the social economy, governance structures needs to be adaptive structures and organizations must be flexible and resilient enough to absorb such continuous or sudden disturbances from within or outside the social system (Tortia & Troisi, 2021; Tortia, 2024a, 2024b). In this respect, continuous or discontinuous adaptation, social entities, such as communities or social economies, can self-organize without centralized control. This principle aligns with utopian visions of decentralized and self-regulating societies.

Utopian thought that concerns the social economy may reflect an idealized vision of human society in which equity and fairness are maximized, as in Rawls approach to justice as fairness, and in his realistic utopia of The Law of Peoples (Rawls, 1971, 1999;

Hedrén, 2014; Tortia, 2024b). Cooperation and collaboration through collective action and the pursuit of social goals are taken as the norm in social action to meet the needs of individuals and groups, as opposed to competition in markets, and hierarchical social relations that characterize orthodox economic and social theorizing (Goodwin & Taylor, 1982; Levitas, 2013).

Social economy organizations, especially cooperatives, social enterprises and non-profit organizations, aim to share resources fairly and achieve an equitable distribution of economic and non-economic benefits. Economic decisions are made collaboratively among communities and organizations, rather than through hierarchical control. Flat hierarchies based on inclusiveness imply that power is distributed evenly, with collaborative decision-making and collective ownership, thus reducing the risk of marginalization and exploitation of weak social groups (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005; Walby; 2007; Amin, 2009). However, complexity theory suggests that these economic sub-systems could encounter unpredictable dynamics, resource allocation problems and other negative unintended inequalities. Therefore, given their hybrid nature, social economy organizations need to achieve economic and social sustainability (Spear, 2011).

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

This work should enhance the understanding of utopias as pathways to better knowledge and practice of the evolution of social systems in terms of progressive, social and political reform. This would support the compatibility of future outcomes and structures with what already exists today, pointing out the qualitative characteristics of social processes, leading from the current situation to future scenarios and outcomes. To evaluate the evolution of culture and social structures in progressive terms, new theoretical criteria are needed, which have been found in critical realism, social systems theory and complexity theory. The danger and shortcomings of restricting and reducing the analysis to standard assumptions concerning human rationality, and individual behavior in the functioning of the social and economic system (e.g., the dominance of the paradigm of perfect markets and contracts) has been highlighted (Büchs & Koch, 2019).

It has been argued that regressive utopias tend to pertain to past events, social orders, and ideologies. To the extent that regressive utopias tend to reproduce past events and mix them with present realities, they may be realistic, but not progressive, and are not compatible with non-contradictory and non-exclusionary changes in human societies. On the other hand, positive and progressive utopias are more closely related to new emerging features of society that may be suitable for overcoming contradictions and paradoxical outcomes. They can improve social relations and institutions in terms of inclusiveness, fairness and universality. Their epistemological foundations lie in social complexity, which directs the emergent properties of new social orders.

The uncertain nature of positive utopias makes them more prone to error and misunderstanding than negative ones. They may require decades or centuries of processes of evolution and social adaptation to be carried out, even partially, as in the case of the formation of unitary political entities in medieval Europe, or the spread and predominance of democratic political regimes in the West. Hence, progressive utopias need clearer evaluative criteria in terms of realism and realisability. Their acceptance at the political level may be much slower than regressive utopias due to their uncertain and difficult-to-understand and -predict character. The complexity and trial-and-error nature of social evolution may entail significant setbacks and detours due to the difficulty of demonstrating their practical relevance, positive outcomes, and applicability.

The social economy and the organizational types that populate it have been taken as prime example of the application of utopian thinking, precisely because they emerged historically as a forceful attempt to overcome some of the major contradictions and anomalies of capitalist market societies, especially in terms of their negative economic, social and environmental impacts. The attempt to introduce new non-profit organizational forms, to induce social innovation and to govern social processes in more equitable and inclusive ways gave rise to several new social phenomena, such as social movements, third sector organization and the cooperative economy. The emergence of the social economy has demonstrated that utopian thinking is not without meaning, reforming potential and positive outcomes when coupled with realism in its potential application, as grounded in the actual conditions of society and human nature, and evaluated using rigorous criteria of analysis that correspond to the complexity of evolving social systems.

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## Chapter 9

# Mythologizing in Economics: Of Utopias and Dystopias

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> "Practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist […] distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back." – John Maynard Keynes

### Abstract

This contribution seeks to situation mainstream economic theory with respect to Rudolf Bultmann's concept of "de-mythologizing". Applying this concept, together with Cornelius Castoriadis' discussion around "instituting" vs. "instituted" societies, the chapter argues that neoclassical economics is in fact a *dystopia*. In order to move beyond its influence, scholars and practitioners must together develop economic and management theories lodged in the lived experiences of the diversity of organizational types in existence, including cooperatives. This applies both in the study of contemporary firms, as well as in historiography, where an "archaeology of knowledge" is needed to uncover hidden or lost traditions of community-oriented wealth-building. It suggests three lines of future research to realize this aim.

**Keywords:** economics, economic history, management theory, theory of the firm, social enterprise, cooperatives

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## 1. Introduction

This contribution is to firstly understand the role of mythologization in economics in as far as it hinders or facilitates the study of cooperation. More particularly, it makes use of the concepts of *utopia* and *dystopia* to engage in two concurrent mythologization exercises. Firstly, a demythologization of the ontological framework of neoclassical economics, and secondly the development of an alternative, practice-oriented approach to economics, which can be used to develop "mid-range theories" to frame a broad array of enterprises and organizations beyond the idealized neoclassical firm.

The chapter is structured as follows. It begins in Section 2 by quickly reviewing the relative lack of attention paid to issues of cooperation in both economics and management, including specifically the pitfalls of applying a neoclassical view to cooperative enterprise. In Section 3, it introduces the approach of *de-mythologizing*, as outlined by Rudolf Bultmann, inquiring as to what it means to apply this approach to the economic domain, choosing Dow's alienation theory as an example of de-mythologizing.

It then argues for classifying neoclassical economics as a *dystopia* in Section 4, before calling for new approaches based on "de-mythologizing" and emphasizing lived experiences in Section 5. This is followed in Section 6 by a conclusion.

## 2. The Pitfalls of Applying Neoclassical Thought to Cooperatives

While the situation is somewhat better in management and business administration, cooperatives and cooperation hardly play a role in the economics curriculum (Warren, Hübner, Biggiero, and Ogunyemi, 2024). In general, cooperatives progressively disappeared from mainstream economists textbooks after the mid-20th century and exceptions to this silence (often stimulated by the successful model of Yugoslavian self-management (Ellerman, 1991) were generally heavily invested in the neoclassical model. This includes the so-called "Illyrian" or *Ward-Domar-Vaněk* model, named after Benjamin Ward, Evsey Domar, Jaroslav Vaněk (Bonin and Putterman, 2013; Dow, 2018). It also generally includes New Institutional Economics in its various iterations.

Numerous luminary figures in economics including Herbert Simon and Kenneth Arrow emphasized organizational dimensions of what one might at first glance call "cooperation". However, much of their research focus remained analytically ambiguous concerning the distinction between hierarchical *coordination* and *cooperation* proper, which Williamson described as "consummate cooperation", as opposed to "instrumental ooperation"[1]. In the end, Simon (1991) primarily analyzed coordination, not cooperation. Similarly, despite the fact that both theoretical empirical evidence has repeatedly demonstrated that cooperative behavior "pays," for example, via the success of Anatol Rapoport's "Tit for Tat" strategy in numerous

[1] Cf. Kroszner and Putterman (2009, p. 22, footnote).

computer tournaments (Gintis, 2014; Simpson, 2016), contemporary economics curricula generally still focus on binary (that is, two-person), non-cooperative and non-communicative scenarios as the benchmark pedagogical tools in approaches like game theory.

This ontological, epistemological and ultimately *methodological* poverty is all the more puzzing in the face of such evidence that cooperation is deeply intertwined with behaviors, preferences, and institutions we refer generally describe as "economic". Especially in as far as cooperation is a robust solution to the problem of "bounded rationality" (Kyriazis and Metaxas, 2013; Novković, Miner, and McMahon, 2023), it should be a strong area of interest for economic ideation and theorizing. This includes cooperation in its multiple dimensions, including cooperative behaviors in general, for instance among individuals or groups. Yet, it also includes cooperation between organizations according to a pre-established (formal or informal) codex of principles and practices, occasionally referred to as "inter-cooperation". The dimension of cooperation's scope lies beyond this latter cooperative scalar dimension.

