



# INTRODUCTION SSE UTOPIAS AND IMAGINARY NARRATIVES

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

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### **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 19<sup>th</sup> 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<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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: deliberation. 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 deliberation 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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