

Title: The Authentic Cooperative Identity: Cooperation as Anarchist Philosophy

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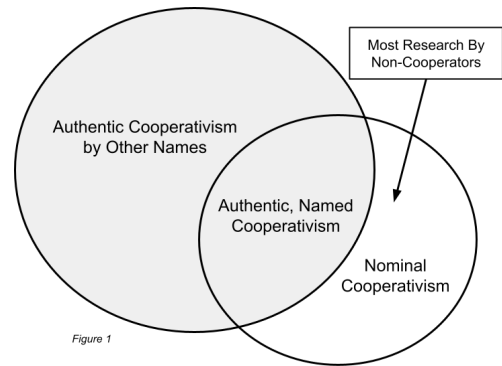
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## **OVERVIEW**

Anarchism, as a philosophy, strives for a world free of coercion and oppression. Following, it calls for the abolition of both the nation-state and capitalist systems given that coercion and oppression are both cornerstones of their functioning. Subsequently, I propose to explore and delineate the full expression of the Cooperative Identity as an expression of anarchist philosophy that rejects and resists the power of the state and capital. While there is existing scholarship from radical theorists, such as Peter Gelderloos (2015), Noam Chomsky (2018), and Mark Fisher (2009), exploring the expression of cooperativism outside or - more aptly - in spite of capitalist and authoritarian landscapes, the bulk of such thinking is cursory and often fails to consider the core philosophy and written canon of cooperativism.

This diminution is largely due to the limited distribution of cooperative literature by its philosophers, as well as the confusion created by both the misapplication and underapplication of the name “cooperative” among visible initiatives. There are an abundance of wholly cooperative projects choosing to identify with unexamined language such as “mutual aid” or socialist rather than cooperativism, creating a false distinction between cooperativism and those endeavors. “Virtually all peoples around the world [...] have practiced mutual aid” (MacPherson, 1998, 225). Additionally, many of the highly visible and cooperatively named projects that have reached scale within globalized capitalism engage in behavior antithetical to the Cooperative Identity - inviting in forms of controlling outside investment, creating a specialized management

class, and other profit-maximizing strategies. The existing critiques of cooperativism by anarchist and radical thinkers, such as those mentioned above, is often analysis of those visible, corrupted expressions of cooperativism; rather than of the Cooperative Identity, the written work of cooperative philosophers, or an analysis of the application of the actual movement stewarded theory in practice. Ultimately the group of those who practice authentic cooperativism, regardless of how they name or frame their work, and those who name their work as Cooperative can be represented as a venn diagram with the latter circle smaller than the other, with most mainstream research considering only those cooperatives in the independent segment of the smaller circle (Figure 1).



This paper, first, analyzes the ways in and degrees to which cooperative theory and practice has departed from the radicalism from which the Cooperative Identity has developed, explaining the predominance of inauthentic, nominal cooperativism. Second, the paper approaches the contextualization of authentic cooperativism as anarchist praxis by laying out a concise interpretation of the Cooperative Identity that is the fullest expression of a striving against coercion and oppression. Through this theorization, I proffer that the most authentic and historically coherent expression of the Cooperative Identity is when it is in harmony with anarchist philosophy calling for the abolition of the nation-state, free market capitalism, and all forms of systemic and individualized coercion and oppression. Such an inference begets further research into how the expression of authentic Cooperative Identity can be best achieved when developing new cooperatives, what accountability to authentic Identity looks like within a movement community, and what implications this framing has for how we choose to operate the infrastructure developed to self-govern the movement.

The supporting research for this paper includes literature from the aforementioned theorists and their contemporaries, such as Elinor Ostrom (1990) and Nick Estes (2019), as well as an analysis of existing literature on the Cooperative Identity from within the Cooperative Movement including, but not limited to, the Guidance Notes on the Cooperative Principles (ICA, 2017), notes from ICA Global Conference and Congresses (1980, 1995), reflections from cooperative philosophers such as Father Arizmendiarieta, A F Laidlaw, and Ian MacPherson, as well as

documentation of the Rochdale Equitable Society of Pioneers. With these materials, it is possible to conduct an analysis and critique of each piece of the Cooperative Identity, beginning with reinterpretations of its Principles, an explication of its Values and their application to the Principles, as well as a review of the defining Statement to establish cooperativism within the landscape of anarchist philosophy.