In mainstream economics, issues concerning the scale, scope and intensity of cooperation are left to disciplines and approaches like psychology, sociology, anthropology. However, as the recently emerging approach of *relational economics* has made clear, these issues – the scale, scope and intensity of cooperation – are increasingly associated with the generation of value in firms (Wieland, 2018). Therefore, and as the production game facing firms changes, including their relationships to suppliers, consumers and governments, the approach to economic analysis must also change[2].

As this contribution attempts to make clear by looking at cooperative enterprise, the neoclassical model has many blind areas with respect to pluralistic firm types. The assumptions the model makes, such as "expectations that the economic performance of cooperatives is inferior to the performance of profit-maximizing firms because of characteristics inherent in the cooperative organizational form" (Elliott and Boland, 2023, p. 17) are not realistic when faced with decades of evidence (Pérotin, Pérotin and Robinson, 2004; Dow, 2018). Moreover, the neoclassical model is unable to account for the fact that firms exist that "may pursue objectives other than profit maximization" (Elliott and Boland, 2023, p. 19). The approach presents clear limitations when analyzing problems of member-oriented firms, including agency issues,

[2] This is also important considering the sheer influence economics has on both scientific as well as political discourse. Consider, for instance, this quote by Herbert Gintis about business schools: "After World War II, business schools blossomed all over the United States. All the major universities set up business schools. Before that, businessmen were just businessmen. They didn't go to college, or if they did they didn't learn anything about business. But these new business schools were very professional. When they wanted to teach economics, they simply borrowed from the economics discipline. In economics it's called Homo economicus. Homo economicus is not that popular any more but it certainly was after World War II. Homo economicus has no emotions. He's totally interested in maximizing his wealth and income. He really doesn't care about other people, although he does care about leisure. Leisure, income, and wealth are the only things. When they taught this to business school students it obviously followed that if you're a good businessman you should just maximize your material wealth. This is greedy. Being greedy is human, it's good to do, and the more greedy you are the more successful you'll be." Cited in Atkins, Wilson, and Hayes (2019), p. 206.

vaguely defined property rights or claims (Elliott and Boland, 2023, p. 42ff.), and related problems stemming from the complex interplay of forces within democratic or pluralistic organizations.

Indeed, a new approach would ideally be required to deal with these and related questions. But where that approach is to draw from is a question that arguably requires peeling back the mask of mythologizing that neoclassical economics has donned.

## 3. Demythologizing Economics

Economics has always been at least in part about mythologizing, as respected and renowned economist John Maynard Keynes observed, writing famously in his *General Theory* that "[p]ractical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist […] distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back" (Parsons, 1983, p. 369). As at this point countless prominent scholars have pointed out, ideas and concepts like self-regulating markets producing socially beneficent results "as if by an invisible hand", are examples of economic mythologization (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]; Hirschman, 2013; Foley, 2006; Porter, 2020, 1996; Van Lente and Rip, 1998; Giraudeau, 2018).

When philosopher, economist and psychiatrist Cornelius Castoriadis wrote of "the magma of signification" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 367), he was at least in part referring to mythologizing, the punctuated transference, interaction and interdependence between concepts, meanings and dynamic mutations and shifts that the latter experience during moments of transition. Similarly, the process of advocating for new ontological, epistemological or methodological positions or approaches involves not only "rational" argument, but also a process of "de-mythologizing", which in a figurative sense likely resembles the congealing and melting of magma around a "hard core" (Lakatos, 1978). The dialectical interchange between the real, the imaginary and the possible, interfaced by language as well as by the imagination, implies the "self alteration" of societies, which include as well business networks and scientific communities, via a communicative process of "reception/alteration" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 370) and implies "the capacity to convert the given confines of the here and now into an open horizon of possibilities". (Steyaert, Beyes, and Parker, 2016, pp. 234-235).

This capacity to alter the economics curriculum to create elements more suitable to the analysis and teaching of cooperatives, cooperation and similar forms requires, as I argue here, returning to some of the founding myths of neoclassical economics and understand these for what they are in the context of the contemporary world. In order to do so and to connect to Castoriadis' distinction, introduced below, I propose

applying Rudolf Bultmann's approach of *demythologizing*, a hermeneutic approach developed in theology, to the domain of the epistemic foundations of economics[3].

> In Bultmann's judgment, the writings of the New Testament presupposed a mythological view of the world which now presented an unnecessary hurdle to the contemporary hearing and understanding of the Christian Gospel. The New Testament picture of a three-story universe, populated with angels and demons and fraught with miracles and supernatural happenings, was appropriate to the Hellenistic age in which it was written but was necessarily alien to the scientific frame of reference of its modern hearers. [Johnson, 1974, p. 1]

Much in the same way that Bultmann found the mythological expression of Christian eschatology to be in conflict with the *kergyma*[4], I argue that the mythologizing of neoclassical economists stands in conflict with the idea of an economy as a social system and economics as a social science, studying complex, dynamic and evolving systems. Similar to the cosmology Bultmann critiques, neoclassical economics often has the veneer of presenting an objective picture of the world, which means it presents a problem in that it offers few solutions to complex challenges and therefore stands generally in opposition to an evolutionary approach to social science (Veblen, 1898). And similar to the "three-story universe" of the Christian mythology, neoclassical economics has its own angels, demons, miracles and supernatural happenings, with its strict emphasis on object-object relationships (Walras, 2013).

Similar to Bultmann, I propose as a first solution to *demythologize*: For Bultmann, "[t]o demythologize meant, in a general way, to strip away from the New Testament its antiquated world view, its objectifying conceptuality, its spatial and cosmological imagery." Similarly and orthogonally, the world which neoclassical economics describes no longer applies to a world in transition, a world beset by major conflicts and a world that is in many ways exceeding the planetary boundaries that neoclassical economists mythologize away. Therefore, it is imperative to strip away the "spatial and cosmological imagery" and the "conceptuality" of neoclassical economics. I propose to do this below via Castoriadis' distinction of *instituted* versus *instituting* societies.

## 4. Neoclassical Economics as Dystopia

While neoclassical economists often retort to accusations that their models are unrealistic with comments along the lines of "it's just a model" (Ellerman, 2021b), the point is not the realism of the models, but the social implications of economics' mythologizing. Mainstream economics' utilitarianism, its emphasis

[3] This exercise has already been attempted, albeit from a theological position. The author claims that "[Milton] Friedman has not revealed the equivalent of Moses' Ten Commandments or Buddha's Four Noble Truths, yet the faith of economism has become creedal and its tenets identifiable." (Peters, 2017).

[4] Kergyma" is Greek for "proclamation" and generally refers to the teachings of Jesus, for example the *Sermon on the Mount*. Cf. also Bultmann, 2014.

on cost-benefit analysis and its treatment of responsible human agency as a commodity have been sufficiently critiqued (Mitchell, 1918; Polanyi, 2001 [1944]; Etzioni, 2010; Porter, 1996). This is therefore not our concern here. Much more, we are interested in de-mythologizing economics, stripping away a mythological view that presents a hurdle to understanding economic and organizational challenges of the present, *a la* Bultmann, especially as it involves a perspective lodged in the dignity of labor (Ellerman, 2021a).

De-mythologizing economics from a perspective of the dignity of labor could commence in a number of ways. Taking the approach chosen by Warren et al. (2024), it might begin with a reference to a general shift towards a networked, relational economy (Wieland, 2018; Biggiero, De Jongh, Priddat, Wieland, Zicari, and Fischer, 2022). It might then continue with Dow (2018)'s outlining three principles of minimum departure from neoclassical economics' "mythological view of the world which now present[s] an unnecessary hurdle to" generating new knowledge about this networked economy, which despite advances like artificial intelligence still depends at its base on responsible human labor (Farjoun, Machover, and Zachariah, 2022).

The three myths that pose the largest hurdle, according to Dow (2018) are firstly, that markets are efficient allocators of resources and therefore, if more prosocial types of organizations like cooperatives are not able to succeed, they are obviously inferior. Secondly, that labor and capital are mere "factors of production". Thirdly, that cooperatives, and especially worker cooperatives, which Dow refers to as *labor-managed firms* (LMFs) somehow only represent extremely small firms like bicycle repair shops (Dow, 2018).

