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What shall be the mechanism? The coming co-operative commonwealth in utopian literature

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Between 1890 and 1910, a small number of utopian novelists from the United States posed a question: under what circumstances might a socio-economic system based upon co-operation supplant a competitive one? This article examines seven novels that describe such a transformation and the conditions that gave rise to co-operative institutions. Although none fully confront the obstacles that must feel insurmountable beyond the confines of the page, the imaginings of the authors remain relevant at a time when technology-enabled economic disruption gives renewed potency to the co-operative ideal.

Introduction

The co-operative movement has always held within it a utopian aspect. In late nineteenth-century Britain, for example, this manifested itself in the dividend principle, not simply a financial rebate but a “stepping stone to the co-operative community of the future” (Gurney, 1994, p. 5). This vision proved robust into the 1940s: co-operative enterprise, given sufficient freedom from the state and the continued loyalty of members, might expand into a “complete system of co-operation” representing the “final stage of a great, self-contained system of direct production for the satisfaction of the known wants of consumers” (Gurney, 2015, p. 1484).

Such an outcome has yet to come to pass, however, the possibility that it might has allowed a small number of novelists during this period of ascendency to speculate on how such a co-operative system might prevail over its competitive rival. In this essay, we explore seven novels published in the United States (US) between 1890 and 1910 that imagine utopian visions of a future society built not simply on loose appeals to co-operation as meaning the achievement of social harmony or getting along, but on the programmatic transfer of social and economic capital to co-operative institutions.

Each of the texts examined here came out of the utopian literature boom that produced over a hundred works between the Haymarket Riot of 1886 and the Bryan-McKinley presidential election of 1896, a by-product of the wider search for alternatives to the strained industrial

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conditions in which US citizens found themselves as the frontier began to close (Pfaelzer, 1975). Unemployment exceeded 10% in the half-decade following the financial crash of 1893; falling agricultural prices devastated farmers across the West and South; and industrial consolidations began to concentrate power into trusts (Lamoreaux, 1985). Rochdale consumer co-operation had already reached the US, and the Knights of Labor were experimenting with worker co-operation and by 1896, over 150 Labor Exchanges were in operation across the country (Spann, 1989). 'Middleman' had become a pejorative across the agrarian and labour movements for the parasitic intermediary, the figure who flourished in the gap between producer and consumer, but who created no value (Spann, 1989).

The most famous novel of this period, and the one which gave rise to so many imitators, was Edward Bellamy's (1888) *Looking Backward*. It is not included here, however, because for all its influence, it did not engage with co-operative ideas. Bellamy himself was sceptical of their worth as a transformative mechanism: in *Equality* (1897), the sequel to *Looking Backward*, Julian West is told by Dr Leete that co-operation had been "tried and found wanting" due to "structural weaknesses" (Bellamy, 1897, p. 351).

> Many noble and enthusiastic souls devoted themselves to … [v]oluntary colonies, organised on co-operative principles … Economically weak, held together by a sentimental motive, generally composed of eccentric though worthy persons, and surrounded by a hostile environment which had the whole use and advantage of the social and economic machinery, it was scarcely possible that such enterprise should come to anything practical unless under exceptional leadership or circumstances. (Bellamy, 1897, p. 351)

In the pastiche novel *Looking Further Forward* by Richard Michaelis (1890), Professor Forest explains to Julian West that the limited success of co-operation had resulted from the reluctance of workers to assume the burden of ownership. If workers "did not care to assume the cares and risks of conducting a business for themselves, if they would rather work for an employer … they had certainly no reason to complain of the profit of the employer" (Michaelis, 1890, p. 34). There was no law:

> … to prevent a dozen shoemakers renting a loft and making boots and shoes at their own risk … no law to prevent all the other workingmen buying their boots and shoes at the shop of the co-operative association, thus securing for the members of the latter the profits of the manufacturer, wholesaler, retailer and workman. (Michaelis, 1890, p. 34)

One of the core tensions we will find in the seven narratives is how far the co-operative transformation described proceeds by voluntary means and natural evolution, and how far by applied coercion. The success of the British co-operative movement after 1844 had demonstrated that workers could run enterprises for themselves and accumulate capital. As Charles Gide (1922) wrote, "wherever we find workmen well enough paid to spend freely, well enough educated in co-operation to look for big results in it … the Rochdale rule of sale" (p. 30) could be applied and the consumer placed in a position of "economic domination" (p. 60). If co-operators had tried and failed to bring about the co-operative commonwealth in the real world, how might a successful evolution come to pass? Each novel acts as an apologue, a prose form in which literary elements are controlled by the political intent of the author, in this instance to make a co-operative transition appear desirable, rational, and achievable with enough will (Pfaelzer, 1975).

