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Gilmore Girls and the co-operative imaginary: Stars Hollow's co-operative economics as comfort TV

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This paper argues that *Gilmore Girls* (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000–2007) derives much of its affective power from an implicit co-operative imaginary embedded in the fictional town of its setting, Stars Hollow, Connecticut. Drawing on the International Co-operative Alliance's co-operative principles and values, the paper analyses how the show constructs an economy grounded in democratic member control, autonomy from corporate capital, mutual aid, and community-centred governance. Stars Hollow is situated within a longer tradition of US popular culture texts that project utopian alternatives to corporate capitalism through small-town or communitarian settings, yet there is an absence of formal co-operative structures to support the alternative economy of the town. The paper examines the absence of named co-operative institutions in Stars Hollow, arguing that this absence reflects both the show's corporate origins and emphasis on the individual as the focal point in US narratives of economic life. Crucially, the paper contends that Stars Hollow's co-operative imaginary depends on a post-racial and post-feminist fantasy: its frictionless mutuality is only possible through the erasure of racial and class inequality. For contemporary viewers navigating late-capitalist precarity, Stars Hollow offers a powerful but politically bounded vision of co-operative economics.

Introduction

Every September, as the leaves start to turn, *Gilmore Girls* (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000-2007) resurfaces in Netflix's top 10 most-watched titles (Hank, 2024). First aired in October 2000, the screwball-feminist, small-town dramedy averaged five million weekly viewers during its initial run, and its 2023 Netflix re-release generated over 500 million viewing hours between January and June, surpassing streaming behemoths *Seinfeld* and *Stranger Things* (Hank, 2024). Journalists, fans, and meme-driven social media cycles agree: it is the quintessential autumn comfort TV show. The opening credits of cosy knits, orange leaves, a sepia-washed New England town square, signal the warm cocoon of Stars Hollow as the weather cools.

Beyond its autumnal palette and signature fast-talking dialogue, why does the series remain so comforting more than two decades later? Scholarly work has approached *Gilmore Girls* through feminist, class, gender, and audience-studies lenses (Calvin, 2008; Diffrient & Lavery, 2010),

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with critics explaining its resurgent popularity via nostalgia, white post-racial utopianism, or pandemic-era anxiety (Grady et al., 2026; Stern, 2012). Yet one dimension remains strikingly underexplored: the economic imaginary of Stars Hollow.

This paper argues that *Gilmore Girls* is comforting not simply because of its characters or aesthetics, but because Stars Hollow functions as an accidental co-operative economy, sustained by participatory democracy, mutual aid, and co-operative economics that resonate with the International Co-operative Alliance's (ICA) principles and values more than with the globalising capitalism of early-2000s United States (US). Stars Hollow's co-operative infrastructure of democratic assemblies, member-like participation, locally owned small-business ecosystem and dense networks of solidarity and reciprocal care, produces the conditions for the show's relationships, tone, and warmth to flourish.

To make this argument, the paper first distinguishes between mutual aid and formal co-operation, grounding both in the ICA's principles and values (2015). It then situates *Gilmore Girls* within a longer tradition of US popular culture texts that imagine co-operative alternatives to corporate capitalism without naming them as such. The paper then analyses three canonical explanations for the show's appeal — single motherhood, the village of eccentrics, and small-town utopianism — demonstrating how each depends on Stars Hollow's co-operative moral economy, mapping the town's political life onto specific principles of co-operative economics. Finally, it examines the central contradictions of this portrayal, arguing that Stars Hollow's comfort is produced through a fantasy of post-racial whiteness and that the absence of formal co-operative structures reflects both the show's corporate origins.

Locating Stars Hollow in the US Economic Imagination

To assess the economic logic of Stars Hollow, we must first distinguish between mutual aid and formalised co-operative infrastructures. The distinction matters because as Stars Hollow enacts co-operative values without co-operative structures, and the gap between these two things is itself analytically significant.

