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Dreaming of "meaningful labour": Notions of co-operativism and environmental sustainability in imagined intentional communities

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This paper investigates the concepts of co-operativism and sustainability by linking dystopian and utopian scenarios with notions of co-operatives to gain insights into values, principles, motivations, and outlook. It examines co-operativism in addition to three feminist and anarchist imagined intentional communities: Anarres in Le Guin's (1974) *The Dispossessed*, Acorn in Butler's (1993, 1998) *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, and the San Francisco Bay Area in Starhawk's (1993) *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. These imagined intentional communities explore dystopian and utopian visions of co-operativism and sustainability within the genres of science and speculative fiction. This paper thematically analysed the fiction texts with supporting literature on co-operatives and mutual enterprises (CMEs), generating a coding structure focused on four major codes of motivation, outlook, principles, and values. This paper finds imagined intentional communities and CMEs share a desire for meaningful, equitable, and engaging work.

Introduction

Co-operativism refers to economic and social systems based on autonomous associations of persons who unite voluntarily to achieve common goals through either co-operative or mutual enterprises (CMEs), which are collectively owned and democratically governed (International Co-operative Alliance [ICA], 2015). This paper examines co-operativism and environmental sustainability, integrating dystopian and utopian fictional scenarios with CME models to analyse underlying motivations, perspectives, values, and guiding principles.

For CMEs to be considered valid and sustainable business models, their socio-cultural imaginaries have often been separated. According to Taylor (2004), the concept of social imaginaries encompasses the ways people individually imagine their social surroundings which is then shared by large groups, if not the whole society. This paper includes the impact of culture, whether in the micro with CMEs or the macro of a nation, to explore socio-cultural imaginaries. Such imaginaries are complex, blending fact and fiction, including normative

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expectations, values, cultural practice, visions, a sense of how people all fit together with others, and aspirations and beliefs for the future, in addition to cultural images, stories, and legends (Chhetri et al., 2023; Roberts, 2014; Taylor, 2004). In addition, Kølvraa and Forchtner (2024) argue socio-cultural imaginaries are “at once an imagery of the past, the present and the future, of what has been lost and what should be, of whom one is and whom one hoped to be, of the traumatically real and the dreamily utopian” (p. 9).

Notions of co-operativism and the motivations for forming a CME, whether ideological, social and/or economic, in popular culture and fiction are separated from research on existing CME examples. Only until recently, with the examination of values and motivations behind CMEs, have such ideas been discussed (Cheney et al., 2023; Ghauri et al, 2021; Puusa et al., 2016). The separation of socio-cultural imaginaries with CMEs downplays the interrelated nature of such imaginaries and real-world action while limiting the capacity for CMEs as enterprises with social and economic purposes to envisage futures beyond the immediately practical. Moreover, it can detrimentally impact how CMEs conceive of their sustainability. By exploring the ways imagined intentional communities conceptualise sustainability and co-operativism, CMEs can develop a deeper understanding of and ways to address the needs of their community, including the dream of a “meaningful job for life” (van Aurich et al., 2025, p. 85).

The methodology for this paper was thematic analysis, drawing on three feminist and anarchist imagined intentional communities: Anarres in Le Guin’s (1974) *The Dispossessed*, Acorn in Butler’s (1993, 1998) *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, and the San Francisco Bay Area in Starhawk’s (1993) *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. These imagined intentional communities explore dystopian and utopian visions of co-operativism, motivations, values, and principles within the genres of science and speculative fiction. In addition, supporting literature on CMEs were also thematically analysed using the same framework.

An intentional community is a residential community formed over a shared vision and purpose, with shared resources, and critical mass (Sanford, 2017). They can be guided by principles of voluntary membership, regional self-sufficiency, interdependence, and non-violence (Sanford, 2017). Furthermore, the concept of imagining in the context of intentional communities is “the intangible, felt ways in which people make sense of the tangible, material world around them” (Baskerville, 2021, p. 38; see also Lennon, 2015). It is how we contend with the future, considering what is possible to achieve individually and as collectives, generating common visions through the suspension of disbelief (Finn & Wylie, 2021; Kølvraa & Forchtner, 2024). Thus, imagined intentional communities are fictional representations of communities formed through shared vision, allowing audiences to “imagine alternative worlds and forms of society”, of embodied ideals and hopes, within “a good story” (Kølvraa & Forchtner, 2024, p. 2).