Dow defines the first hurdle as the "imperfection principle". Dow (2018, pp. 61f.) argues that "in an environment of complete and competitive markets, control rights can be assigned to any set of input suppliers (or output demanders) without endangering allocative efficiency." In fact, "the LMF [labor-managed firm] exhibits the behavioral and efficiency properties of the Walrasian firm." Thus, "[a]ny theory claiming to explain the empirical asymmetries between KMFs [capital-managed firm] and LMFs must specify one or more departures from the framework of complete and competitive markets." (Dow, 2018, p. 7). If it is the case that firms are not price-takers, entry is not free, sunk costs are not irrelevant and scale economies and working capital matter, then this circumstance surely has a role to play in the rarity of LMFs in most contemporary economies. Therefore, "[t]he task facing both advocates and skeptics of workers' control is to identify market failures that differently affect labor-managed and capital-managed firms". (Dow, 2018, p. 62)

Since the neoclassical model does not generally distinguish between firm types, it is clearly guilty of what Bultmann referred to as a "mythological view of the world". The problem becomes clear when connecting the failures of the model to account for any differential market failures facing capital- versus labor-managed firms to the policy arena. Nevertheless, the mythological view of neoclassical economics is not exhausted,

according to Dow, by reflection on market failures. As Dow (2018, p. 7) argues, "[a]lthough they are necessary, market imperfections are not sufficient to explain patterns like [e.g., compressed wage structures, less elastic quantity responses to prices], because such imperfections may have symmetric effects on KMFs and LMFs."

Therefore, in the interests of de-mythologizing, one must find fundamental differences between capital and labor that, in combination with market imperfections, facilitate differences in practice between the two firm types. Thus, Dow (2018, p. 8) suggests an *asymmetry principle*, stating that "[a]ny theory claiming to explain the empirical asymmetries between KMFs and LMFs must identify a causally relevant asymmetry between capital and labor." For Dow, as for numerous other authors in the cooperative economics and management tradition (see Ellerman, 2021b) the most relevant of these asymmetries is *alienability*, meaning that labor cannot be separated from the person providing it, as can capital. This *inalienability* represents a fundamental distinction between capital and labor, as labor is responsible productive activity[5].

The last hurdle involves the fact that, while cooperatives generally have managerial hierarchies, the neoclassical model usually stipulates that they are leaderless, small firms with no formal hierarchy. Dow's *replication principle* merely asserts that one should not essentialize non-intrinsic characteristics of firms when analyzing market and firm behavior. For example, "it would not be satisfactory to explain [productivity advantages of KMFs] by asserting that KMFs have managerial hierarchies but LMFs do not. There is nothing about the principle of ultimate control by labor suppliers that rules out the use of a managerial hierarchy." (Dow, 2018, p. 9) Dow says that one instead "would have to show that control by labor suppliers makes managerial hierarchy more costly or less effective than it would be in an otherwise identical KMF." (*ibid.*) On this basis, Lucio Biggiero has developed a multi-dimensional organizational democracy measure that takes into account the responsiveness of a firm's management to various indicators[6].

Thus, it is incorrect to infer from the fact that in most economies cooperatives have not managed to proliferate that this is merely the result of some intrinsic weakness in the cooperative form. The long-standing history of the plywood cooperatives of the Pacific Northwest and their continued resilience against their KMF counterparts; the success and proliferation of Mondragon in Spain, a collective of some €26 billion in capitalization; and the continued growth and success of the Legacoop and the combined cooperative sector in Italy (moving from 2.5% to 8% of GDP between the 1990s to the present day) put lie to this claim (Ammirato, 2018). The replication principle anchors this rejection in an analytical frame: if an LMF can do it, then it will do it, given the opportunity.

[5] Ellerman (2021b) speaks here of "imputation".

[6] See Chapter 10 in Warren et al. (2024).

Considering these three departures at a minimum[7], it is fair to say that mainstream economics, as taught in University curricula and represented in textbooks, is not able to recognize differential effects of market failures on firm phenotypes[8], as it only recognizes firms as price-takers, it is unable to view labor as anything but a differentiable and alienable commodity, to be sold on the market like apples and used cars, and it recognizes, if it regards them at all, cooperatives as quaint shops organized around a campfire, instead of being understood as complex, multi-layered organizations with a distinct identity, history and agency.

Therefore, I argue that the mythological view of neoclassical economics is actually a *dystopia* that turns the living, creative and responsible human beings engaged in the dynamic process we call the division of labor into what Ellerman (2021a) calls "part-time robots". This is especially the case when applying the lens of cooperative economics and management (CEM), which departs from a perspective lodged in the dignity of labor, supplementing this view with both a moral economy framework and a notion of abolitionist relationality[9]. It has been pointed out since Mitchell (1918), Etzioni (2010) that much of neoclassical economics is based on a strongly normative worldview. In particular, it is a pessimistic, untrusting and mechanical worldview (Bowles, 2016). Moreover, it is largely based on an atomistic view of individual agents acting in isolation, which has been critiqued both on theoretical, as well as on practical grounds (De Woot, 2005; Peters and Adamou, 2015).

Lastly, it should be pointed out that the consensus around ecological sustainability demands a new orientation of the global economic order, beyond a model of social harmony through growth (Raworth, 2017; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2020). Neoclassical economics, with its penchant for optimizing economic systems represented as differential equations is in a miserable state to meaningfully contribute to this effort. Its approach merely accelerates and intensifies the problems which the planet is experiencing, as it does not perceive anything beyond its reductivist search for competition within the price mechanism. It has already been pointed out in theoretical ecosystems science that this is a framework that is lethal for any complex, living system (Ulanowicz, 2009). Therefore, the international consensus around sustainable development serves as merely another dimension of the indictment against neoclassical economics as a dystopia.

[7] And others can be emphasized that would go beyond the limits of this short contribution. Many of these alternative departures can be found in the first seven chapters of the upcoming Warren et al. (2024), and include Global South perspectives, extending mainstream approaches like Transaction Cost Economics by introducing cooperation as a distinct pole of agency, alongside markets and hierarchy, adopting a relational approach, a feminist approach, among others.

[8] Pheno.

[9] Cf. Warren et al. (2024), Introduction.

## 5. An Ounce of Practice

In keeping with the second moment of Bultmann's de-mythologizing (Bultmann, 1962; Johnson, 1974), suitable economic theory must stem directly from the realities of economic actors who populate a diversity of economic systems and firm types with a wide range of *raisons d'etre*. It firstly requires both detailed and adequate study of the lived experiences of actors engaged in the diverse economies to be found around the globe (i.e., it must at least in part be inductive). At the same time, it demands an approach to theory-building akin to Michel Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge", which admits a multiplicity of knowledges based on shifting relationships of power. In the context of the social economy, such archaeological uncoverings have occurred in recent decades in volumes like Nembhard, 2014.

As Nembhard's and similar efforts (Kropotkin, 2021) show, de-mythologized theories often tend to emphasize the collective, the public and, most importantly, the community-oriented dimension of a diversity economic relationships over the satisfaction of individual wants. Thus, the domain of relational economics and its abolitionist cousin cooperative economics and management require new relational approaches on which to found ideation and theory-building for a range of phenomena ranging from industrial districts, research and development networks, science parks, so-called "competitivity poles", cooperative enterprise, social enterprise, stewards and purpose enterprise, enterprises with a mission, etc. Many of these approaches will be found to align with Karl Polanyi's broadened notion of economy, beyond "formal" exchange to include also the "substantive" sphere of reciprocity and redistribution (Wilk and Cliggett, 2018).

Furthermore, these efforts will involve issues of complexity in their relation to the agenda of sustainable development. Beyond this, they broach issues of organizational learning, as well as entrepreneurialism and leadership in as far as they involve deviations from an atomistic model[10]. I suggest three arenas in which this might occur, each responding to one of Dow (2018)'s three principles of alienation theory. The first of these approaches would concern the role of cooperatives in helping to facilitate a sustainable transition by acting as intermediaries in a process of strengthening local, regional, national and global economies' resilience. This element also includes viewing cooperatives and their federations as "emergently coherent" institutions that deal with complexity via a catalog of principles and practices, as authors like Silva or Camargo-Benavides and Ehrenhard (Warren et al., 2024) argue. This agenda will connect cooperatives' democratic structures to outcomes validating these structures as preferable to alternatives.