Co-operation, mutual aid, and the co-operative imaginary

The ICA (2015) defines a co-operative as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise" (p. 48-49). Formal co-operatives are organised according to seven principles: 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. The values underpinning these principles represent an internationally agreed ethical framework that distinguishes co-operative enterprise from both investor-owned capitalism and state socialism (ICA, 2015). It is these values of self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, honesty, openness, and social responsibility where Stars Hollow can begin to be observed as analogous or aligned with co-operative economics.

Mutual aid is related but distinct, as theorised in the tradition of Kropotkin (1902) and revived in contemporary usage by Spade (2020), refers to informal, reciprocal networks of solidarity in which communities meet each other's needs outside market or state structures. Mutual aid operates within existing economic arrangements and requires no formal ownership structure or democratic governance mechanism. It is co-operative in spirit, grounded in solidarity rather than profit, but it does not, by itself, constitute a co-operative economy in the ICA sense.

Stars Hollow exists somewhere between the two: saturated with mutual aid, concern for community, collaborative approach to businesses, and deep democratic decision making but conspicuously lacking any further formalised co-operative structures like worker co-operatives, housing co-operatives, and credit unions. Yet the town's economic and social life consistently

enacts co-operative values such as democratic participation, community concern, resistance to external capital, and the subordination of market logic to collective welfare. The paper's argument is that the show constructs what might be called a co-operative imaginary: a cultural vision of economic life organised around co-operative principles, with only some of the institutional forms that would give that vision material reality.

Small towns and communitarian life in US popular culture

Stars Hollow belongs to a distinctive and long-standing tradition in US popular culture of the idealisation of small-town or communitarian life as an implicit critique of corporate capitalism. Here, co-operative values are projected onto a community without being named as such. Understanding this genealogy contextualises the show's co-operative imaginary and illuminates why formal co-operative structures remain absent from it.

The small town has functioned as a recurring symbolic site in US culture throughout the twentieth century, a space where the nation negotiates its identity between idealisation and critique. Media scholars have consistently noted how popular culture lauds the small town as a wholesome refuge, particularly during periods of national crisis, producing what Williams (1973) called "pastoral nostalgia": an enduring affective response to industrialisation in which the rural, small-town past is reconstructed as a lost community of use-value relations.

For Simmel (1903/1950), modern urban life necessarily produces alienation and the attenuation of personal bonds, and the small town functions in US cultural imagination as the antidote. Fredric Jameson's (1992) analysis of the nostalgia film develops this further, where texts function as symptoms of late capitalism, expressing a desire for pre-corporate social relations that the present economic order has foreclosed. Here, the small-town setting is a mythic structure organising values of community and moral coherence against the anomie of the market.

Gilmore Girls is distinctive because it brings these two traditions into an unusual synthesis. It carries the moral economy, the communal solidarity, the resistance to corporate incursion, the dense reciprocity of local life with a witty, feminist politics, and cultural self-awareness often associated with urban sensibilities. Indeed, it further absorbs the twentieth century characterisations of US small towns as neighbourly, fair, decent, while rejecting their snobbish, small minded, and class stratified critiques (Halper & Muzzio, 2011). It is both wholesomely communitarian and irreverently urban in sensibility; anti-capitalist in implication without being countercultural in form.

Instead, co-operative values are displaced onto character, story, and tone: onto Suki's relational generosity, Luke's unpaid labour, the town meetings' participatory democracy, and the dense reciprocity of small-town life. The co-operative imaginary is present as feeling before it is present as analysis, and this, perhaps, is precisely what makes it so comforting. Embedded in the background texture of the show rather than foregrounded as an argument, it models co-operative life without naming the conditions that would make it structurally possible.

Single Motherhood and Co-operative Security

A rarity in early-2000s television, *Gilmore Girls* centres three generations of women: Lorelai, her daughter Rory, and matriarch Emily. Its witty, pop-culture-saturated dialogue merges urban feminist sensibilities with a warm mother-daughter intimacy, creating female characters who are independent, complex, and deeply embedded in their community.