A Cityless and Countryless World (1893) by Henry Olerich

Set in "the pleasant little village of Dozen" (Olerich, 1893, p. 16), *A Cityless and Countryless World* follows a visiting writer who records the frequent visits of Mr Midith to the Uwin household. Midith announces he was born on Mars and across a series of discussions outlines in detail Martian society and its nine-hundred-year evolution towards "practical co-operative individualism". The central organising principle is the big-house, a system of architecturally integrated, non-hierarchical dwellings housing "about a thousand men, women and children"

(Olerich, 1893, p. 53) who share living space, child-rearing, labour, and productive work. The dispersal is what gives the book its title: big-houses are spread evenly across the land rather than concentrated, so that neither the crowded city nor the lonely country survives, since "both are faulty, both are unhealthy, both are inconvenient, and both are useless" (Olerich, 1893, p. 238). Rather than relying on state authority, the Martians transition through domestic co-operation and local self-sufficiency, gradually aggregating into larger co-operative units.

The transition began, Midith explains, when two couples merge their households to achieve efficiencies, sharing one house, stove, table, and the rest, rather than two. It also recasts women's domestic labour: with cooking and washing done by machinery, the washerwoman, "looked upon as an inferior" in competitive society, "stands equal with the highest" (Olerich, 1893, p. 91) in the co-operative one. As big-houses expand, each community establishes a commissary, or 'com', a centralised area for administrating business, selling products, issuing currency, and managing utilities. Communities own warehouses and factories connected by motor lines for inter-community exchange, and, critically, there are no middlemen, "no army of mercantile schemers, the successful ones of whom live and grow rich from the labor and wrecked fortunes of others; no traveling salesmen; no countless warehouses and elevators" (Olerich, 1893, p. 167) hoarding commodities to create artificial markets. All labour is recorded and "labor checks" (Olerich, 1893, p. 172) issued to the value of work completed. Neither device was Olerich's invention: as Grant (1975) notes, the big-house descends from the phalanx popularised in the 1840s, while the labour checks were the labour scrip the Labor Exchange movement had advocated since the mid-1870s. Olerich's co-operative individualism adapts older communitarian and labour-exchange traditions rather than inventing its mechanism from nothing. The whole system rests on the land question. Land may be held only by occupancy and use, never by deed, so vacant land is free, monopoly is impossible, and rent disappears, leaving the Martians with "neither profit, interest, nor rent" (Olerich, 1893, p. 236).

What of those individuals who do not wish to co-operate? Because vacant land is free for the taking, anyone tired of co-operation may occupy it and "set up … any kind of religion or government" (Olerich, 1893, p. 403) they wish. Yet once co-operation's advantages are experienced, individuals rarely return to the "poverty, tyranny, and superstition" of the old "perverted system" (Olerich, 1893, p. 403).

Altruria (1895) by Titus K. Smith

Of the utopian narratives written in the wake of *Looking Backward* (Bellamy, 1888)*, A Traveler from Altruria* by William Dean Howells (1894) was perhaps the most influential, inspiring community experiments and a real-world colony in Sonoma County, California (O'Connor, 2000). Bearing the same name, and published by the Altruria Publishing Company, Titus K. Smith's (1895) *Altruria* describes the visit of the author and his friend John Optimus to Altruria, Iowa. Smith's fictional community is a hybrid of three co-operative forms working together: a producer co-operative that owns the land and runs the farms and factories, a building-and-loan society that finances it, and a community land trust that governs tenure.

The whole town operates without wages or a servant class. Smith (1895) encounters horseless carriages on asphalt streets, a telephone in every cottage, and dinner ordered from a central kitchen and delivered in thirty minutes with no servant in sight. Labour is pooled rather than hired; members register as available and are summoned by telephone as needed; every service a person renders or receives is entered to a running personal account; and only the year-end balance is settled in cash. The man who cooks the narrator's dinner is credited for the work and the household that eats it debited, and across a year most accounts roughly cancel, so very little money changes hands at all.

The producer co-operative is the Altruria Corporation, which owns the land and machinery and runs "a co-operative farming and manufacturing business" (Smith, 1895, p. 32) under "a system of voluntary co-operation scientifically adjusted to the seasons of nature" (Smith, 1895, p. 33).