As outlined in this paper, imagined intentional communities and CMEs share a common desire for meaningful, equitable, and engaging work. Further, the respective cultures of these imaginary and real communities reflect individual values of democracy, collaboration, and sustainability, including environmental care and long-term security. The literature on co-operativism highlights the public’s lack of awareness about CMEs, which hinders their growth and function (Mazzarol, 2023).

The global movement of co-operativism can trace its origins to the sixteenth century in the form of friendly societies. However, co-operatives emerged from the late eighteenth century and developed rapidly during the nineteenth century (Patmore & Balnave, 2018; Williams, 2007). Building societies and co-operative banks emerged in the nineteenth century, and credit societies and unions in the twentieth century (Mazzarol, 2023). The origins of specifically worker co-operatives are deeply tied to the idealism, social investment, and, in some cases, socialist beliefs of the nineteenth century, whether it be French thinkers or the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers (van Aurich et al., 2025). For example, in 1830 in France, the worker’s newspaper *L’Artisan* first began promoting the idea of a worker co-operative (Negri Zamagni, 2017; Patmore & Balnave, 2018).

Substantial, if not comprehensive, research exists on most CME businesses (Mazzarol, 2023). However, according to Pérotin (2017), prevalent research on worker co-operatives, often highly critical and replete with misconceptions, is based on partial empirical evidence . She argues as data becomes more available, including over the past decade, a different picture emerges with more nuanced understandings. Other research has explored the values guiding the formation and development of CMEs (Bastida et al., 2022; Ghauri et al., 2021; Puusa et al., 2016). However, little examination has been undertaken in relation to the ideological components, particularly those informed by notions in popular culture and fiction, that is, socio-cultural imaginaries.

Methods

The four texts, Le Guin's (1974) *The Dispossessed*, Butler's (1993, 1998) *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, and Starhawk's (1993) *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, were selected based on their underlying paradigms, whether feminist or anarchist, as well as explorations of co-operativism. Some had explicit examples of CMEs (Butler, 1998; Starhawk, 1993) or reflected CME values and principles in their respective imagined intentional communities (Butler, 1993,1998; Le Guin, 1974; Starhawk, 1993).

Imagining through fiction can be "serious ideological business" which does "crucial political work" (Kølvraa & Forchtner, 2024, p. 180). Examining co-operativism and CMEs through the lens of feminism and anarchism allows for complexity, centring perspectives which are often on the margins of CME discourse, providing possibilities of alternative socio-cultural imaginaries which transform injustice and unsustainability (Chhetri et al., 2023; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). Moreover, such ability to imagine alternatives, "is key for many social change processes" (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020, p. 2), including, this paper argues, co-operativism.

These texts are within the genre of speculative and science fiction, which commonly ponders, "Where in the world am I? What in the world is going on? What am I going to do?" (Moylan, 2000, p. 3). These genres re-create the present in an "alternative spacetime" that fosters a "re-visioning" (Moylan, 2000, p. 5) of the world in the mind of readers, providing clarity or new perceptions about right and wrong, what is to be done, and social change. That these texts also exemplify utopian and dystopian outlooks emphasises their capacity to challenge readers' worldviews and demonstrates that even in the direst of circumstances, people seek to imagine co-operative ideas.

That three out of the four texts are set within the United States (US), and specifically California, adds a contextual specificity to this paper and would be worth exploring further in the future. For example, the impact of racial diversity in California and the subsequent perspectives this incorporates into the texts may not be evident in works set in other regions. Moreover, class dimensions are little explored in the three California-based texts, with only some exploration of the collapse of the US middle-class in the *Parable* series (Butler, 1993, 1998), which may be much more impactful if set in the United Kingdom, or a non-western country, for example.

Data from the texts and supporting literature on CMEs were collected using constructivist thematic analysis that emphasises subjective meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018), generating a coding structure focused on the major codes of motivation, outlook, principles, and values. From these codes, the research team developed secondary and tertiary codes.