Lorelai's biography (pregnant teen runaway turned inn manager turned small-business owner) is consistently cited as the show's most aspirational element (Diffrient & Lavery, 2010; Seitz, 2025). Yet online commentary frequently interrogates the plausibility of her owning a two-bedroom home in a picturesque Connecticut town on an entry-level service salary (Adamczyk, 2015; Gibbons, 2022). The show itself destabilises this claim to bootstrap independence, as Lorelai succeeds because Stars Hollow functions as the literal village of the proverb.

Lorelai depends on Stars Hollow's communal infrastructure, which constitutes precisely the principle of concern for community (ICA, 2015). The housing and employment offered to teenage Lorelai by Mia at the Independence Inn, the informal childcare provided by neighbours, Luke's unpaid labour and food, the loose alternative currency of favours, and communal goodwill are all material examples of basic needs being reliably met; social crises being treated as communal problems rather than individual failures, creating a comforting portrayal of single motherhood, where viewers are comforted by the security of Lorelai and Rory's life.

The resonant co-operative principle of voluntary and open membership (ICA, 2015) is more ambivalent and revealing. In Stars Hollow, community membership operates on analogous terms in some respects: newcomers are absorbed, eccentrics are accommodated, difference is tolerated. When teenage Lorelai arrives pregnant, she is housed and employed immediately; when Kirk experiences a brief homelessness arc in Season 5, a town-wide rota forms to house him (Palladino & Douglas, 2005, 5.18); when Luke's brother-in-law goes without work, Lorelai and Luke absorb the costs of his employment and redistribute resources to support his family (Rosenthal & Zinberg, 2005, 6.03). The community functions as though structured by an informal open-membership norm: once you are a member of Stars Hollow, you are absorbed into its system of care.

Yet the ICA's (2015) prohibition on discrimination is violated in practice. Stars Hollow's open-membership norm applies primarily within a community that is overwhelmingly white and implicitly middle-class. The co-operative imaginary of Stars Hollow is not universally available, but it is structurally bounded by race and other forms of discrimination: its rejection of teenage vagrant Jess in series 2 (Palladino & Katleman, 2001: 2.8) suggests some classism exists in this otherwise egalitarian society. For now, it is sufficient to note the productive tension that Stars Hollow performs voluntarism and openness while failing the non-discrimination requirement. The comfort the show offers is real but partial, available to some viewers more readily than others.

The feminist appeal of Lorelai's life therefore rests on the imaginative possibility of a town where women's security is structurally achievable outside heterosexual monogamous partnership. As Stern (2012) argues, this reflects a postfeminist fantasy of empowerment. Approached from the question of what makes the show comforting rather than realistic, this fantasy reveals an audience that finds a co-operative economic system of distributed security, relational labour, and communal safety nets affectively compelling precisely because they are so structurally absent from contemporary life.

The Village of Eccentrics: Small-Business Economy and Member Economic Participation

Throughout the show, Stars Hollow is contrasted with the nearby city of Hartford, the realm of Lorelai's parents Emily and Richard Gilmore, portrayed as class-stratified, formal, and anxious about status. Stars Hollow, conversely, is egalitarian, quirky, porous, and a place where difference comparatively thrives, with Feuer (2010) identifying the show's 'village of eccentrics' as central to its pleasure. The town's economy consists entirely of small enterprises: diners, bookstores, repair shops, dance studios, farms, and inns. Corporate presence is absent; big-box stores remain outside town boundaries. Stars Hollow operates as an economically protected micro-region, insulated from the competitive pressures that eroded small-town economies during the late-1990s wave of globalisation.