Six hundred families are settled on its thirty-six thousand acres; work is not compulsory, but the rule is ‘no work, no pay’, and because the members collectively own the enterprise they work for, each is at once a worker and a part-owner of what he or she produces. The finance is handled by the Altrurian Bank, which runs as a building-and-loan society: a mutual in which members pay small monthly subscriptions into a common fund that then lends them the money to build their homes, the savers and the borrowers being the same people. Every member holds at least one fifty-cent monthly share and may hold up to fifty; a member who wants a house subscribes enough shares to cover its cost, the corporation builds it, and once the shares are paid off the house is theirs outright, with the land rented from the community land trust. Things that wear out, houses and machinery, are amortised, their cost spread across their working life and written off the books once they are used up. Things that do not wear out, the land itself and the permanent improvements, are never charged to the present members; they are carried on hundred-year bonds at two-and-a-half per cent, so their cost falls on all the generations who will use them rather than on the founders alone. “In Altruria labor employs capital instead of capital employing labor; and consequently, every man is a small capitalist as well as a worker,” auditor Dr Wellworth explains (Smith, 1895, pp. 72–73). For Smith, this economic order is not merely practical but devotional: the Altrurians “hold that honest, intelligent political economy is a part of religion” (Smith, 1895, p. 92), so that adopting co-operation is itself a religious act rather than a calculation of advantage.

Smith does not mean Altruria to remain a single town. The design is built to spread by example: as the corporation prospers it draws subscribers from neighbouring communities, until “every township in the land [becomes] a co-operative industrial republic” (Smith, 1895, p. 54). The narrative leaps to 4 July 1914, where the narrator, his fortune lost in the post-1893 depression and rebuilt under the Altrurian system, returns to a transformed New York. Every township has become “an Altrurian industrial republic” (Smith, 1895, p. 103). Conventional employers have themselves adopted profit-sharing, obliged by Altrurian conditions to offer high wages to retain their workers. The form wins not by political imposition but by drawing labour out of the wage economy.

The Co-opolitan: A Story of the Co-operative Commonwealth of Idaho (1898) by Zebina Forbush

Little is known about Zebina Forbush. A publisher’s announcement describes the author as a “prominent lawyer in a Western City” (Hayes, 2022, p. 96), and the novel has been attributed to both Frances H. Clark and Frank H. Clark. It is rumoured that the titular city was directly modelled on the New Plymouth colony in Idaho, founded in 1895 by middle-class ‘urbanites’ from Chicago as a co-operative settlement at the height of the depression. Set in the same state, *The Co-opolitan* (Forbush, 1898) charts the growth of the Co-operative Association over twenty years and its plan to colonise Idaho with co-operators whose combined political weight would permit them to “outvote the devotees of the old system” (Forbush, 1898, p. 10) and establish a co-operative commonwealth. Forbush makes their intent clear. Political co-operation alone cannot succeed because:

> … industrial and commercial education are against it … the great, the powerful, and strong are against it … [it] has no money with which to compete with the competitive system. Righteousness without money is a will-o’-the-wisp as against Mephisto with millions in the competitive system. (Forbush, 1898, p. 4)

The solution, then, is one of industry:

> Let us raise the cry of Industrial Co-operation against Industrial Competition and then go to work. When we are strong enough, we will do what Industrial Competition in the form of corporations and syndicates has done. We will become political. (Forbush, 1898, p. 4)

Co-opolis grows rapidly, developing all the amenities of a modern town overseen by a legislative council made up of department heads with provisions for referendum and recall. Labour is

strictly regulated: all persons under twenty remain in education, and no member works beyond twenty-five years. Each worker is assigned to a position within the ‘industrial army’ undertaking productive work, while “parasitic occupations” (Forbush, 1898, p. 37) such as speculators and lawyers are prohibited. Women make up a third of the ‘army’, concentrated in the domestic department and supplying most of the clerical staff and all the bookkeepers. Inheritance is abolished; credit earned cannot be willed to partners or children.

Members soon enjoy material security: by 1910, the dividend system established by the colony provides an annual equivalent of “twelve hundred dollars” (Forbush, 1898, p. 145) to members. This success provokes fierce opposition from competitive interests, who accuse the association of “destroying personal liberty” and of driving out “all the capital in the state” (Forbush, 1898, p. 64). John Thompson, the association’s president, retorts:

> Drive capital from the state! Prevent its entrance! Why! Let them take every dollar of gold and silver and every item of what they call credit away forever. Let them leave us the land and ability to labor and we will speedily reverse the order. Instead of Idaho being a suppliant at the door of capital, we shall soon see capital, so boastful and arrogant now, an abject suppliant at the door of Idaho. Instead of capital directing industry we shall find industry directing and controlling capital. (Forbush, 1898, p. 64)

The association achieves state political power and moves into Boise to house its legislature. Rather than inherit the city’s bonded municipal, water, and school debts, it relocates to a purpose-built town and leaves old Boise deserted, a move its opponents condemn as immoral debt-dodging. Economic self-sufficiency follows, with manufacturing plants, agricultural specialisation, and vertically integrated transport networks including a transcontinental railway, built and run without “brokers or speculators” (Forbush, 1898, p. 149), that carries Idaho’s goods to market. By 1917, the association dominates the state economy, and its co-operative model has spread across thirteen Western and Plains states.