Motivation refers to the factors which create interest among individuals to establish and maintain an imagined intentional community or CME. Within this code were secondary codes of safety, sustainability, and social co-operation. Safety refers to personal safety (physical and psychological) and economic stability. Safety in this context is an environment which lacks danger and unwanted risk, both to persons and to the economic stability of the community and/or organisation, while serving as a refuge from previous detrimental experiences. Sustainability refers to environmental and organisational continuation over time (Cheney et al., 2023; Mellor,

2012). This includes the outlook and measures taken to pursue meaningful continuation over time, such as relationality with nature, minimising or zero waste, labour which is valued by individuals and the overall community, and having purpose or vision. Lastly, social co-operation refers to the ability and capacity to do more and gain better outcomes together than can be achieved apart (Mazzarol et al., 2014; Preluca et al., 2022).

Outlook refers to the overarching perspective of the literature, whether utopian or dystopian. This paper defines utopian as a society and environment which involves collaboration, equality, equity, sustainability, wellbeing, and happiness. Moreover, a utopian outlook involves envisioning the ideal, the "best-case scenario" (Hudson, 2023, p. 25), including how to construct such an ideal, which contrasts with present reality (Hudson, 2023; Troschitz, 2024). Conversely, dystopian is a society and environment, whether real or imagined, which involves suffering, degradation, and/or considerable harm. A dystopian outlook involves a bleak vision of the future, both as disillusionment with contemporary socio-cultural developments and with "the utopian dream" (Troschitz, 2024, p. 61). It draws on historical examples and imagery such as militarisation of society, state violence, war, genocide, torture, imprisonment, slavery, disease, and ecocide (Moylan, 2000; Vieira, 2020). Importantly, a dystopian outlook is one which views the causes of socio-cultural and ecological "evils" as systemic and that "no single policy or practice can be isolated as the root problem; no single aberration can be privileged as the one to be fixed so that life in the enclosed status quo can easily resume" (Moylan, 2000, p. xii). Both dystopian and utopian outlooks involve some form of criticism of the present through comparison with an imagined society and often are a refraction or reflection of "the spirit of the times" (Vieira, 2020, p. 354).

Principles refers to the seven co-operative principles. According to the ICA (2015), these are voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, co-operation among co-operatives, and concern for community.

Values refers to a series of values generally attributed to co-operatives. These include self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity (Ghauri et al., 2021; Novkovic et al., 2012).

Discussion

The themes emerging from the four works — including motivations, dystopian and utopian outlooks, co-operative principles, and values — are now discussed in turn.

Motivations

Motivations for establishing imagined intentional communities are deeply tied to notions of survival and sustainability, including a meaningful existence. Survival refers to both the survival of individuals and the planet, as well the longevity of safety, sustainability, and social co-operation. These are shaped by practical needs and socio-cultural imaginaries, with fiction and popular culture playing a significant role in legitimising and inspiring co-operative models. All four works describe how establishing their communities was motivated by safety needs, with the new community functioning as refuge from existing detrimental experiences, whether it be economic exploitation, violence, or environmental destruction.

For example, the *Parable* series depicts an "unforgiving world" (Butler, 1998, p. 25) that is "dangerous and crazy" (Butler, 1993, p. 6), filled with extreme violence, poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and environmental collapse. Survival and safety are challenging at best and social co-operation is key. For the central characters, pooling resources and collaboration are the only ways in which they can overcome their current conditions and build a better future in Acorn.

Similarly, social co-operation is central to Anarres, the lunar anarchist society in *The Dispossessed* (Le Guin, 1974). Its creation is based on "those who are most social" (Le Guin,

1974, p. 198) surviving, and thus individual ownership and economic competition are eradicated. In addition, it emphasises sustainability principles of the right to work and to be maintained while working. Inherent in these rights is the notion that “People like to do things. They like to do them well” (Le Guin, 1974, p. 134).