This small-business ecosystem enacts something close to the principle of member economic participation, holding that in a co-operative, "capital is the servant, not the master of the enterprise" (ICA, 2015, p. 30). In Stars Hollow, economic surpluses circulate within the community rather than flowing outward to external investors or shareholders. Wealth is generated, spent, and reinvested locally, a form of import-substitution economics that the ICA (2015) associates with the co-operative model's capacity to "counterbalance the massive growth

of inequality between the world's rich and poor" (p. 1). When the Independence Inn experiences a fire, a coordinated network repurposes Miss Patty's Dance Studio as office space, Luke's Diner as a cafeteria, and townspeople's homes as guest lodgings (Palladino & Long, 2003, 3.17). This spontaneous collective mobilisation of community assets in response to economic crises echoes member economic participation (ICA, 2015): the community collectively manages its resources in the interests of its members rather than for individual profit.

The town also protects its small-business character from competitive pressure in ways that echo co-operative principles. When the unofficial town troubadour's complaint about a competitor leads to a town-meeting debate and the creation of the official position of Town Troubadour (Palladino & Sherman-Palladino, 2001: 1.21), the outcome is functionally anti-competitive, placing communal cultural welfare above market logic. When Richard proposes franchise expansions of Luke's Diner (Palladino & Orteka, 2004: 5.07) or the Dragonfly Inn (Sherman-Palladino & Zinberg, 2004: 5.10), townspeople respond with bemusement and mild hostility. Taylor Doose's expansion from owning the market store to opening a sweet shop and ice cream van is portrayed as self-important: growth for its own sake is treated as an outlier rather than admirable.

Community rituals (the dance marathons, picnic basket auctions, niche historical reenactments, and seasonal festivals) function as the cultural infrastructure of this co-operative moral economy, generating cohesion, reciprocity, and shared identity. They are mechanisms through which co-operative values are reproduced and transmitted without formal institutional structures. Indeed, the ritual of participation often matters more than the goal of the event itself. When Christopher, Lorelai's new husband, makes a generous donation to the bridge restoration project, for which the town has organised a 'knit-a-thon' to raise the necessary funds, this act is socially rejected (Grae & Ortega, 2006: 7.9). It is precisely the participation in activities and collective sourcing of the resources that the townspeople enjoy, and Christopher's donation marks him as someone who 'doesn't get it'. Stars Hollow's festivals and rituals perform an analogous function of continuously re-enacting and transmitting the community's co-operative values, while socialising newcomers and renewing existing members' commitment to collective life — indeed, they make co-operative economics and resource sharing 'fun'.

Town Meetings, Democratic Governance, and Autonomy

While many television shows centre around some form of localised economy, rarely is such attention paid to the governance of the local economic model. In *Gilmore Girls*, the town meetings serve as a central dramatic device in every season. These open assemblies adjudicate town matters from stop signs and garbage dumps to zoning battles, traffic disputes, cultural events, and interpersonal conflicts. They closely resemble the real New England Board of Selectmen, one of the few surviving forms of direct democratic governance in the US where citizens meet face-to-face to make binding legislative decisions (Bryan, 2003).

In the imaginary New England of Stars Hollow, where no big business or state interference interrupts the town's autonomy, the town meetings enact co-operative principles of autonomy and independence. These hold that co-operatives are "autonomous, self-help organisations controlled by their members" and that "if they enter into agreements with other organisations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy" (ICA, 2015, p. 45). Stars Hollow's governance structure is self-referential and self-sustaining, generates its own norms, enforces its own bylaws, and resists external interference. The absence of state intervention or corporate pressure is the structural condition of its co-operative imaginary and the show's comfort TV show status.

Taylor Doose, the town select-man and busy-body, embodies the tensions of collective governance. He is simultaneously the guardian of the municipal code, self-interested shopkeeper, and zealous advocate for community standards, speaking for the Business

Association, Tourist Board, Neighbourhood Watch, and Citizens for a Clean Stars Hollow (Palladino & Katleman, 2001: 2.8), often using municipal law to advance personal agendas. When Jackson's greenhouse violates setback rules by six inches, Taylor responds: "Your issue is not with me. I am merely the humble vessel for the municipal code" (Prady & Shallat, 2004: 5.04). The show uses Taylor to dramatise both the strengths and pitfalls of direct democracy: its capacity for genuine participatory decision-making and its vulnerability to capture by local power imbalances by those with privileges, such as time-affluence like Taylor.