Secondly, there is a need for better understanding the role of cooperatives in achieving organizational learning, a process related variously to a sustainable transition, but more generally reflecting on a firm's ability to navigate a changing environment.

[10] On issues of organizational learning and leadership in a "de-mythologized" context, see especially Vieta, et al. and Cousin, et al. In Warren, et al., 2024.

Cooperatives' anchoring of education, training and information, as well as participation in management, arguably provide their members with the experiences needed for navigating an environment characterized by a high degree of change and uncertainty. A robust tradition in the literature exists, stemming from Pateman (1970)'s seminal work on the "spillover hypothesis." Much current and future work is being done and must be carried out to understand robustly the directionality of such spillovers, as Vieta, et al. have done in Warren et al. (2024), in which they argue for bi-directional spillovers.

Thirdly, there is an acute need for enlarging the domain of entrepreneurial theory to incorporate cooperative approaches to entrepreneurialism. In particular, how can one understand collective, community-based or distributed notions of entrepreneurialism? Concepts like the "Pegasus enterprise" and collective notions of leadership in the digital realm are promising in this respect (Cousin, et al. and also Martinelli in Warren, et al., 2024).

Surely, future challenges like artificial intelligence and data governance will place increasing strain on the cooperative sector, as it will on traditional firms, family firms, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and others. Scholars of pluralistic and heterodox economics and management science will be increasingly called upon to provide creative and bold knowledge for how to adapt to the increasingly and rapidly changing environment, including new and innovative forms of ownership (Gonza, Juri and Ellerman in Warren et al., 2024). Only by continuing to "de-mythologize" can contemporary scholars ensure that those future "scribblers" Keynes was referring to in the introductory quote are not misleading future economic, including cooperative, leaders.

## 6. Conclusion

This short contribution has set out to apply Rudolf Bultmann's concept of de-mythologizing to the economic domain, looking at where "mythological conceptions of the world" pervade and to what extent they hinder in providing new knowledge for a pluralistic economy able to deliver on the promise of sustainable development. By adopting Rudolf Bultmann's lens of "de-mythologizing", I attempted to demonstrate, borrowing Dow (2018)'s three principles of alienation theory, how neoclassical economics is in fact a dystopia. In place of this dystopia, new theories are needed that reflect not only the lived experiences, but the aspirations of a diversity of economic actors, including the cooperative sector and social enterprises more broadly.

In outlining what these theories might look like, I have drawn on Cornelius Castoriadis' juxtaposition between *instituted* and *instituting* societies and their respective imaginaries. Connecting these categories to the emerging consensus around a sustainable transition, I argued that the judgments – both on the organizational, as well as the meta-organizational level – this transition implies actually require an institut*ing* society to deliberate, select and execute.

Viewed from this vantage point, I suggested that cooperatives and their allies are actually at a competitive advantage in contributing to the realization of the goals of sustainable development, since their identity, as established in the various formulations of cooperative principles and practices adhered to globally, is anchored in both an abolitionist relationality as well as a moral economy that institutionalist economist John Commons argued represented “a new universal right to collective action” (Commons, 1936, p. 247).

I then argued that scholars to “de-mythologize” based on the lived experiences of cooperatives and their members, both presently and historically. Arguably only in this manner can the risk of harm from applying what in essence are dystopian theories by avoided.

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# Chapter 10

# A New Social Imaginary in the Making in the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE): Deliberalism

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**Abstract**

Every society is self-instituted and evolves under the authority of a radical imaginary that escapes the will of social individuals. This radical imaginary begets a social imaginary. The latter is never stable because it is shaped by the tension between the instituted social imaginary and the instituting social imaginary. As part of this understanding of Castoriadis' work, we will present deliberalism (Dacheux, Goujon, 2020) as an instituting social imaginary in the making within the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) or, more precisely, within a part of the SSE that we call "solidarity initiatives". To present this thesis, which makes liberalism the instituted social imaginary of capitalism, we will proceed in four stages: first, to set up our epistemological framework, then to define our main concepts theoretically, next to present and characterize solidarity initiatives and, finally, to indicate how deliberalism could be a new instituting social imaginary.

**Keywords:** social imaginary, social and solidarity economy, deliberalism, democracy, solidarity initiatives

**JEL-Codes:** B55, L31, Z13

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The author's idea of the imaginary institution of society is complex and open to many interpretations. For our part, we understand his work as follows: every society is self-instituted and evolves under the authority of a radical imaginary that escapes the will of social individuals and any transcendence. This radical imaginary begets a social imaginary that is never stable because it is shaped by the tension between the instituted social imaginary and the instituting social imaginary. As part of this understanding of Castoriadis' work, we will present deliberalism (Dacheux, Goujon, 2020) as an instituting social imaginary in the making within the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) or, more precisely, within a part of the SSE that we call "solidarity initiatives", while liberalism (and its variant neoliberalism) is here considered as the instituted social imaginary of capitalism[1]. To present this thesis, which makes liberalism the instituted social imaginary of capitalism, we will proceed in four stages: first, to set up our epistemological framework, then to define our main concepts theoretically, next to present and characterize solidarity initiatives and, finally, to indicate how deliberalism could be a new instituting social imaginary.

## I. Epistemological framework: for an implicated impartiality in the service of a public science

On the epistemological level, our work falls within a particular constructivism, that of complex thought conceptualized by E. Morin (1994). The latter, because it no longer separates the researcher from the citizen, calls into question the notion of "axiological neutrality". However, the latter is central for the pragmatic sociologist Nathalie Heinich (2022), for whom there is a clear demarcation between factual and value judgments. The researcher sticks to the facts, the militant defends values. Any normative approach is, therefore, in the realm of politics and therefore no longer a matter of knowledge. This epistemological position has the merit of clarity and simplicity. But it is no less problematic. Indeed, as another pragmatic sociologist, Philippe Corcuff, notes, N. Heinich[2], proceeds from a partial and sided reading of M. Weber. Indeed, he reminds us, with (unshortened) quotations in support, that Max Weber does not ask the scientist to be neutral but, on the contrary, to take into account the ethical presuppositions that inform the sociological consideration: " *In 1904, he questioned the possibility of "a knowledge of reality devoid of any presupposition*", since "***Only a portion of the singular reality becomes interesting and meaningful to us, because only that portion is related to the ideas of cultural values with which we approach concrete reality***[3]" "(Corcuff, 2017). Moreover, P. Corcuff rightly emphasizes that "*Max Weber does not forbid scientists* "***to express in the form of value judgments the ideals***

[1] To put it another way, liberalism is the system of justification of capitalism, not its truth. For example, the liberal justification of the market economy is free and undistorted competition, whereas in the capitalist reality monopolies and oligopolies are legion.

[2] *Des valeurs. Une approche sociologique*, Paris, Gallimard, 2017.

[3] The passages in bold are by Max Weber, « *L'objectivité de la connaissance dans les sciences et la politique sociales* », [1904], in *Essais sur la théorie de la science*, Paris, Plon, 1965, pp. 162-163.

***that animate them***", *provided always that they* "***scrupulously bring to their own consciousness and to that of the readers at all times, what are the standards of value that serve to measure reality and those from which they derive the value judgment***[4]". *The German sociologist here appears to be driven by a need for a reflexive differentiation between the analysis of facts and the assumption of an axiological position, the two poles having a relationship with "standards of value", and not by the thesis of a "clear-cut distinction", to use the expression employed by Nathalie Heinich. By integrating this passage, we may no longer speak as she does of "prescription", "obligation" or "imperative" with regard to "axiological neutrality". It is rather the path of sociological reflexivity that Max Weber outlines here*" (Corcuff, 2017). It thus follows that to act as a scientist is not to seek, in vain, to rise above one's citizenship but, in the dialogical perspective dear to Morin (2004), to link the two so as to better understand democratic society which, as Habermas (1997) reminds us, is carried by beings with normative values[5]. As a result, what is important is not to neutralize these normative preconceptions but to expose them publicly. In the present case, to make clear that democracy seems to us to be the most desirable form of living together as well as the most effective way of creating collective intelligence.