The World a Department Store (1900) by Bradford Peck

A practical merchant who had his start in Boston’s Jordan Marsh Department Store before running his own in Lewiston, Maine, Bradford Peck brought direct commercial experience to his co-operative vision (Cary, 1977). Vulnerabilities as a small businessman in the age of trusts drew Peck towards the social criticism of Edward Bellamy, Henry George, and the Christian Socialists (Cary, 1977). In January 1900, he organised the real-world Coöperative Association of America (Peck, 1900, p. vii), his answer to the trust formation that, in his account, gathered from 1892 and grew too large for individual merchants to compete against. In the novel, the Association is formed early in 1901, a trust “unlike any of the private individual trusts heretofore organized”, founded on the “principles of the teachings of Jesus Christ” and aimed at re-creating “the cities, towns, and villages” through co-operation (Peck, 1900, p. 4).

The novel offers an ‘awakened sleeper’ narrative. Percy Brantford, a struggling merchant, is prescribed sleeping powders to assist his sleep, which he ingests on 31 December 1899. He reawakens on 7 April 1925 to find that the Coöperative Association has grown into a powerful integrated trust. One-hundred-dollar shares attract global investors despite there being no dividend payments for five years. A strict rule forbids members from patronising other businesses, systematically starving competitors and forcing many into the co-operative. To eliminate middleman costs, the Association acquires manufacturing plants, integrating them into a single system where goods ship directly from producer to supply stores. Its news organ, *The Daily American*, spreads the Association’s programme nationally alongside its departmental branches. The loyalty requirement proves crucial: “Piratical and incorporated trusts continually failed, our growing membership depriving them of customers” (Peck, 1900, p. 73). Eventually, massive membership enables the Association to capture state and national political control, dismantling laws blocking the creation of a “grand people’s trust” (Peck, 1900, p. 74). Parasitic industries such as insurance, stock jobbing, and traditional banking disappear, working hours reduce, wages increase, and housing is reformed.

The real-world Coöperative Association attracted significant support: within two years it was undertaking a million dollars in business with over a thousand members, drawing in figures such as Henry Demarest Lloyd and the Vrooman brothers, who built an elaborate holding-company architecture around it (Spann, 1989). Yet most members had joined the Association for the Rochdale-style dividends on their purchases rather than for the utopian programme, and the enterprise collapsed when workers refused to accept company notes instead of real money and small entrepreneurs proved "generally disinclined to accept any outside trust management whatever its ideals" (Spann, 1989, p. 222). Historian Edward Spann (1989) has noted that "successful cooperatives were far more likely to evolve into conventional businesses than to pave the way for cooperative society" (p. 224).

Henry Ashton: A Thrilling Story and How the Famous Co-operative Commonwealth was Established in Zanland (1903) by R. A. Dague

When the steamer Osceola wrecks off California, Henry Ashton, a young Christian Socialist, is separated from Lilly Higsbee, an heiress whose father, Colonel Higsbee, he rescues from drowning. Following this act of heroism, Ashton earns the Colonel's respect, his consent to the marriage of Ashton and Lilly, and his appointment as executor of the Higsbee estate. Following the Colonel's death, Lilly inherits a vast fortune, including mines, timber interests, railways, and stocks on the island of Zanland. After an adventure plot involving a dishonourable challenger to Lilly's hand is resolved with Ashton victorious, the couple propose using her inheritance to establish a "Co-operative or Collective Commonwealth … on a small scale, and yet of sufficient magnitude to furnish a pattern which the people of a State, or an empire, might easily and profitably adopt" (Dague, 1903, p. 181).

To build their Commonwealth on Zanland, the Ashtons first establish a printing plant to promote the ideas of direct legislation through initiative and referendum, collective ownership of productive property, universal healthcare, free public education, and pensions for the aged. Public utilities and transport networks are brought into public ownership, with former owners compensated by non-interest-bearing 'commonwealth due bills' redeemable in communal products. Labour organises into three classes based on hazard, technical skill, and responsibility, with workdays of four, five, and six hours respectively, and all workers receive equal compensation in redeemable 'time checks' usable at public department stores. Though productive property is collective, individuals own personal property and luxuries, enjoying material comfort once restricted to the wealthy. Specialised maternity hospitals focus on ante-natal influences, education and polytechnic training are universal, and the elimination of profit from liquor has nearly eradicated intoxication. Character and service, rather than greed, become the standard for honour.