Luke acts as Taylor's foil, the embodiment of anti-hierarchical, relational, and resistance to regulation or participation for its own sake. Their debates stage the philosophical conflict at the heart of decentralised governance: bureaucratic proceduralism versus communal autonomy. The ICA's guidance recognises this tension explicitly, noting that "one of the biggest challenges facing co-operatives in implementing the Principle of Democratic Member Control is creating a culture that welcomes and encourages debate, rather than stifles it" (ICA, 2015, p. 31). In Stars Hollow, lively challenging debate is precisely the norm where the consistent victories of quirky, populist voices over Taylor's bureaucratic or self-interested positions constitute a utopian ideal in which democratic procedure ultimately serves the community well.

Absent Co-operative Structures

Beyond the town meetings, however, there is very little portrayal of formalised co-operative structures that differentiate co-operative economics from the less structured forms of mutual aid. In Stars Hollow, children are informally cared for between families, safe in public spaces to wander, but there is no formal co-operative childcare arrangement, for example. This absence illuminates a broader relationship between the show's specific cultural context in US popular culture and popular understandings of co-operative economics.

The lack of formal co-operative structures allows the co-operative imaginary to circulate as feeling, as warmth, as community texture, but as a cultural text produced by global corporation Warner Bros, it cannot be institutionalised. The dominant American cultural narrative of economic life, from the self-made individual to the family business to the franchise, leaves little room for co-operative ownership as an aspirational form. And so we witness Stars Hollow, magically insulated from the neoliberal form and governed by co-operative principles, imbue a comforting feeling that comes from more collaborative, fair, caring economic systems without explicitly naming or showing how those economies come into fruition.

What this analysis reveals is that the co-operative imaginary in Stars Hollow functions as what the literary critic Jameson (1992) calls a "political unconscious", a repressed or displaced utopian content that circulates affectively within a text whose explicit ideology is quite different. Stars Hollow's co-operative values are real in their effects, producing the affective comfort and aspirational community that viewers find so compelling, but they cannot be named as co-operative without disrupting the show's cultural logic.

Small Town Communalism and Whiteness in the US Imagination

The emotional comfort of *Gilmore Girls* is inseparable from its co-operative economic imaginary. Stars Hollow offers a world largely free from precarity where basic needs are reliably met, relationships are more central than markets, governance is participatory and hyper-local, and crises never exceed the community's collective capacity to respond. For contemporary viewers navigating housing unaffordability, inflation, gig-economy volatility, and political instability, Stars Hollow functions as a utopia of relational labour, mutual aid, and community-based wellbeing.

Yet this comfort is sustained through selective exclusions that constitute a fundamental violation of co-operative principles of voluntary and open membership that require membership be open "without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination" (ICA, 2015, p. 5) and that

co-operatives ‘challenge’ prejudice when they encounter it. Stars Hollow’s largely post-racial whiteness enables the frictionless social harmony that Pettman (2016) terms ‘normporn’: an affective smoothing that removes diversity, conflict, and structural inequality in favour of benign sameness. The show includes only a handful of recurring non-white characters, whose arcs remain underdeveloped or constrained by stereotype. As Chung (2010) notes, Lane Kim’s story relies heavily on tropes of Korean American assimilation, while Michel’s, the show’s only returning black, and gay, character, is never afforded any meaningful independent narrative arc.