The distinction between fact and value is also called into question by the existence of epistemic values (Kuhn, 2008; Putman, 2002). A contemporary epistemologist, Léo Coutellec (2015), extends this analysis of epistemic value. In his opinion, the activity of the researcher forms part of a singular community, an epistemic community, which defines the rules of scientific objectivity specific to this community (The criteria for scientific validity are not the same in mathematics and archaeology), but the scientist is also dependent on the cultural and social context in which he lives, that is to say, dependent on the values, in particular the ethical values, of the culture in which he conducts his research. As a result, the researcher cannot be neutral, but must defend an "implied impartiality" that can be summarized as follows: "*What makes the scientific approach relevant in its singularity in relation to other approaches to understanding the world is not this epistemological illusion implied by the axiological triple of autonomy-impartiality-neutrality but, rather, another set of values constitutive of the sciences that can be formulated as capacities of an involved science: fertility (ability to create new questions and raise doubt); diversity (ability to welcome pluralism in all its dimensions); implied impartiality (ability to account for reality and to submit to it for verification, while explaining the context); responsibility (ability to answer from and respond to)*" (Coutellec, 2015, pp. 43-44).

[4] Max Weber, « *L'objectivité de la connaissance dans les sciences et la politique sociales* », *op. cit.*, p. 133.

[5] Without the advent of autonomy, there would probably be no constitution of modern and reflexive social sciences, because, without autonomy there is no possible reflexivity, only heteronomy. Knowledge of the social sciences may well develop with modernity, but it is also a constituent element thereof. Therefore, by participating in the constitution of knowledge, the researcher also participates in the strengthening of autonomy and, therefore, of democracy (with thanks to N. Chochoy for prompting me to make this clarification).

At a time when the conditions of habitability of the planet are in danger and when the very survival of human space is at stake, this implied impartiality must, in our opinion, be part of the perspective of a public science (Burawoy, 2013). That is to say, a science that, rejecting scientism and scientific neutrality, takes part in the public debate, not to impose its point of view in the name of a single, universal and intangible truth, but to contribute to the reflexivity of our societies by deconstructing certain evidences and or by opening up the space of possibilities. It is, in any case, from this perspective of the academic and social debate that we propose this research on the relations between the social imaginary, democracy and the social and solidarity economy. It is time to define these terms theoretically.

## II. Theoretical framework

To understand what we are trying to say, we must now define three terms. It is not a question of freezing these definitions or imposing a normative framework but, on the contrary, of encouraging critical debate around these terms. The first one we use is that of the social imaginary. It is a term used in philosophy, but also in history where it allows us to "*think about the performative dimension of representations, the effects that imaginaries can have on practices, behaviours, ways of appropriating the world and collective sensitivities*" (Pinson, 2022). To construct our definition of the social imaginary, we will, as E. Morin invites us to do, weave together three different definitions. The first is that of Cornelius Castoriadis. The latter, in opposition to structuralist and Marxist determinism, bases the existence of all systems, including the symbolic, on the existence of a radical imaginary inscribed in the unconscious of each human being. This radical imaginary institutes, beyond any individual or collective will, a singular "social-historical" that varies from one era to another. This historical social is, by definition, indeterminate because it is shaped by a tension between two collective imaginaries: an instituting social imaginary and an instituted social imaginary. Thus, the imaginary "*gives the functionality of each system its specific orientation, which superdetermines the choice and connections of the symbolic networks, the creation of each historical epoch, its singular way of living, seeing and making its own existence, its world and its relations to it*" (p. 203). However, there are no determinative links between the radical imaginary anchored in the individual psyche and the social imaginaries that underpin the economic, political, and symbolic institutions of a given society. As Nicolas Poirier (2003) explains: "*The psyche of individual humans, although it exists only in socialized form, can never be completely socialized, that is to say, the psyche can never be made to conform to what institutions require of it: this "presocial" world always constitutes a threat to the meaning established by society*" (p. 401). This vision of the social imaginary, rooted in psychoanalysis, can be complemented by two more philosophical approaches: that of Charles Taylor and that of Paul Ricoeur. The first defines the social imaginary thus: "The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of the practice of a society" (Taylor, 2004, p. 2). This definition helps to understand

his success among historians, “*It allows us to understand the influence of ideas on practices and that of practices on ideas*” (Hulak, 2010, p. 391). Indeed, the social imaginary, according to Taylor, is a way of analyzing a given historical society, because it has a double dimension: the way in which citizens imagine society; the set of social practices resulting from this imagination, that is to say, “the repertoire” of possible actions, Taylor says, for members of a society. To put it another way, the social imaginary is embodied in concrete practices which, in turn, make it possible to understand the imagination at work within a given collective. Paul Ricoeur, in an article etitled “L’idéologie et l’utopie : deux expressions de l’imaginaire social” completes these two visions. For him, the same faculty, imagination, allows us to think about our relationship to the past and to the future. Now, Ricoeur points out, what is interesting is “*the fact that this social and cultural imaginary is not single but twofold. It operates sometimes in the form of ideology, sometimes in the form of utopia*” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 51). He concludes his analysis of these two imaginaries, which are both antagonistic and complementary, in the following way: “*The double series of reflections that we have just devoted successively to ideology and utopia leads us to reflect on the necessary interweaving between ideology and utopia in the social imagination. It is as if this imaginary were based on the tension between an integrative function and a subversive function.*” (p. 63).

These three approaches feed into our theoretical definition of the social imaginary: It is anchored in a radical imaginary that no one controls. It is permeated by a tension between a function of integration (the instituted imaginary) and a critical function of subversion (the instituting imaginary), a tension which, at the same time, founds and explains the evolution of the economic, political and symbolic institutions that make up a given society. The formal expression of the instituted imaginary is ideology, the shaping of the instituting imaginary is utopia[6]. It is possible to grasp the formalized social imaginary of a given collective both on the basis of theoretical productions that legitimize (orthodox approaches) or criticize institutions (heterodox approaches), but also on the basis of collective practices that reveal both what actually is (the instituted imaginary) and what could be (the instituting imaginary). Within this analytical frame-work, it is therefore possible to shape the imaginary instituting SSE actors theoretically by analyzing their practices and the political and scientific discourses that underpin them. This, as we shall see, is the object of deliberalism.

We will define the other two terms more quickly, as we have largely justified these definitions in previous works. For us, democracy is a singular society (Dacheux, Goujon, 2020). Society is the “*ensemble des ensembles*” (Braudel, 1981) which articulates a political order (the elaboration of norms for living together), an economic order (the valorization of resources) and a symbolic order (the circulation of belief),

[6] This definition seems to be in line with Ricoeur's thought, which makes Utopia an expression, and therefore a formalization of the social imaginary, but it is very far from the thought of Castoriadis, for whom “Utopia” visibly replaces here, as in all contemporary parlance, the Kantian “regulatory idea”, removing from it the unpleasant “idealist” connotations and conferring on it, after the bankruptcy of Marxism, a pleasant “pre-Marxist revolutionary” flavour (1988, p.113).

legitimates norms (Lefort, 1986) and is not based on any transcendent order, it is autonomy (Singular, it articulates a public sphere (Habermas, 1978) where conflicts between infrastructural orders are settled, it is marked by a tension between freedom and equality (Tocqueville, 1835), it is based on the legitimacy of contestation (Castoriadis, 1975).

The social and solidarity economy, on the other hand, is an economic activism that asserts the link rather than the good. For us, it is a political expression of the instituting imaginary that articulates a critical ideal (the democratization of the economy) and alternative social experiments (cooperatives, neighbourhood boards, fair trade, etc.) that feed each other, in other words, what we call, following Ricoeur, a utopia (Dacheux, Garlot, 2019). To put it another way, the SSE as a utopia allows access to the formalized part of the instituting imaginary of our capitalist society. In any case, this is the case for a part of the SSE, the one that is not the victim of institutional or economic isomorphism, that is not part of a-capitalism, but that openly claims an alternative to capitalism, what we have called (Dacheux, Goujon, 2020): solidarity initiatives.