## **CORRUPTED COOPERATIVISM**

*“Cooperatives were started solely as an alternative to private business or capitalism.” “In the past, it must be admitted, too much of the development of cooperatives has been dictated by the examples and models of capitalist business, as seen by the terminology, structure, methods, and even the titles opted into the cooperative sector” (Laidlaw, 1980, 41, 42).*

### **Capitalist Realism**

Throughout the last century, cooperativism and its expressions have been corrupted by authoritarian and capitalist ideologies. The devolution of the Cooperative Identity overtime has amounted to cooperativism as primarily understood within a seemingly inherent capitalist context or, more succinctly, “capitalist realism” (Fisher, 2009). Ian MacPherson, cooperative historian and scholar, observed a “widespread belief in many countries that the future belongs exclusively to a capitalist economy,” and thereby described “capitalist realism” more than a decade before Mark Fisher, cultural theorist and philosopher, defined it (1998, 229). A key facet of “capitalist realism” - the predominant sense that capitalism is the only viable political and economic system, to the point it has become “impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative” - is “business ontology.”

Within a “business ontology,” all elements of exchange are understood as with and between businesses or their supporting nation-states (Fisher, 2009, 17). It additionally understands all valuable exchange to be fiscal transactions - “a brutal state of affairs, profoundly inegalitarian - where all existence is evaluated in terms of money alone - and presented to us as ideal.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cox, Christoph & Whalen, Molly. “On Evil: Interview with Alain Badiou.” *Cabinet* 5, Winter, 2001.

This is evidenced in the cooperative community by the mistaken belief that a cooperative is solely a form of business or fiscal enterprise - concepts now understood exclusively in a capitalist context, rather than a complex identifying framework used to understand and guide any and all aspects of human interaction. "There is a strong tendency among cooperators nowadays to avoid theory and ideology and instead 'get on with the business'" (Laidlaw, 1980, 32).

## The Cold War

A considerable tipping point at which capitalism "won" over the hearts and minds of society and the Cooperative Movement was the end of the Cold War. With the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the "end of history,"<sup>2</sup> it was generally believed that an ideological war between socialism and capitalism came to a close. While this is both untrue and a vast oversimplification of what transpired, it was "accepted by the cultural unconscious" that capitalism rightfully won a decades-long, global ideological war against any and all forms of communitarianism (Fisher, 2015, 10). What was presented as a comprehensive illustration of socialism by the Cold War context only consisted of examples of centrally-planned, government controlled economies, whereas capitalism was presented as a system in which economies operate "freely" with government as a subordinate enabler of capital.<sup>3</sup> This created a false sense that there was a "correct" and "friendly" form of government intervention in the economic and, accordingly, social affairs of people, and that all forms of socialism mandated oppressive government control of daily life. It is notable that cooperative literature solicited by the International Cooperative Alliance prior to the end of the Cold War frequently and openly names both capitalism and the nation-state as major foes of cooperativism - most notably the 1980 ICA Congress Report, though the literature thereafter barely names the former and considers the latter almost solely in allyship - as in the 1995 ICA Congress Report.

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<sup>2</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, no. 16, 1989, pp. 3–18.

<sup>3</sup> The policy and theory advocating for the shift of government's role in society to that of enabler of capitalism is commonly referred to as "neoliberalism."

## Coerced Compliance

A key example of coerced compliance of cooperatives with capitalist and pro-state norms is the concert of legal requirements for those enterprises that wish to participate in the formal economy. The businessification and non-profitization of cooperatives commonly occurs through the process of legal incorporation, when traditional or intuitively designed organizational structures and processes are forcibly changed - transforming intentional and, often, culturally-specific systems into conventional Boards of Directors, titled and rigid officer positions for individuals, as well as mandated decision-making processes.

“Legal requirements and corporate structure may also distort the true nature of a cooperative, which is essentially much closer to an association than a corporation” (Laidlaw, 1980, 33).

While less violent and immediately catastrophic, this coercive process for cooperatives bears similarities to those enacted by the United States government during their long term and ongoing oppression of indigenous peoples by stealing their land, forcing them into reservation communities, and imposing governance systems on tribal groups.

“The primary conflict boiled down to governance. The reservation system and the imposition of the elected tribal councils had all but dissolved traditional governance. In its place, a winner-takes-all electoral system turned relatives against each other, and harsh political divisions broke down the family kinship unit, the tiospaye - an extended network of relatives that was fundamental to decision-making and care-taking. The arrangement that replaced it instead fomented division and rivalry over scant resources, catering to outside corporate and state interests; it was a type of neocolonialism” (Estes, 2019, 37).