Reciprocity in the Thirtieth Century, the Coming Co-operative Age (1909) by Thomas Kirwan

In the summer of 1907, William Wonder boards a train in Boston headed for Vermont. On the way, he is inexplicably transported to 2907 and the town of Pomfret, where the 'commune' holds title to all "real estate, buildings, schools, public utilities and industries" (Kirwan, 1909, p. 11) in the local area, with work restricted to adults aged twenty-one to sixty-five in two three-hour shifts daily. Life in Pomfret, a densely populated commune of over fifty thousand inhabitants, is governed by a "religion of humanity" (Kirwan, 1909, p. 175) beginning each day with a sun invocation honouring the sun as the "source and sustainer of all life" (Kirwan, 1909, p. 31), and religious services consist of moral lectures in public halls, where 'heaven' is understood as the equitable social order established on earth. Domestic life is defined by the absence of a servant class; family members perform housework as a respected, healthful duty, while the matron's guild and patriarch's guild provide voluntary mediation for marital or personal disputes.

Individuals own only personal belongings, and technology derives from renewable sources following the exhaustion of coal and mineral oil.

Wonder meets Aaron Wellman, who offers to host him in his house in lieu of a hotel. He later meets Wellman's great-grandfather, a patriarch, who details the systematic transition of Pomfret towards a co-operative commonwealth, beginning with the organisation of the 'industrial masses' into trade unions and co-operatives as defensive measures to secure "a measure of justice from the employing capitalists" (Kirwan, 1909, p. 114). Such early experiments demonstrated the viability of co-operative industry, eventually allowing citizens to "afford to take our ease after a period of work" (Kirwan, 1909, p. 114). The turning point came when the government, having purchased property to back currency and bonds, permitted communes to do the same, purchasing local lands and industries with long-term debentures, often redeemed early through communal effort, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of investment, ownership, and public benefit (Kirwan, 1909). This model spreads rapidly: "town after town and state after state wheeled into the line of co-operative progress" (Kirwan, 1909, p. 144).

At the end of his week-long sojourn, Wonder boards an airship bound for Boston, but it suffers a catastrophic mechanical failure and appears doomed to crash into the sea. Now facing his apparent death, he feels the hand of a conductor on his shoulder and hears him say: "Wake up sir! Your ticket was for West Hartford and here you are" (Kirwan, 1909, p. 190). The entire trip had been a vivid dream.

Roadtown (1910) by Edgar Chambless

Financially ruined by the 1893 financial crisis, Edgar Chambless seeks solace on a hill overlooking Los Angeles. With his last dollar drawn from the bank, he realises the ground is vacant and worthless because there is "no convenient way for people to get on top of the hill" (Chambless, 1910, p. 18). From this observation he conceives Roadtown: a continuous line of cement construction functioning as a linear city integrating housing, transport, and utilities into a single system (Chambless, 1910). Three underground monorail tracks and utility conduits occupy a basement runway, with two storeys of living and working space above ground and a continuous promenade on the roof for recreation.

By eliminating transport costs, Chambless (1910) argues, co-operation becomes practical and desirable, rendering middlemen surplus to requirements. Domestic labour is socialised through centralised co-operative establishments, bakeries, creameries, and roasting houses, distributing prepared food to serving stations at half-mile intervals. Beyond domestic co-operation, Roadtown aims to abolish the wage-system by returning industry to homes; every residence includes a sound-proof workroom equipped with electric power and machinery for independent production. The model combines co-operation in land and power use with individualism in machinery operation, designed to free women from housework and, in Chambless's (1910) vision, to underwrite a wife's independence in marriage itself, free to choose a husband "regardless of his ability to thrive in the present unfair struggle" and to leave him "if he proves to be the wrong man" (p. 113). Social harmony and home rule are maintained through "direct legislation, initiative, referendum and recall" (Chambless, 1910, p. 142), ensuring every inhabitant a direct voice in communal management. Social transformation is achieved not through political revolution but through infrastructural design and voluntary participation, creating an environment where, in Chambless's (1910) words, "man will finally enjoy all the fruits of his labor" (p. 169).

The scheme attracted the support of Thomas Edison, who donated the use of his cement-house patents, and William H. Boyes, who donated the use of his monorail patents (Chambless, 1910). In 1911, Chambless (1911) pressed the scheme on Theodore Roosevelt himself, leaving a copy of the book at his office and asking for his criticism. Yet for all this backing, Roadtown was never built.