## III. The solidarity initiatives

As Laurent Fraisse (2024) points out, scientific vocabulary is not neutral. Talking about a social and solidarity economy company is not the same thing as talking about an organization. The first term refers to a liberal imaginary embodied by social entrepreneurs, the second refers to the plurality of legal forms that make up the SSE: cooperatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations. Similarly, he points out, the term "organization" tends to refer to a managerial imaginary that departs from the political dimension of the SSE. However, the latter is very present in the SSE (Duverger, 2023; Laville, 2010). To restore this political dimension to SSE practices, Laurent Fraisse reminds us that the actors use the term initiatives “*When talking about socio-economic initiatives, its promoters (Hersent and Palma Torres, 2014) emphasize that the economy is not only a matter of companies, even if they are social economy, but that it is also a question of economic citizenship. Moreover, one of the flagship schemes of Guy Hascoët's Secretary of State for the Solidarity Economy (2000-2002) was called “solidarity dynamics” and provided much support for new projects or activities as the creation of companies*” (Fraisse 2024, pagination not final). For our part, we have used the term solidarity initiatives, in a complementary perspective. It is also a question of underlining the political dimension of the SSE, and also of distinguishing, within the SSE, initiatives that are in opposition to capitalism. More precisely, it is a question of identifying a fringe of anti-capitalist economic militancy that stands out from the institutionalized social economy and social entrepreneurship while having links with other anti-capitalist economic movements, such as the commons or degrowth. In concrete terms, these solidarity initiatives (SI) have three characteristics:

One: These are citizen initiatives that experiment with ways of producing and consuming alternative to capitalism. Another agriculture, non-industrial and globalised, but ecological in short circuits, is desirable, as the CSAs are experimenting. To fight against the financialization of the world, we need to democratize money, which is what social currencies and SELs, etc., test every day.

Two: these initiatives are experimenting with new practices that are supported by a desire for alternatives that finds its source in the contestation of the liberal instituted imaginary, in the social and environmental degradation of the world of capitalist production and in the alternative economic theories (instituting imaginary) carried by the SSE, the commons, degrowth, Marxism, etc.

Three: the SIs may be diverse but they do have a common feature: deliberation. It is not the invisible hand of the market that builds solidarity-based economic exchanges, but discussion in local public spheres where both the terms of trade (quantity, price) and the political project of the initiative are constructed.

Our hypothesis is that the analysis of SSE practices allows, as C. Taylor (2004) indicates, to highlight the key elements of a social imaginary specific to its initiatives. The name we have given to this instituting imaginary is deliberalism. More precisely, deliberalism is a theoretical construction that is based on the utopia carried by a specific fringe of the SSE (solidarity initiatives) to develop, in the public sphere, a reflexive debate that favours the contestation of the established imaginary (liberalism) in order to facilitate the emergence of new institutions that promote the transition to a post-capitalist society.

## IV. Deliberalism

Deliberalism is a play on words. It is all about leaving behind the (neo)liberal imaginary to enter into democratic deliberation. But deliberalism is more than just a play on words, it is a rigorous theoretical construction based on the idea that in a democracy, the best factor for allocating resources is not the self-regulating market, but the deliberation of actors in the public space. This theoretical construction is based on the analysis of the practices of solidarity initiatives: all of them are utopias that rely on the deliberation of the collective that implements them. Solidarity practices thus reveal the contours of a particular social imaginary marked by:

– the search for a new form of democracy that goes beyond representative liberal democracy. The desire of the Solidarity Economy Movement (SEM) and the Network of Local Authorities for a Solidarity Economy (NLASE) to develop the co-construction of public policies or the self-management demands, present in the ZADs and in certain associative cafés, clearly indicate the presence of an alternative democratic imaginary that we have tried to specify by evoking, in accordance with our theoretical framework, various heterodox approaches to democracy, namely:

the deliberative (Habermas, 1997), creative (Dewey, 1939) and conflictual (Rancière, 2005) dimensions of democracy.

– the desire to establish a post-growth economy. Alongside the idea that deliberation is the best way to build more ecological and solidarity-based terms of trade, the ideal, experimented by initiatives such as Terres de Liens or Enercoop, of an oecomenia (an ecological economy that takes care of the home of all of us, the Earth) reconciling the economical development of resources, the protection of the habitability of the planet and conviviality is emerging which some heterodox thinkers have summarized under the idea of happy sobriety (Rabhi, 2010).

– The search for a new rationality that does not submit to transcendence but remains open to spirituality. The interchange of knowledge implemented by ATD Fourth World, the popular education practices applied by the associations and the demands of a third sector of research show the emergence of a new common sense, the search, sometimes made explicit, for a new cognitive justice, Sousa Santos (2015), resulting from a vision of science not as a single truth enlightening the world, but as a co-construction of new knowledge respectful of the diversity of knowledge. To put it another way, the imaginary that emerges behind SSE practices is that of rationality which would no longer be the indisputable universal calculation promoted by the Enlightenment, but a sensible (Laplantine, 2005), limited (Morin, 1994) and situated rationality (Varela, 1999).

Deliberalism is therefore an intellectual construction that is based on a practice common to the SI (deliberation) and that formalizes this instituting imaginary with the help of heterodox theories (which are therefore not related to the liberal imaginary) that are often evoked by the actors or researchers who accompany them. Like liberalism - which is based on the strong theoretical coherence between an economic (free competition), political (representative democracy) and symbolic (the Enlightenment) dimension - deliberalism intends to defend freedom by also articulating these three dimensions: radical democracy (politics), oecomenia (economy) and epistemology of complexity (symbolic). It is, moreover, for this reason that, in our previous work, we defined deliberalism as the system of justification[7] of the SSE, in the image of liberalism, which is the system of justification, but not the truth, of capitalism. What we would like to emphasize here is that this theoretical formalization is also a way of giving a conceptual and reflexive form to the social imaginary instituting solidarity initiatives. Are the latter not seeking, through practices such as election without a candidate or decision by consent, alternative forms of democracy? By being part of the circular economy, by seeking to develop other forms of entrepreneurship, by creating free zones, are corporate tax carriers not of another vision of the economy? By practising participatory action research, by demanding the consideration of experiential knowledge, by working for emancipation through action,

[7] We have taken the concept from Boltanski and Thévenot (1991); for us, it means a theoretical discourse of legitimation that we distinguish from the system of truth, which is the set of practices that define themselves as the only legitimate ones and invalidate the others. In our societies, liberalism is the system of justification, capitalism the system of truth.

do these SIs not bring a new relationship to science, even if few actors formulate it in this way? Thus, deliberalism is an attempt to translate the social imaginary instituting solidarity initiatives into a theoretical formalization as well as being a reflexive framework that can help these initiatives to develop, in full consciousness, new solidarity practices. Deliberalism is thus both a conceptual formalization of the instituting social imaginary and a system of justification for a post-growth society yet to come.

## Conclusion

At the end of this short survey, what can be said about the relationship between deliberalism and the social imaginary? Three things. First of all, deliberalism reveals the existence of a social imaginary at the heart of the SSE as opposed to the social imaginary that instituted the capitalist economy. Indeed, deliberalism has its source in the analysis of the practices of a fringe of the SSE, solidarity initiatives. Now, as C. Taylor (2004) shows, the analysis of practices gives access to the social imaginary of a given collective. By discovering that deliberation is at the heart of the SI, deliberalism brings to light an instituting imaginary opposed to economic liberalism, an instituted imaginary carrying capitalism. The theoretical formalization[8] of an alternative social imaginary embodied in practices and a critical political project, what P. Ricoeur (1984) calls a utopia, then opens up the political space of possibilities. Secondly, deliberalism is a tool for decolonizing the imagination. By translating the instituting social imaginary with the help of heterodox economic, political and symbolic theories, deliberalism is an intellectual construction that makes it possible to question the doxa (what is self-evident is not debatable): free trade is not the only possible conception of the economy that respects the freedom of each individual; liberal democracy can be overtaken by participatory and creative democracy; science is neither the truth of the world nor a knowledge that must submit to transcendence, but a rational, situated and limited knowledge that can authorize the co-construction of emancipatory knowledge between different forms of knowledge. However, this decolonization of the imaginary is, according to Serge Latouche (2006), the prerequisite for the advent of a post-capitalist society. If, as Castoriadis (1975) indicates, institutions are indeed the fruit of the imagination, only the establishment of a new imaginary, stripped of the rags of liberalism can, in fact, produce the bifurcation that we need. Finally, as a theory of democratic society formalized to generate debate in academic, activist and public spheres, deliberalism is also an attempt to escape the unconscious grip of the radical imagination. It is a question of avoiding the grip of this informal and unconscious magma Castoriadis (1975), without sinking into historical determinism. Seen thus, instituting society through deliberation in the public sphere is a further step towards the autonomy dear to Castoriadis: It is no longer the unconscious at the heart of

[8] It is therefore a question of a second and partial representation: the theoretical formalization of a (formal) political expression, of an instituting social imaginary that cannot be reduced to the practices and discourses of the SIs.

the faculty of the human imagination that institutes an indeterminate historical social, but human communication that makes and unmakes the rules of living together[9]. This emancipation of the psyche - impossible in Castoriadis - becomes possible once we adopt the concept, drawn from complex thought, of emergence. In the same way as consciousness emerges from the brain and allows us to better control its functioning, the deliberalism that arises from the aim of autonomy made possible by the radical imagination can help us to think of a democracy that is always indeterminate, but an indeterminacy linked to the contingencies of the deliberations taken and no longer linked to the uncontrolled emergence of meanings engendered by the psyche. A conscious autonomy that is consciously redefined according to the problems encountered and not an autonomy constantly produced by the breaches opened by the unconscious. Thus deliberalism is constituted both with and against Castoriadis' thought.