In Butler’s (1993, 1998) Parable series, the creation of Earthseed, an ideology-religion in which “God is Change” (Butler, 1993, p. 3), envisions a meaningful life for all, with a sustainable future and valuable purpose. As the protagonist Lauren explains:

> Earthseed offers its own rewards, room for small groups of people to begin new lives and new ways of life with new opportunities, new wealth, new concepts of wealth, new challenges to grow and to learn and to decide what to become. (Butler, 1998, p. 357)

Earthseed is attractive to many, despite “offering so little comfort from such an utterly indifferent God” (Butler, 1998, p. 51). This is because, as with Anarres (Le Guin, 1974), the “promise of hard work … problems, challenges, and changes” (Butler, 1998, p. 52) fosters meaning and value beyond basic survival.

Social co-operation is necessary for CMEs to form, serving as motivation for their establishment (Mazzarol et al., 2014). In addition, addressing economic and social needs, as well as social ideals, are often motivations to form CMEs. For example, worker co-operatives emphasise meaningful labour; labour is meaningful because workers actively participate in the processes, strategy, and structure of an organisation, with their input taken into consideration, rather than performing “labour-as-toil” (Novkovic et al., 2012, p. 30; Zaunseder, 2022). Research suggests these co-operatives are simply meeting the expressed needs of workers for “dignified and meaningful work, in a climate of mutual respect; safe working conditions; equitable remuneration; some degree of autonomy at the job; and an opportunity for some degree of voice about the policies of an organization and workplace” (Cheney et al., 2023, p. 9).

Essential for overcoming challenges and building resilient communities, social co-operation requires the sharing of skills, advice, knowledge, ideas, and organisational best practices (Preluca et al., 2022). Through imagined intentional communities, readers can experience how vital social co-operation is through the lens of speculative and science fiction worlds. Indeed, fictional depictions can legitimise co-operative ideas by providing rich examples of how social co-operation and meaningful labour can serve individuals and society at large. This is particularly the case when juxtaposed with highly individualistic, competitive, and unequal fictional societies.

To ensure the continuation of the community, Butler (1993, 1998) explores sustainability through relationality, both with others and with nature. Cultural studies define relationality as experiencing the self as part of others and vice versa, which can encompass social memory, shared experiences, co-operation, reciprocity, and coexistence (Moreton-Robinson, 2000/2020). In both novels, a medical condition called ‘hyperempathy’ affects a minority of individuals, including Lauren, and results in literally feeling the pain of others. This causes those with hyperempathy to be vulnerable in a world of frequent violence. Notably, Acorn has many members with the condition, despite it being rare among the broader population. This is no coincidence, as Butler (1993, 1998) uses hyperempathy to explore the strengths of relationality and co-operativism.

Similarly, Starhawk (1993) explores relationality with nature. The Bay Area community is established to ensure the safety and survival of individuals and the planet. This is exemplified in an ideology which considers air, water, fire, and earth sacred:

> To call these things sacred is to say that they have a value beyond their usefulness for human ends, that they themselves become the standards by which our acts, our economics, our laws, and our purposes must be judged. No one has the right to appropriate them or profit from them at the expense of others. (Starhawk, 1993, p. i)

By honouring nature as sacred, the community creates conditions where individuals and the environment sustain and flourish. The book highlights the motivations for creating and

maintaining the community by contrasting it with the violence, poverty, deprivation, and environmental damage of the surrounding society. That is under the control of a highly dogmatic authority called the Stewards, where slavery is common, unemployment is high, and wars are fought over water.

For CMEs, sustainability refers to attaining long-term environmental, social, and economic goals (Preluca et al., 2022). The notion of environmental sustainability is becoming increasingly important across various sectors, including CMEs. A core motivation for establishing imagined intentional communities and CMEs is the pursuit of sustainability, both environmental and organisational. Socio-cultural imaginaries can legitimise and explain CME concepts in modes which are accessible to readers. Through the lens of the protagonist, readers develop an understanding of their motivations to form imagined intentional communities. This, in turn, can make readers open to exploring the social and economic realities of CME structures in the present and for future possibilities.