Analysis: They Made it All too Easy

Each novel describes its own co-operative society, but all seven start from the same assumption, that co-operation can displace competition. They differ mainly in how they think it would happen. Each proceeds from the assumption that co-operative transition succeeds, demonstrating how their proposed mechanisms subordinate competition to co-operation once material superiority is achieved. Reviewing *The Co-opolitan*, George Howard Gibson (1898) named the cost of that method: Forbush had “made it too easy”, silently assuming “that there were no moral miracles or difficulties worth recording” (p. 31) in the transfer to a co-operative society. The charge reaches well beyond Forbush, for what unites these otherwise diverse proposals is a single shared tension: how to secure decisive economic transformation while preserving genuinely voluntary participation.

If that tension is shared, so, less obviously, is the conception of co-operation beneath it. Lambert’s (1959/1963) distinction between principles he considers essential to co-operation and those he treats as historically conditioned responses to circumstances illuminates how far these novels travel from orthodox Rochdale practice, and how much of it they keep. The essential principles are democracy through member control; service, defined as the orientation of the enterprise toward the benefit of members and the wider community rather than toward profit; freedom to join; distribution of net assets without profit upon dissolution; and voluntary membership. Other Rochdale principles — cash trading, limited interest on capital, political or religious neutrality, education — Lambert (1959/1963) treats not as binding requirements of co-operation as such but as contingent features of the historical moment in which the Pioneers operated. The novels therefore diverge over diagnosis: how each author assesses the obstacles capitalism presents, and the mechanism that will overcome them. Across all of them, competition is displaced sometimes by structural restructuring and sometimes by overt instruments. Populations favour co-operation once profit-extraction mechanisms are removed and service principles institutionalised. While the option to remain outside the co-operative order formally persists, the material incentives to take it steadily erode.

The novels offer three strategies for moving to a co-operative society. A first strategy trusts that co-operation need only demonstrate its material superiority, drawing labour out of the wage economy until competition can no longer match its terms. Smith’s (1895) *Altruria* is the purest case: a co-operative township in Iowa prospers, draws subscribers from its neighbours, and by 1914 has multiplied until every township has become an “Altrurian industrial republic” (Smith, 1895, p. 103), conventional employers driven to adopt profit-sharing simply to keep their workers. Olerich’s (1893) Mars presents the same gradualist logic as a nine-hundred-year accomplished end-state, though the mechanism there is domestic aggregation and land tenure reform rather than labour-market competition, with vacant land free by occupancy ensuring that monopoly and rent disappear and the competitive alternative becomes materially unsustainable. Forbush (1898) works the identical labour-market mechanism to Smith (1895), but reinforces it at two points with instruments that shade demonstration into coercion. In the founding phase, the Co-opolitan Association secures exclusive control of the valley’s water rights under US desert land law, rendering settlement by non-members structurally impossible without access to irrigation. In the expansionary phase, co-operative department stores and hotels undercut all private traders until merchants and hotel men are “compelled to assign for the benefit of creditors, join the Co-operative Commonwealth or depart from the state” (Forbush, 1898, pp. 89–90). It is the most patient and most genuinely voluntary of the three strategies, and the one on which the voluntarism tension presses hardest. Writing about Olerich, Bill Kauffman (1995) argues that the vision constitutes dystopia regardless of material benefit, describing Mars as “a sterile planet in which all particularistic loyalties, to country, town, neighbour, family, even children, have been extirpated” (p. 144), invoking Huxley’s warning that such systems produce “slaves who do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude” (p. 35). The charge is sharpest here because the demonstration strategy depends entirely on free choice, and yet across all three novels the option to remain outside the co-operative order formally persists only until the material incentives to take it have been eroded away.

A second strategy treats capitalism as resilient enough to resist gradual economic pressure, requiring accelerated capital formation to construct a countervailing system. In Dague's (1903) narrative, the Higsbee fortune is deployed to build education, healthcare, and public utilities as structural expressions of service, bypassing the long demonstration period that Olerich (1893) and Forbush (1898) rely upon. On a larger scale and with greater institutional ambition, Peck's (1900) Association attracts global investment, prohibits members from patronising competitors, and uses accumulated capital to fund industrial integration and political control, eventually dismantling the legal barriers sustaining the "grand people's trust" (Peck, 1900, p. 74). In both cases, democracy and service are not emergent outcomes of voluntary adoption but programmed features of co-ordinated capital deployment.