This kind of coercion by the nation-state to participate in and perpetrate the capitalist system is incredibly commonplace throughout the world.

The nation-state is not the only coercive actor. Given the ubiquitousness of capitalism throughout society, its values have become embedded within cultures with which people strongly identify. For example, “grind culture” advocates for constant work and ties self worth to material wealth gained via that work. Further, the type of work that is glorified in grind culture is most often independent and self-directed endeavors outside the formal economy (e.g. selling drugs, product resale), though it has in recent years become used by young corporate workers to glorify long hours and self sacrifice for the benefit of their employer. Grind culture in the

informal economy directs individuals to essentially bring capitalist values and methods of exchange into community systems, while the latter iteration among corporate employees in the formal economy allows individuals to justify their own exploitation. Both examples speak to the internalization of capitalist values impacting individual conceptions of self worth and purpose, which then facilitate an individual functioning as an agent of capitalism and their own coercive actor.

Within the cooperative context, the devolution of the tradition of the Rochdale Equitable Society of Pioneers (RESP) towards an aesthetic of “empowered consumerism” is one of the most notable impacts of the various forms of capitalist coercion. The RESP, whose philosophy shaped the Identity of the modern cooperative movement, began organizing themselves in response to the violence of the Industrial Revolution; to resist the encroachment of capitalism on their lives. Their contemporary heritage is the modern-day consumer sector of the Cooperative Movement, now largely comprised of national, large-scale retail chains and luxury retail food stores, some of which endeavor to provide affordable, “basic needs” products often via special programs rather than as a core function. The shift from cooperative resistance of capitalism to empowered consumerism within capitalism had already taken place by the first half of the twentieth century, as the 1966 revision of the Cooperative Principles have since been criticized for being too “oriented towards consumer cooperatives” (MacPherson, 1995, 208). Today, there is active discourse around the integrity of consumer cooperatives with relation to the Cooperative Identity, given that they often employ a workforce that does not enjoy ownership or control within the cooperative and behave in other ways that perpetuate capitalist values and norms.

### **System of Presumed Virtue**

The corruption and, at times, co-optation of cooperativism has taken place over more than a century. The gradual nature of this development is one element of the process that has logically allowed many practitioners to ignore or not readily perceive the changes to how the philosophy has been expressed or even how their role within cooperative practice has shifted. Another element that has both enabled the degradation of the ideology and hindered its potential evolution is what cooperative scholar AF Laidlaw called a “system of presumed virtue” in which people assume that they are acting ethically, cooperatively, and “doing it right” simply because

“it is a cooperative” (1980, 32). This is akin to what theorist Mark Fisher refers to as “alternative cultural zones” in which people “repeat older gestures of rebellion” while actually constituting the mainstream culture against which the rebellion was originally formed (2009, 14). Today’s nominal or corrupted cooperatives are examples of such alternative cultural zones, and those members and workers within them are operating within systems of presumed virtue. Of further and considerable note is the extension of the system of presumed virtue into those nominal cooperatives used as tools of colonization, imperialism, and oppression. For example, within Canada and the United States, cooperatives were used by colonizing governments to expand the control of land and resources by their settlers, and to thereby further oppress and marginalize the land’s indigenous residents and stewards.<sup>4</sup> Cooperatives still exist today that were created by nation-states or their agents, as well as by independent groups of settlers to facilitate the violent displacement of people and/or the exploitation of resources from foreign lands - such as the aptly named “Settlers Cooperative” in Bruce Crossing, Michigan in the United States. In acknowledging the harm perpetuated by the presumably virtuous - as well as what wealth is still possessed as a result of that harm, there are broad implications for the necessity of reparations within a fully coherent cooperativism if it is to be truly virtuous.

## **AUTHENTIC COOPERATIVISM**

### **Philosophy Not Checklist**

The foundation and core of cooperative thought is the Cooperative Identity; a collection of Principles, Values, and a defining Statement. The Cooperative Identity is stewarded by the International Cooperative Alliance, which has tended to the Identity a handful of times over the past century through discussions, revisions, and the development of complementary canon. Despite this intention and care, there persists a “tendency to see the Principles as a set of organizational injunctions rather than an integral part of a coherent philosophy,” or, more simply, as “a checklist of institutional structures” (206, 209). This tendency was named by Ian MacPherson, in his address to the 1995 ICA Congress explaining the process he and others

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<sup>4</sup> Sengupta, Ushnish, Indigenous Cooperatives in Canada: The Complex Relationship between Cooperatives, Community Economic Development, Colonization, and Culture (August 13, 2015). *Journal of Entrepreneurial and Organizational Diversity*, Vol. 4, No. 1, (2015): 121-152.

had undertaken to revise the Cooperative Principles into the current Cooperative Identity maintained today.