Dystopian and utopian outlooks

The Dispossessed's utopian outlook is based on the notion that "change is freedom, change is life" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 149). Tom Moylan (1986) argues *The Dispossessed* is a kind of critical utopia, that is, the critique, debunking, and recognition of limitations in the utopian tradition and historical circumstances as well as generating a sense of the critical mass required to make "necessary explosive reaction" (p. 10) for social change. This is reflected in the book's exploration of complexity, both admiring and critiquing Anarresti anarchism, demonstrating ways it can falter. Moylan (1986) asserts that critical utopias focus on difference and imperfections within utopian society to "render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives" (p. 10). Moreover, the book embraces a holistic approach, examining the past, present, and future to ensure longevity of communities. This is exemplified in the final chapter, where a Terran diplomat discusses the destruction of her planet and the future of Anarres. The protagonist, Shevek, critiques her perspective:

> You say the past is gone, the future is not real, there is no change, no hope. You think Anarres is a future that cannot be reached, as your past cannot be changed. So, there is nothing but the present. (Le Guin, 1974, p. 314)

Through this exchange, Le Guin argues change is hope, and to change we must accept the present with the past and future, looking back and looking forward simultaneously. As a critical utopia, *The Dispossessed* does not provide simple solutions, it requires resistance, political force, and personal risk to achieve its aims (Moylan, 1986).

Although filled with moments of hope, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (Starhawk, 1993) is dystopian. The suffering, degradation, and considerable harm to people and the environment are extensively explored. This lens shapes the community, as its recognition of current environmental conditions as a direct consequence of human actions ensures its capacity to survive. It is their commitment to zero waste which ensures the community has enough food and water to sustain itself. As one character describes, "We've become such artists of unwaste we can almost compensate for the damage. Almost" (Starhawk, 1993, p. 3).

Butler's (1993, 1998) *Parable* series are also dystopian settings, however, they contain an underlying utopian outlook. The first book explores the state of the present world, with extreme violence, suffering, and degradation. In addition, there is a constant feeling of humanity running out of time. When the protagonist Lauren's childhood community suffers severe violence, she is determined to build something anew, focused beyond the immediate.

The underlying philosophy of the series is future-focused, exemplified in the experiences and mindsets of the characters as well as Earthseed, arguing, "we can grow or we can wither" (Butler, 1998, p. 79). In both books, Lauren often criticises those who try to hold onto aspects of the twentieth century or "waiting for the good old days to come back" (Butler, 1993, p. 50). For example, when she explains Earthseed to others, Lauren says:

> We keep falling into the same ditches, you know? I mean, we learn more and more about the physical universe, more about our own bodies, more technology, but somehow, down through history, we go on building empires of one kind or another, then destroying them in one way or another … And when we look at all of that history, we just shrug our shoulders and say, well, that's the way things are. That's the way things always have been. (Butler, 1998, p. 392)

As a part of this growth philosophy, there is a belief in the power of change, exemplified in Earthseed. In addition, the necessity for a unifying purpose is emphasised to move beyond the limitations of being stuck in the past and present, providing a focus for humanity. Moylan (1986) agrees, arguing that if humanity is too taken with the present, there is little "possibility of imagining a radically other future. We lose the ability to hope" (p. 21).

Dystopian and utopian outlooks in imagined intentional communities can legitimise co-operative ideas by serving as examples of what can be achieved under even the direst of circumstances. They not only explore co-operativism in popular culture, but also remind readers of the consequences of undemocratic and inequitable societies. These works can inspire and provide vision, presenting alternatives to conventional, better-known systems. As one character in *The Dispossessed* says:

> Do you know what your society has meant, here, to us, these last hundred and fifty years? Do you know that when people here want to wish each other luck they say, 'May you get reborn on Anarres!' To know that it exists, to know that there is a society without government, without police, without economic exploitation, that they can never say again that it's just a mirage, an idealist's dream! (Le Guin, 1974, p. 266)

Co-operative principles

The imagined intentional communities in the novels exemplify many of the seven co-operative principles. This section explores voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, and education, training, and information.