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[9] Deliberation is not pure rationality, emotions and the unconscious are obviously present. Through communication with a deliberative aim, it is a question of strengthening the power of the human imagination beyond "unconscious reproductions" (with, however, the limits of collectives that may not behave in an enlightened way but on the contrary allow themselves to be dominated by collective unconsciouss). With thanks to Marius Chevallier for prompting me to make this clarification.

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## FUTURE OUTLOOKS

# Imagining a Different World: The Ethical Responsibility of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) Researchers

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The social imaginary can be defined as a vision of the world specific to a society, a set of representations that provides a collective identity and which, by demarcating what is possible or impossible to do, delimits a scope of action (Taylor, 2004). Opening up a different kind of imaginary means enabling different kinds of action. If we want to preserve our planet's habitability, we need to break out of the production-driven and growth-oriented imaginary established by capitalism. This capitalist instituted imaginary is challenged by the new imaginary of economic alternatives, in which supporters of degrowth as well as ecological planning are striving to bring about a world of greater solidarity, ecology and democracy. In a context of crises and one in which capitalism is contested, what is the relationship between the imaginary and the SSE? This is the question that this multi-disciplinary collective work, bringing together researchers of different nationalities, has set out to answer. On completion of this dense and abundant work, what stands out? The first thing is undoubtedly the complementarity of these various approaches.

## Complementarity that enables circumscription of a research field

These ten texts are all of different nature. This lack of uniformity does not make it easy for the reader, but, on the other hand, it makes it possible to cover a broad spectrum of possible relationships between the imaginary and the SSE. Indeed, this collective work covers all the following: how narratives can mobilise SSE organisations (in the first part), the role of utopia in local solidarity initiatives (in the second part), the place of art – in this case the blues and cinema – in the construction of a solidarity imaginary (in the third part) and the necessity to deconstruct economic myths generated by orthodox economic science (in the fourth part). These four avenues of analysis are certainly not the only ones possible for exploring the links between the SSE and the imaginary, but they do enable us to set the initial markers for a new field of research, all the more so as the authors brought together by

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CIRIEC International propose theoretical and empirical approaches, combine Anglo-Saxon references and French-language works, analyse utopias and dystopias alike, develop highly rational approaches to utopia or, on the contrary, question the links between utopia and individual identities (chapter 1), but also between utopia and organisational identities (chapter 3) or sectorial identities (chapter 4), not forgetting the relationships between utopia and cultural identities (chapter 7) or social identities (chapter 6). This complementarity of the approaches highlights different facets of the links between the imaginary and the SSE and reveals just how heuristic this field of research can be. However, while the diversity of the approaches brought together illustrates the richness of a field of research that has yet to be fully explored, it also highlights a number of differences of opinion.

## Convergences and divergences

The aim of this work is to invite researchers to explore the relationships between the imaginary and the SSE, not to propose a single, coherent doctrine. So, while there are some points of convergence, it is not surprising that there are also some points of divergence. Let us start with the convergences. The first is massive and is connected to the reason which incited the authors to write their text: the ecological emergency calls for a change of economic model, which, according to the contributors, is only possible if we develop a new imaginary, a new representation of the world and the economy. A new world demands new solutions. New solutions require effort with regard to imagination, a new imaginary that authorises unprecedented experiments enabling combination of democratic demands, ecological urgency and creation of social utility. The second convergence very closely linked to the first is also often explicitly formulated by the authors: there are alternatives. Contrary to what Margaret Thatcher, neo-liberalism is not the be all and end all of the matter. Admittedly, there is no historical determinism that leads inevitably to the end of capitalism, but the need to face up to ecological and social problems is producing social innovations that are outlining paths of resilience. These paths are not definitive, nor do they all necessarily lead to sustainable solutions, but they all show that there are different ways of doing business. It is no longer a question of remaining locked in the narrow paths of a limited rationality defining a sole and single possible path, but of trusting collective intelligence to constantly adapt to changes in the environment we are modifying. As so eloquently put by Laigha Young (chapter 7): let us improvise! Much less explicit, but just as present in the writings brought together in this collective work, multi-disciplinarity is practiced by all the authors, who enrich their original discipline with contributions to political philosophy and/or the epistemology of complexity. To think differently, it is necessary to step outside one's discipline. This work illustrates a strong hypothesis expressed in an issue of a CNRS journal devoted to epistemology: inter-disciplinarity implies indiscipline (Hermès, No. 67, 2013). These three convergences form a common base, which in no way precludes divergences. The first is the reference to degrowth and post-growth. All the authors talking about the SSE support the need to act for a sustainable transition, but a transition towards what?

Some texts explicitly cover degrowth and post-growth (chapters 3 and 10) or quote authors who are specialists in degrowth (chapter 5), but the others do not, as if the local roots of the SSE - its pragmatic desire to stick as closely as possible to territorial developments - prevented it from recognising itself in a prescriptive political project. The second notable difference concerns space. As illustrated in chapter one, SSE players and the researchers who study them do not seem to have the same understanding of the configuration of the arenas on which social innovations act. Are we talking about singular places, re-enchanted by utopia, heterotopias as Foucault would say, which offer an escape from economic globalisation (chapters 3, 4 and 5) or are we talking, on the contrary, about arenas of conflict, counter-public spaces where citizens develop their autonomy by creating spaces for struggle within democracies plagued by the far right (chapter 2 and chapter 10)? Finally, the third and last major difference: what is the core value of the SSE – is it autonomy (chapters 2 and 10), solidarity (chapter 6) or cooperation (chapters 5, 7 and 9)? These divergences, and others that the attentive reader may have spotted, underline the diversity of possible approaches to the emerging subject regarding the study of the relationship between the imaginary and the SSE. And yet, despite the diversity of perspectives offered, there are still a few blind spots that need to be clarified.

## Two blind spots: the rise of the far right and digital servitude

Many of the authors in this book cite Paul Ricoeur's book Ideology and Utopia to define utopia as one of the components of the social imaginary. This is a relevant but partial interpretation. Indeed, according to Ricoeur, utopia should not be thought of in itself, but in relation to another component of the social imaginary: ideology. According to the philosopher, ideology and utopia are ternary structures that are symmetrically positioned and oppose each other. At an initial level, which he calls pathological, ideology is a dissimulation, a distortion of reality, while utopia is an escape from reality. At a second level, the function of ideology is to legitimise established authority, at the risk of distorting reality. This is a risk that utopia fights, because it undermines the credibility of authority. At a third level, ideology is a matrix for social integration, while utopia is a form of social subversion. What is at stake is that there is a form of tension, an unstable equilibrium, at each of these levels. Striking a balance between utopia and ideology strengthens democracy, but if the imbalance is too great, democracy falters. In such a case, nostalgia and myth come into play (see Table 1). Indeed, according to the analytical grid shown in this table, the democracies of the European Union have entered a downward spiral: the integrating conflict between utopia and ideology is gradually giving way to a destructive antagonism between myth and nostalgia. To explain, in European democracies, the civil arena - that of citizens' solidarity initiatives - is healthy, but the public arena (where public opinion is formed) and the political arena (where decisions are taken) are sick. In the political arena, the elites have been unable to think of an alternative to liberalism since the fall of communism. They clash over the possible variants of the ideology (from ultra-liberalism to social liberalism), variants which are not equivalent, but which in no way constitute

an alternative to this ideology. As a result, in the public arena, alternative proposals are being developed that are described as populist and aimed at all those who reject the ideology that has been transformed into a myth.