If one only conceives of the Cooperative Identity as a structural checklist, it is possible to entertain an interpretation of cooperativism that considers the existence of the nation-state and capitalist systems as both natural and necessary. When the Principles and Values, in particular, are assessed in concert as a complex philosophy, any sense of the nation-state or capitalism as inherent or needed are quickly nullified.

“We do not review our ideology merely to repeat it, but also to examine it critically, sometimes to defend it, but also to revise it when necessary and allow it to evolve.

Methods, rules, and practices, as opposed to principles, continue to have momentum in the Cooperative Movement long after their validity and usefulness are finished” (Laidlaw, 1980, 34).

Accordingly, it is vital that the cooperative community develop explicit commentary and philosophy exploring how the Cooperative Identity is expressed without and in opposition to oppressive and exploitative systems. Doing so is both in service to disallowing the movement’s core philosophy being treated as a simple checklist that provides for inauthentic cooperativism, as well as in order to develop strategies for moving beyond capitalistic and authoritarian modes towards a more cooperative world.

## **Reconsidering the Cooperative Identity**

The bulk of this paper and research is a piece by piece analysis of the Cooperative Identity exploring each element in the context of all others, as well as within the lineage of cooperative thought over the last century. These revelations are then contextualized within key facets of anarchist, anti-capitalist, and anti-authoritarian philosophy. Given the fact that the Principles are the most direct outgrowths of the Identity’s roots in the philosophy of Rochdale Equitable Society of Pioneers, as well as their wider consideration by modern cooperators than the Identity’s other elements, they are assessed first, followed by the Values and the Statement. In considering the Cooperative Identity, part by part and in its entirety, it is essential to ground any and all interpretations in its non-prescriptive nature.

“How each principle is expressed in a cooperative varies by the cooperative. For each significant issue there will be a continuum of possible choices from which a cooperative



can select the most appropriate, but each principle demands a form of minimal behavior from every cooperative” (MacPherson, 1995, 208).

Similarly, radical theory and practice implies forms of minimal behavior by individuals and groups, without being prescriptive of how such behavior is to necessarily look or be assured.

## **CONCLUSION: FIRST-NEXT STEP**

Often, cooperative practitioners do not consider cooperativism to be in peership with other, more established schools of radical philosophy and practice, precisely because cooperativism promotes a model that can participate in the marketplace. However, “whether a given type of economy can survive, much less grow, within capitalism is a poor measure of its liberatory potential” (Gelderloos, 2015, 63). Cooperative practitioners and thinkers, too, have a tendency to shrink cooperativism to an alternative, among countless organizational and social philosophies, which do not seek to radically transform society. Some even embrace the conceptualization of cooperativism as a “kinder, gentler form of capitalism.” However, it is imperative that this segment of the Cooperative Movement do away with its “comfortable position of defeated marginality” and perceive the potential power of cooperativism to truly rival capital and state power, rather than just react to or cope with it (Fisher, 2009, 78).

Through the in depth analysis of the Cooperative Identity, cooperativism can be located within the landscape of anarchist striving as a “first-next-step” towards a world free from coercion and oppression. This both humbles cooperativism as a means to an end, and brings cooperativism into greater peership with more documented and acknowledged philosophy. It can prove exponentially impactful in revealing the relevance of the cooperative model to many practitioners and theorists working from anarchist and radical perspectives - and vice versa, thereby knitting together scholarship not yet fully realized as wholly intertwined.

“It is in struggling to understand how the range of possible action implicit in cooperative thought, principles, and practice should be applied in the contemporary experience that cooperators make their contribution” (MacPherson, 1998, 253).

Beyond raising further inquiries for consideration by cooperative and anarchist thinkers, alike, it also provides the Cooperative Movement more explicit metrics by which to identify whether a cooperative is truly an expression of a transformative Cooperative Identity or one that is, rather,

trading on the Cooperative Identity to achieve a capitalist advantage. One of the ultimate measures of the authenticity of a cooperative is whether it would persist in the absence of capitalism or whether it helps people to cope within capitalism without perpetuating it.

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