Voluntary and open membership is exemplified in *Parable of the Talents* (Butler, 1998). Acorn is a voluntary member-based structure, open to anyone over the age of 15. Once an individual arrives at Acorn, they have a "probationary year" (Butler, 1998, p. 269) in which they can observe and learn. After the year has passed, they can become a member, however, residing at Acorn does not require membership. Those who reside there for a year but are not members still get benefits, like "a share of the profit from the sale of the crop" (Butler, 1998, p. 81). If a person joins, they get a larger share of the profit and voting rights on all major decisions. Furthermore, although most members follow the principles of Earthseed, it is not required for membership.

CMEs have open membership policies, regardless of race, gender, background, religion, and social status (ICA, 2015). Some also specifically seek out marginalised and underrepresented groups for inclusion (Baskerville et al, 2022; Mazzarol, 2017; Mazzarol et al., 2025; van Aurich et al., 2025). Imagined intentional communities can serve as examples of the social benefits of open and voluntary membership.

Democratic governance is a central feature of Starhawk's (1993) community. For non-residents, its democracy is alluring and inspiring. The community is structured in cell-like collectives, with a nominated head attending major meetings. To ensure non-hierarchy among the collectives, the role of the head rotates among members. Notably, this differs from Anarres (Le Guin, 1974), in which democratic governance shifted toward stifling bureaucracy and hierarchical abuse of power, as heads of departments maintained their position while all others frequently rotated positions. The regular rotation of leadership roles allows all members to develop skills and expertise in their field.

Democratic governance is a core feature of CMEs and has been central to worker co-operatives since their origin (Balnave & Patmore, 2017; Mazzarol, 2023; Patmore et al., 2024). This involves equal voting rights regardless of economic participation or shareholding and the notion

of one-member-one-vote (Mazzarol, 2023; Mazzarol et al., 2024). This form of governance ensures decisions reflect the needs and goals of the membership, rather than external investors, fostering a strong sense of involvement, responsibility, and cohesion (Bastida et al., 2022: Cheney et al., 2023; Mazzarol et al., 2025; Reboud & Toutain, 2025). This is particularly the case for enterprises directly tied to an industry, such as worker and agricultural co-operatives, in which they can control production and shape the economy (Patmore & Balnave, 2018; Patmore et al., 2024).

Imagined intentional communities can demonstrate both the personal and societal benefits of a democratic structure in evocative ways. Juxtaposing undemocratic examples with democratic ones can serve as a warning to the public, as well as illustrating how democracy can shift over time towards oppressive systems. For example, Le Guin's (1974) exploration of the breakdown of democratic governance serves as a warning to CMEs with board members that serve very long terms. Highlighting democratic structures in fiction can legitimise co-operative structures to the public, demonstrating that although democratic governance can be slow, it is ultimately the better, more equitable option (Cheney et al., 2023; McCain, 2007; Thompson, 2015). Similarly, imagined intentional communities can provoke thought about alternatives to conventional representative democratic governance, such as non-hierarchical and anarchistic structures.

All three imagined intentional communities place high importance on education, training, and information, perceiving it as vital to longevity. For Le Guin (1974), ignorance is a lack of freedom. She uses the capitalist, hierarchical society of Urras to demonstrate how the Urrasti ruling classes enforce ignorance on the masses to control them, while at the same time devaluing them because of a lack of knowledge. Moreover, on Anarres, the sharing of knowledge is equated with freedom and morality. When Anarresti society risks becoming undemocratic, ignorance is expressed as a major concern:

> Education is the most important activity of the social organism … It's always easier not to think for oneself. Find a nice safe hierarchy and settle in. Don't make changes, don't risk disapproval … It's always easiest to let yourself be governed. (Le Guin, 1974, p. 150)

In the Acorn community, all members no matter their age are required to learn basic skills and acquire a trade (Butler, 1998). Anyone with a trade shares their knowledge and teaches others. As Lauren expresses, "One of the most valuable things they traded with one another was knowledge" (Butler, 1998, p. 26).

CMEs aim to invest in education and training for members, directors, and staff, both informally and formally. This ensures the development of leadership skills, expertise, informed participation, and commitment among members (Cheney et al., 2023; Dufays et al., 2020; Mazzarol et al., 2025). In addition, it increases efficiency, innovation, and social cohesion within CMEs (Cheney et al., 2023; Ghauri et al., 2021; Reboud & Toutain, 2025). However, research into co-operative principles and values indicates the principle of education and training does not resonate with members (Ghauri et al., 2021). Through engaging storytelling, imagined intentional communities can demonstrate the importance not only of relevant technical information, but also of broader notions of co-operativism, principles, and values.