A third strategy holds that neither gradual superiority nor accelerated capital formation addresses the deeper institutional conditions sustaining competition. The solution is structural redesign: reconfiguring physical and economic space so that co-operative participation becomes the rational default rather than an ideological choice. This is the logic of Chambless (1910), whose *Roadtown* integrates transport, utilities, and production so that middlemen become not merely outcompeted but technically redundant, surplus to requirements before anyone has chosen to exclude them. Between these positions, Kirwan's (1909) communes occupy a middle ground that is neither purely economic nor purely structural but institutional: once they are permitted to purchase local lands and industries with long-term debentures on the same terms as government, a self-reinforcing cycle of investment, ownership, and public benefit drives expansion without coercion, town after town wheeling into "the line of co-operative progress" (Kirwan, 1909, p. 144).

The diversity of mechanisms these seven novels propose reflects divergent diagnoses of the system to be displaced rather than any fracture within the co-operative ideal itself. Their disagreement is not about whether co-operation should be voluntary, democratic, and service-oriented, but about what capitalism is (vulnerable, resilient, or structurally embedded), and therefore what it would take to displace it. What all seven authors share is the assumption that markets need not be abolished, only the competitive relationships governing them. Van Rensburg's (1962) distinction is clarifying here: commercial systems aim at the highest return on capital invested, while co-operatives aim to secure for members the best realisation of their product. Both operate through markets; the difference lies in what surplus is for. Anti-middleman vocabulary runs through all seven novels, but Peck (1900) is the instructive exception: his Association does not abolish the middleman so much as absorb him, the displaced intermediaries "given more profitable and beneficial work to perform as managers of our mills and enterprises" (p. 129), which confirms that the target is the parasitic function, not the person. Eliminating that layer is not the abolition of markets, but the restoration of their co-ordinating function, stripped of profit extraction.

Racial equality does not provide a focus for these works. Their co-operative universalism abstracts away the racial structures that organised American economic life in the period, and African Americans are substantively absent from the corpus. Ethnic difference fares little better: Forbush's (1898) Idaho commonwealth approvingly bars Chinese miners and "an ignorant class of Italians, Hungarians and Slavonians" (p. 99). Kirwan (1909) alone engages the question directly and does so through an overtly antisemitic framework that runs across several pages: Christianity is traced to a "socialistic movement of the lower classes of the Jewish people" (p. 162), Jewish belief is characterised as a "race religion" so deeply rooted that "it required hundreds of years of enlightenment to neutralize" it (p. 164). The book concludes by predicting that Jewish "racial conceit and exclusiveness" (Kirwan, 1909, p. 170) will dissolve through intermarriage by the thirtieth century. Beyond the page, the Knights of Labor organised Black and White workers into the same assemblies after 1883, and the Colored Farmers' National Alliance ran its own exchanges and stores for Black farmers in the cotton South, at the very moment the Populist revolt threatened a union of white and Black labour against banking and plantation interests (Pfaelzer, 1975). The 'universal' co-operation these strategies project renders invisible whole groups of

people, with Forbush (1898) alone drawing the boundary at overt exclusion of ethnic minority groups.

Why, then, were these books published as novels rather than manifestos? A reviewer of *Henry Ashton* (Dague, 1903) in *The Iowa Socialist* gave the working answer: “if you have a friend who does not manifest sufficient interest to take up the study of the subject in the abstract, you will do well to place in his or her hands a copy” (McKee, 1903, p. 1). Fiction was a conversion tool for readers who would not engage with theory, an attempt to make co-operation seem natural, attractive, and already inhabitable. The same reviewer noted “the possibility that the time has passed for the Socialist novel” (McKee, 1903, p. 1), and Pfaelzer (1975) documents the transition in the publishing history of Charles H. Kerr and Company, which published *The Co-opolitan* (Forbush, 1898) before shifting decisively toward scientific socialist literature after 1900. The utopian novel as a vehicle for co-operative advocacy was historically specific to the 1890s, and largely unread even then: Grant (1975) notes that Olerich’s book “sold poorly, probably less than 1,000 copies” (p. 250), and Pfaelzer (1975) observes that Forbush and Peck “request funds to establish the ideas of their books” but that “none of the books requesting aid attained a large enough circulation to have any tangible results” (p. 195). Chambless (1910) is the instructive exception: *Roadtown* influenced Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Soviet architects (Myers, 2014), but its co-operative content was overshadowed by its architectural vision. The obscurity is not incidental to the mechanism question; it is part of the answer.

Conclusion: What Shall be the Mechanism?

