CHAPTER 4

GRASSROOTS UTOPIAS IN SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

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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 Making quality tea and local herbal teas	1992 Cultural third place at the service of its users, cultural rights Territory factory Permanent experimentation	1996 Participatory artistic practices and accompaniment of artists Association as a project	2015 Alternative for another education. Individual (child, adult) in a collective. 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 Cooperative orientation schema (SOC) co-constructed 2020-22 But the challenge of putting it in practice	Participatory governance Board of competence Creating a link between employees and board	Associative status but based on a cooperative model. Giving power to employees. Link between employees, volunteers and users essential but not decisive in the final analysis
Territory: **the importance of places**	Territory of the struggle Territory of supply	Between openness and closure The work of the territory Conflicts of use	Anchoring in its territory through its governance, through its activity	Anchoring oneself in its territory through the activity (educational and cooperative). Building future together.
Work and freedom	Work in chains But pride in work Organisation of work: the choice of making. *Liberating yourself in and through work*	Paradox of enclosure Reopening: internal and external dialectics Tensions over use *Liberating oneself in and through work*	Learning together, participating *Liberate yourself in and through your work*	Project to be maintained despite the fragility of the economic model *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, implemen-tation, 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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An Analysis of Socio-Economic Models in Action (2025). Cahiers de Recherche(s) Caisse des Dépôts. Contributors: Mariagrazia Cairo Crocco, Melaine Cervera, Cyrille Ferraton, Laurent Gardin, Patrick Gianfaldoni, Vincent Lhuillier, Delphine Vallade
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Cairo Crocco M., Gianfaldoni P., Nicoli M. (2024). "Understanding a Socio-Economic Model in Social Integration through Economic Activity: An Entrepreneurial Approach to Territorial Development" in Gianfaldoni P., Richez-Battesti N., Fraisse L. (eds.) *The Development of Territories through the Lens of Social and Solidarity Economy*, Editions universitaires d'Avignon.

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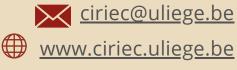Her research is about social economy in Europe. In this large field, she is working on cooperatives, social enterprises and social innovations. In an institutionalist perspective, she mainly observes the transformation of organizations in a context of new welfare state and intensification of competition, and their effects on the quality of job, on the link with the territory, on the governance and on forms of hybridization. She is also working on data about SSE in a French perspective and her last book was written with Eric Bidet, *L'innovation sociale: expérimenter et transformer à partir des territoires*, Coll. Mondes en transition, Les Petits Matins, 2024.