Similarly, there is little public awareness and understanding of CME models, which is detrimental to the longevity of co-operatives. They must use significant effort to explain the model to stakeholders and when recruiting members, which can mean losing competitive advantage (Cheney et al., 2023; van Aurich et al., 2025). Educating the public through imagined intentional communities, can develop understanding of CME ideas within personal and community-based contexts.

Values

Co-operative values include self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity (Ghauri et al., 2021; Novkovic et al., 2012). For co-operatives, particularly worker co-operatives, value-based culture is essential in maintaining efficiency and member

commitment (Ghauri et al., 2021). These values can foster feelings of pride, dedication, and belonging among members, while reducing issues of alienation (Preluca et al., 2022). This section explores how imagined intentional communities demonstrate these values, focusing on self-help, self-responsibility, equality, equity, and solidarity.

Self-help and self-responsibility ensure members of an organisation can self-regulate with integrity and honesty, fostering trust (Ghauri et al., 2021). Without the external incentive of money or profit to work, in Le Guin's (1974) Anarresti society, individuals are motivated to contribute by taking pride and pleasure in their labour. For example, when Shevek, whose background is in theoretical physics, is posted to a mining region, he does eight hours a day of menial labour. Despite feeling that he was not very good and was "being worked," Shevek reflects, "Yet it was queer how proud you felt of what you got done this way — all together — what satisfaction it gave" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 46).

In addition, Le Guin (1974) explores the notions of obedience and being the "initiator of one's own acts" (p. 322). Anarresti are described as not being "moved by mass feelings" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 4), and yet because they assume commands are never arbitrary, they have "no practice in disobeying them" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 4). This becomes a problem as over time the society becomes less idealistic and increasingly hierarchical in its bureaucracy. As Shevek explains: "Our society is practical. Maybe too practical, too much concerned with survival only. What is idealistic about social cooperation, mutual aid, when it is the only means of staying alive?" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 120).

The book describes this as a kind of "spiritual suffering" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 149), where the consequence of only allowing for the practical is suppression of individuality. It argues that when individual creativity is sacrificed for a perceived common good, solidarity and co-operation fall apart. In response to Anarres' present system, Shevek asserts an even greater responsibility to the community. For him, reciprocity and mutuality are important and deeply tied to the individual:

> Sacrifice might be demanded of the individual but never compromise — for though only the society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice, the power of change, the essential function of life. (Le Guin, 1974, p. 299)

Similarly, Butler (1998) explores the concept of self-responsibility through Earthseed. Using the language of farming, an Earthseed verse describes: "Shape Chaos—/ Shape God. Act. / Alter the speed / Or the direction of Change. / Vary the scope of Change. / Recombine the seeds of Change. / Seize Change, / Use it. / Adapt and grow" (Butler, 1998, p. 120). Through this and other Earthseed verses, Butler asserts that although the world is difficult to understand and control, through self-help and self-responsibility communities can shape the world that they want.

Equality and equity refer to the equal treatment of individuals regardless of status or identity (Ghauri et al., 2021). Examples of equality and equity explored in imagined intentional communities are differences of sex, race, and ability. Although Anarres acknowledges the differences between the sexes, it does not prescribe any superiority or inferiority among its people, and thus in this case is an equitable society. Le Guin (1974) contrasts this lunar norm with Urrasti society, where the sexes are highly gendered. One Urrasti is shocked to learn women are scientists on Anarres:

> But the loss of — of everything feminine — of delicacy — and the loss of masculine self-respect — You can't pretend, surely, in your work, that women are your equals? In physics, in mathematics, in the intellect? You can't pretend to lower yourself constantly to their level? (Le Guin, 1974, p. 16)

Shevek is baffled by the lack of women present in Urrasti workplaces. Notably, Urrasti men are rarely described as immoral or despicable. Rather, they are presented as ignorant in their constructions, often failing to adequately explain themselves when questioned. For example, when discussing the distinction between men and women's work:

> "A person chooses work according to interest, talent, strength — what has the sex to do with that?" [An Urrasti responds,] "Men are physically stronger', the doctor asserted with professional finality. "Yes, often, and larger, but what does that matter when we have machines?" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 16)

Starhawk (1993) carries this further to other forms of difference. The book describes the diversity of the Bay Area community as part of its strength. Butler (1993, 1998) similarly explores how Acorn's racial diversity is a strength, fostering social cohesion. Diversity in the Bay Area includes not only race, but also ethnicity, religion, language, skill, and ability. Madrone states "Our system cannot work if we start to say one person's work or skill is worth more than somebody else's. An economic system is like an organism, and to function all its parts are necessary" (Starhawk, 1993, p. 276).

For CMEs, the value of solidarity is defined in economic and social terms, with the sharing of risks and rewards among all members (Mazzarol, 2023) and co-operation among co-operatives (Ghauri et al., 2021). CMEs' emphasis on solidarity builds trust and loyalty among members, crucial for long-term success (Baskerville et al., 2023; Ghauri et al., 2021). Additionally, during times of crises, solidarity can be leveraged within and between CMEs, providing social and economic benefits (Ghauri et al., 2021; Roloff, 2023).

In all three imagined intentional communities, solidarity is expressed in connection with others and with the environment. Le Guin (1974) defines solidarity as a brotherhood which begins in shared pain, whereas Butler (1998) explores solidarity through Earthseed: "It's about learning to live in partnership with one another in small communities, and at the same time, working out a sustainable partnership with our environment" (p. 393).

Solidarity with the environment is a form of sustainability. Starhawk (1993) defines sustainability as something which generates or saves "as much energy as it consumes and doesn't depend on non-renewable resources" (p. 275). Indeed, each book critiques environmental exploitation and waste. Le Guin (1974) perceives it as strange and short-sighted, Butler (1993, 1998) as thoughtless and unnecessary, and Starhawk (1993) as unethical and destructive. Again, relationality is key to solidarity, as Starhawk (1993) argues:

> We believe we can continue to live and thrive only if we care for one another … at last, we have come to understand that we are a part of the earth, part of the air, the fire, and the water, as we are part of one another. (p. 17)

Imagined intentional communities' emphasis on value-based living and organisation can legitimise co-operative ideas by demonstrating the dire consequences to society and the planet when living the opposite. Moreover, socio-cultural imaginaries can explore new and complex concepts to audiences, helping them to be open to and comfortable with CME values.

For example, research demonstrates some CME members and executives struggle with the applicability of certain values, like equality and equity (Ghauri et al., 2021). Imagined intentional communities can provide both practical and speculative examples of these values in practice. Research also indicates when values and ethics align with those of individuals, it can motivate them to choose CME models (Bastida et al., 2022). This is the case for many worker co-operatives, with values and ethics being considerable draws to employees and members (Reboud & Toutain, 2025; van Aurich et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This paper finds imagined intentional communities and CMEs share a desire for meaningful, democratic, interesting, and engaging work. In addition, the culture of a CME or imagined intentional community reflects the co-operative principles and values (ICA, 2015), including environmental care and long-term job security. Notably, the supporting literature on CMEs highlights the public's lack of awareness about CMEs generally and worker co-operatives specifically, which hinders their growth and function. This can be addressed through the use of imagined intentional communities.

A key difference between CMEs and their investor-owned counterparts is their focus on economic and social purposes. Unlike the investor-owned organisations, which are primarily

focused on profit and maximisation of shareholder returns, CMEs, while cognisant of the need to operate a profitable and efficient business, are also motivated by social objectives. For CMEs, profit maximisation is not as important as the maximisation of their members' economic and social wellbeing. As a result, CMEs need to integrate social values with the practical to be recognised as viable social and economic enterprises. Separating ideological, social, and economic motivations and values from day-to-day management limits CME potential to envision future possibilities. By examining how imagined intentional communities conceptualise motivations, outlook, co-operative principles and values, CMEs can better address community needs, environmental sustainability, and meaningful employment.

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