



## 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

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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 19<sup>th</sup> century; consumer republic in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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<sup>1</sup> 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”<sup>2</sup>. 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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> <https://futursproches.com>

<sup>3</sup> <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 Access for all	Demonstration Going to the open-air market 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 Technology friendly (computer as useful companion)	Social dialogue; discussion A regular bug to modify organization 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) Fulfilling work (vs. for a living) Neighbourhood	Create a space for dialogue with residents in an area	Ordeal Navigation: to round the cape
The GAFAMs have become Social Solidarity Economy companies	Drawn at random	Every citizen may participate in decision-making Digital sector = open (vs. Lucrative) Board meeting in rural town	Governance: debates, inclusion of civil society (drawn at random and 1-year mandate) Pedagogical efforts 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) Zero waste, waste as a resource	Campers’ council (lively) Converting waste into energy 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 Happy and productive work Local territory Circular economy AI friendly	Governance Conviviality	Taste for life Battle Salutary crisis Ordeal 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 embringer 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.*





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