**Table 1: The four-stroke symbolic engine of democracy**

*Nostalgia and myth*

Nostalgia and utopia challenge the current order. Yet, while utopia is a forward-looking project rooted in the past, nostalgia is a complete rejection of the present that looks to the past. Indeed, etymologically, nostalgia is an aching to return to the past, but the *Trésor de la Langue Française* dictionary stipulates that it is also a pathological disorder which, in the nineteenth century, meant “a melancholic regret for a thing, a state, an existence that one has had or known, a desire to return to the past”.

In its usual sense, a myth is a fabulous tale involving supernatural beings (gods, demons or heroes). In 1957, R. Barthes took up C. Levy Strauss's idea of a link between myth and ideology.[1] For him, a myth is a symbolic operation that aims to maintain an ideology by naturalising it, “The development of a second semiological system will enable myth to escape the dilemma: forced to reveal or liquidate the concept, it will naturalise it. This is the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature” (p. 237). [...] “This is the very approach of bourgeois ideology” (p. 251).
Myth is a secretion of ideology that aims to keep things as they are. It therefore helps to combat nostalgia, which is itself all the stronger when the utopia is weaker.

*The utopian dimension of myth and the mythical dimension of utopia*

Every utopia has a mythical dimension that aims to make people believe that the desirable future is already a desirable reality. This is what Ricoeur calls the “pathology” of utopia. Similarly, the strength of a myth lies in its utopian dimension. It only succeeds in naturalising the present by emphasising and explaining current promises. This is why myth is often invested in by activists who seek to take the promises it contains at face value. This dual polarity is generally beneficial: it links utopia to the present and opens up myth to the future. But it can also be dangerous when the myth becomes so powerful that it attracts a strong militant energy which, having been exhausted in trying to make the promises of the myth come true, fails to build an alternative utopia. As a result, those who do not identify with the myth are condemned to desert the public arena and/or give in to the siren song of nostalgia.

*Four stroke*

The integrative conflict between utopia and ideology energises democracy, with today's utopia destined to become tomorrow's ideology. However, if utopia disappears, it is replaced, in the symbolic order, by nostalgia. It is then fought by myth. These are the four symbolic pistons of democracy.

[1] Yet, the intrinsic value attributed to myth stems from the fact that the events, which are supposed to take place at one point in time, form a permanent structure. It refers simultaneously to the past, the present and the future. A comparison will help to clarify this fundamental ambiguity. *Nothing resembles mythical thinking more than political ideology*. In today's society, perhaps this has only replaced that (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 228-231).

These propositions look to the past, a golden age that needs to be rediscovered, nostalgia for the happy days when the world was stable. This nostalgia becomes xenophobic because it compensates for economic insecurity with security of identity. As a result, it is rightly opposed by the European elites. In the absence of a new utopia[2], these elites are proposing, for 2030, a new European myth named, by the President of the European Commission, the European Green Deal (involving green growth based on a dual ecological and digital transition) which is supposed to mobilise European citizens. This myth has the particularity of combining liberal ideology, technological determinism and a utopian dimension (reconciling the economy and ecology). This utopian dimension is so strong that many activists mistake the bubble of the sustainable development myth for the light illuminating the ecologist utopia. Yet, the very name of this project shows that it does not embody a new European utopia, but rather the Europeanisation of an American ideology. However, this global ideology, embodied in the myth of the European Green Deal, is not matched by any utopia known to the general public. As a result, those who have no other future other than the uncertainty of an unstable world that they do not recognise and that does not recognise them turn away from political life and/or seek reassurance in the arms of nostalgia embodied by the parties of the far right. The latter skilfully play on the rejection of the inegalitarian model promoted by the elites, on fears of the future and on a sentiment of confusion (Corcuff, 2021) that glorifies a past marked by the Cold War, decolonisation and the armed violence of extremist groups, while disregarding historical facts.

Re-thinking the imaginary of the SSE therefore means not only highlighting the links between social experimentation and utopia, but also underlining how this new imaginary is invisible because it is doubly opposed by the instituted imaginary of capitalism and the regressive nostalgia of the far right. This regressive nostalgia develops because the future is clouded, but also because the present is unstable: it is unstable due to ecological and economic crises, unstable due to wars and the widespread rearmament of the planet, but also unstable due to the lack of credible information. A quotation from H. Arendt perfectly explains the current dynamic:

> *"What allows a totalitarian dictatorship or any other dictatorship to reign is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed? When everyone lies to you all the time, the result is not that you believe the lies, but that nobody believes anything anymore.*
>
> *This is because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, and so a lying government has to constantly rewrite its own history. As a citizen, you are not on the receiving end of just one lie - which you may continue to believe for the rest of your life - you are on the receiving end of many, depending on how the political wind is blowing.*

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[2] The European Union is in fact the daughter of utopia, the daughter of all the writings which, from Kant to Victor Hugo, via Rousseau and the Duke of Sully, called for perpetual peace and an end to wars between European nations.

*A population that can no longer believe anything cannot form an opinion. They are deprived not only of their capacity to act, but also of their capacity to think and to judge, and you can do what you like with such a people".*[3]

The ease with which the likes of personalities such as Milei, Trump or Meloni manage to convince a majority of voters proves - alas! - the point of H. Arendt. However, in our collective work, there is little discussion of digital connection tools. Yet these tools partly shape our imagination through what Morozov (2014) calls technological solutionism, the idea that the solution to all crises (economic, ecological and democratic) lies in technology, which, however, creates a present in which everything accelerates (Rosa, 2010). This digital urgency clashes with the ecological pace of living things. Life mutates, evolves and transforms over time, whereas economic pre-eminence on the short term tends to sacrifice biodiversity and the climate on the altar of profitability. The long-term evolution of living things is being called into question by short-term decisions that are leading to an unprecedented ecological disaster. We need to act quickly to preserve life while taking the time to build a sustainable society together. This contradiction is the central difficulty of all policies aimed at solving the ecological crisis.

Another considerable problem which players in the SSE striving to work towards a new imaginary come up against is digital connection. Indeed, the applications and software controlled by the GAFAM are slowly but surely leading us into an era of digital servitude[4] (Poitevin, 2020) in which the suspension of our personal data and the proliferation of algorithms are restricting our autonomy. Yet democracy, as chapters 2 and 10 of this work remind us, is precisely autonomy - auto (self) and nomos (norm, law). In a democracy, it's not God, the supreme leader or GAFAM that make the laws that govern us, but it is the people who make, unmake and remake the rules that enable them to live together. The more our choices depend on market algorithms, the more our political autonomy diminishes and the weaker democracy becomes.

In the end, the democratic autonomy so dear to Castoriadis (1975) is under a twofold threat: by xenophobic nostalgia which, in the absence of a visible utopia at European level, appears to many to be the only way of combating the myth of green capitalism; and by digital connection tools which speed up time, encourage misinformation and thus create digital servitude. These two threats combine and help to make invisible the emergence of a new social imaginary supported by the SSE, one in which there is a world that is more supportive, more ecological and more democratic, where citizens can freely organise themselves to find solutions to the problems they face.

As readers will have realised, pointing out the blind spots in this collective work is a way of emphasising that this book is not the end of the journey but the beginning of

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[3] Source: https://www.les-crises.fr/une-archive-exceptionnelle-un-certain-regard-entretien-avec-hannah-arendt-1973/

[4] Digital servitude which is, at the same time, the fruit of our freedom, but also the product of a 'management of appropriation' of our personal data by the GAFAM (Guignard, Le Caroff, 2020).

an exploration. Our collective research has opened up a new field, but in no way claims to be exhaustive. On the other hand, this approach is also, and perhaps above all, an invitation to conduct research differently, to combine indiscipline (exploring new fields by combining different disciplines) and ethical responsibility (developing a public science that opens up the range of possibilities in the public arena). And what if, in the era of the Anthropocene, we were to collectively construct a new scientific imaginary?

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