This racial exclusion is a structural feature of the co-operative imaginary the show constructs. Stars Hollow’s co-operative values of open community, democratic participation, and shared commons, are available primarily to the white characters. The informal open-membership norm operates within a community from which racial and class differences have been largely evacuated. This is the central contradiction of the show’s co-operative representation: it enacts co-operative values while violating co-operative principles. The frictionless mutuality of Stars Hollow is only possible because the diversity, conflict, and structural inequality that co-operative institutions must actively address have been imagined away.

Gilmore Girls allows viewers to inhabit a fantasy in which difference is reduced to quirky personality traits rather than structural inequality. This illusion of frictionless conviviality is comforting precisely because it requires no political struggle, where conflict is gentle, consensus is assumed, and economic security is never materially questioned. In a decade marked by rising authoritarianism and widening inequality, imagining a co-operative local economy unburdened by race, class, or precarity offers a powerful affective refuge for some. But this refuge depends on assimilation into whiteness, and the show’s economic imaginary of a frictionless, self-sustaining small-town commons rests on the erasure of the very inequalities that make such a world structurally necessary.

Conclusion

Stars Hollow’s co-operative economic imaginary underpins the emotional, feminist, and aesthetic comforts of Gilmore Girls. The series inadvertently constructs a vision of participatory democracy, mutual aid, and community-centred economics that resonates with the ICA’s (2015) co-operative principles — particularly democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, and concern for community — without naming these principles as such. In doing so, it belongs to a longer tradition of US popular culture that projects co-operative values onto idealised community settings while avoiding formal co-operative structure.

The distinction between co-operative values and co-operative structures is the paper’s central analytical finding. Stars Hollow demonstrates that co-operative economics can be affectively compelling without the formal institutions that would give it material reality. The co-operative imaginary circulates through character, community texture, and governance practice, producing what might be called an informal co-operative moral economy: an economic culture governed by solidarity, reciprocity, and democratic participation without the legal and institutional forms that would make these values durable and accountable.

This finding has implications beyond the analysis of a single television show. It suggests that co-operative economics is more culturally legible than its marginal position in mainstream economic discourse implies, and that audiences might be capable of recognising and finding comfort in co-operative values even when they are not named. For Gen Z and younger millennials who increasingly seek imaginaries of locality, mutuality, and relational labour as alternatives to neoliberal atomisation, Stars Hollow provides an accessible and affectively powerful countermodel. For Gen Z and younger millennials navigating housing unaffordability, gig-economy precarity, and rising inequality, Stars Hollow’s co-operative moral economy offers something specific beyond nostalgia towards an alternative economic imagination. Research on Generation Z’s relationship to collective and communal forms of living and working, documented

across studies of the sharing economy, co-operative housing interest, and localisation movements suggests a demographic with particular receptivity to co-operative values (Moharam & Mukherjee, 2023). Stars Hollow's implicit co-operative economy provides what Ernst Bloch (1959/1986) would call a 'not-yet' horizon: a utopian image that makes present conditions legible as insufficient by offering an affective sense of what might otherwise be possible. The co-operative imaginary need not be explicitly political to be culturally significant.

Yet the paper's critical conclusion must stand alongside this positive finding. The cosiness of Stars Hollow requires critical scrutiny; its co-operative economy is emotionally rich but politically bounded, offering comfort through idealised homogeneity rather than genuine pluralism. Real co-operative institutions with formal commitments to open membership, democratic accountability, and concern for community, are just as demanding as the participation in Stars Hollow's town hall but likely much more expansive, boring, conflictual, and genuinely more transformative than the affective warmth of Stars Hollow can suggest.

However, in an era of late-capitalist exhaustion, we should pay attention to what audiences find comforting within popular culture and comfort TV. That millions of viewers find a vision of democratic governance, mutual aid, and community-centred economics deeply consoling is not a trivial cultural fact. Stars Hollow's co-operative imaginary is not merely cosy but hopeful, and indicative of a large-scale yearning for economic alternatives that the co-operative movement is uniquely positioned to make real. The task is to make the co-operative tradition legible as its fulfilment and to name what Stars Hollow can only feel.

The Author

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