Later novelists returned to the question posed in the 1890s and found they could not answer it the same way. What the seven novels assumed away, namely the friction of human nature, the resilience of capital, and the absence of any cleared space in which to begin, returned as soon as co-operation was imagined not as a perfected destination but as a struggling presence inside an unreformed world. Kim Stanley Robinson (2021), at once practitioner and critic of the form, has argued that earlier utopias depend on a clean break, a space cleared in advance for a new order. Several of the seven novels evade in just this way, the hard passage put offstage by the frame and slept through in Peck or dreamed away in Kirwan (Robinson, 2021). In later novels, co-operation no longer wins because people are persuaded of it, whether by proof or by belief; it emerges because necessity leaves them no alternative. Necessity has, in Robinson’s (2021) phrase, “jammed utopia into history”.

Robinson’s (1990) *Pacific Edge* holds its California in common, capping private wealth through what its characters call “a legal floor and ceiling on personal income” (p. 52) and running its towns by direct democracy and obligatory communal labour; yet its plot turns on a reform-era mayor quietly gaming that system to develop the community’s last open hillside. Robinson (1990) is candid that the green enclave is no escape, since “there is no such thing as a pocket Utopia” (p. 60) while the wider world burns. His reformers achieve change not by demonstration or conviction but through law, since “legislation is a revolutionary power” (Robinson, 1990, p. 56). *Blue Mars* makes small worker-owned co-operatives the engine of history and inverts the wage relation so that “workers hire capital rather than the other way around” (Robinson, 1996, p. 147), yet still concedes that its people argue, resent, and hate. Le Guin’s (1974) *The Dispossessed*, the purest case, runs on voluntary work-syndicates and mutual aid and is just as honest that co-operation policed only by a neighbour’s opinion can curdle into conformism and the covert power of a Sabul, the ambiguous utopia that gives the tradition its watchword.

Across the *Fall Revolution* quartet, Ken MacLeod scatters co-operative organisation across every ideology, from the voting security collectives of *The Star Fraction* (MacLeod, 1995) to the avowedly communist Solar Union of *The Cassini Division* (MacLeod, 1999), which defines itself against its ‘non-cooperators’ yet is only “the civilian hinterland of a war economy” (p. 48). MacLeod (1999) is no more sentimental about the market-anarchist mirror of that order, the rival world of New Mars, which from the Union’s vantage “sounded more like a multiple mutual tyranny” (p. 43). Behind the fiction lies an argument he has made in his own voice, that

“production for exchange can’t be gradually reformed into production directly for use” (MacLeod, 2004, p. 29), a direct rebuttal of the seven earlier novels, whose method was precisely to keep the market and reform only the relationships within it. Cory Doctorow’s (2017) *Walkaway* pushes furthest, dissolving the firm into a leaderless common whose deadliest enemy is internal, and whose survival is never secured but only ever “the first days of a better nation” (p. 38). Across all these books the co-operative is the recurring instrument of a fairer economy, yet no degree of it dissolves ambition, corruption, or inertia: utopia is never a finished state, but an arrangement that has to be defended, co-operatively, without end.

That necessity, not conviction, might be the true engine is the assumption the seven novels never tested. They take the answer for granted: demonstrate co-operation’s superiority, or engineer conditions attractive enough that adoption follows, and it will win out, whether from rational self-interest or, in Smith’s (1895) case, religious conviction. More than a century ago Richard Michaelis (1890) argued that co-operative transformation could happen if people wanted it badly enough, but wanting assumes a choice freely made, and as Robinson and MacLeod between them have suggested, the actual passage between two systems may not move that way at all. When the California self-help barter co-operatives organised direct exchange networks in the 1930s, their members did not adopt co-operation from utopian conviction but from immediate necessity, and when the Roosevelt administration provided employment through New Deal programmes the movement collapsed, since paid work in dollars was more valuable (Curl, 1983). The mechanism these seven authors proposed requires persuading people. Necessity removes some of that persuasion when the existing distribution system fails, but even then, co-operation would need advocates to take root. It is possible for example, that if economic conditions had been different in the years following 1844, that the Rochdale Pioneers Society might have failed.

If artificial intelligence, automation, or platform monopoly reduce the availability of well-paid work to the point where competitive markets can no longer deliver goods and services through available employment, co-operative relationships may emerge not from conviction in their superiority but from recognition that community is the only remaining distribution mechanism. At that point, Michaelis’s (1890) formulation looks different: if people want transformation badly enough, not ideologically but practically, the mechanism requires no utopian vision, only the relational and institutional infrastructure to be in place when they are ready to use it. In a way, co-operation is well fitted for this, for there is real world precedent of it being an alternative to free markets and competition that emerges from the existing system in a way that avoids revolution.

The Author

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