Platform Cooperativism Consortium

INSTITUTE FOR THE COOPERATIVE DIGITAL ECONOMY

COOPERATIVE ROOTS FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE

A Report by

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INTRODUCTION

This ICDE fellowship report delves into the historical underpinnings of cooperative thought as a lever for advancing climate justice. It scrutinizes the contributions of the early socialist and cooperative pioneer, Robert Owen, alongside the African American sociologist and civil rights activist, W. E. B. Du Bois. Their insights are pivotal in addressing the identity crises within cooperatives and thereby fortifying the collective endeavor against climate change. Initially, the report contextualizes climate justice, segueing into an examination of Florentine cooperatives' proactive roles in climate justice endeavors. It further dissects the inherent dual identity of cooperativism—the intricate balance between economic viability and social commitments, spotlighting common hurdles such as capital acquisition, market competition, regulatory conformance, democratic governance/member participation, and the reconciliation of socio-political goals with fiscal prudence. Concluding with an analysis of Owen and Du Bois, the report critically questions the prevalent neoliberal stance within much of the cooperative sector, urging a reinvigorated cooperative ethos that champions radical political stances in solidarity with workers, minority groups, and environmental stewardship.

Platform cooperatives have emerged as a recent alternative to capitalist platforms. By bringing the cooperative principles online, they have positioned themselves within the rich heritage of the two hundred years of cooperative movement history. However, they have also inherited the burden of its unresolved problems. Yochai Benkler who is credited with pioneering the concept of "commons-based peer production," a model that emphasizes collaboration and shared access to resources, observed that "cooperativism has not played a transformative role in the past two centuries of capitalism". [1] The path to proving that platform cooperatives can have a radical transformative role, putting an end to the obscene inequalities and forms of exploitation of the digital economy, may require revisiting the roots of cooperative identity and addressing its obstacles. This is the belief that underlies this initial investigation into the history of cooperative thought. As a fellow at the *Institute of Cooperative Digital Economy* this year, I revisited the works of two fathers of cooperative thought, Robert Owen and W. E. B. Du Bois, to glean what they can still teach us.

The challenge was twofold. In response to the ambitious call of the *Platform Cooperativism Consortium*, I examined them through the lens of environmental scholars. Can these cooperative pioneers also provide insights into the fight against climate change?

Rapid climate change is leading to alarming consequences such as deforestation, forest fires, water shortages, and rising sea levels.

Predictions suggest by 2030, a 40% water supply shortfall could occur, causing arid regions, coastal inundation, and mass displacements. The Paris Agreement is everywhere criticized for inadequacy, with even 1.5°C warming deemed unacceptable. Projections indicate potential global temperature rises of 4-5°C by mid-century, triggering catastrophic impacts, from infrastructure collapse to social and economic breakdown. Urgent, immediate, and dramatic emissions reductions and a global collective political focus shift are needed.[2]

From the initiatives of the CoopCycle federation [3] to the sustainable practices of Mexican fishers [4] and eco-conscious online banks, platform cooperatives are increasingly focusing on environmental and sustainability issues. Cooperatives all around the world have clearly shown their potential in addressing climate change.

Recently, just a short drive from my home in Florence, Italy, a significant cooperative effort has taken shape in response to the closure of a local GKN automotive factory, a facility once part of a global engineering and manufacturing giant. The workers, facing job loss, have united to repurpose the factory with a vision for sustainability. Through crowdfunding, they aim to launch a new venture that focuses on producing green energy and manufacturing cargo bikes, not only to secure their employment but also to enhance the well-being of our community. [5] Yet, addressing the magnitude of the multifaceted challenges of the climate crisis—encompassing political, environmental, and social issues—demands more than isolated actions. Echoing the wisdom of cooperative pioneers, there's a growing imperative for cooperatives to collaborate, adopting a radical eco-socialist approach that not only confronts climate change but also tackles the deep-seated inequities of gender, race, and class.

Methodology

This study employs a textual analysis of both primary and secondary writings, coupled with an observation of Florentine cooperatives, both online and offline, that are actively engaged in efforts to address the climate crisis.

The report starts with defining climate justice, considering the social effects of climate change. This definition is based on a review of recent literature in the field. It then introduces the efforts of the cooperative of ex-GKN workers and Robin Food in addressing climate change, drawing insights from their communications, websites, and an examination of these cooperatives' activities.

Furthermore, the research explores the intrinsic problems faced by cooperatives, emphasizing their identity crisis. This understanding is gleaned from an in-depth text analysis of cooperative literature, shedding light on challenges that could potentially impede the effectiveness of cooperatives in confronting climate change. Texts were selected mainly from the archive of Barberini Foundation [6] in Bologna according to their relevance in addressing the identity and the traditional challenges of cooperatives.

Recognizing these challenges, the study, in its final section, turns to primary classics from Owen and Du Bois. A selected examination of their renowned speeches, articles and relevant secondary literature is conducted to explore whether their insights can offer solutions to the identity crises plaguing traditional cooperatives, and in doing so, potentially contribute to addressing the broader climate catastrophe. By synthesizing key ideas from these historical figures with present-day environmental challenges, the research underscores the critical role of resolving cooperative identity issues in bolstering effective climate action.

1.

CLIMATE JUSTICE

As readers delve into the introduction, a pertinent question may arise: how did cooperative pioneers, who passed away more than a century ago, address climate change when it was not yet recognized as a global issue? It is evident that cooperative forefathers did not contemplate climate change, as this critical environmental concern only entered the international discourse in June 1972 during the UN Scientific Committee meeting in Stockholm, which marked the first major global conference on environmental issues, leading to the establishment of key environmental policies and the formation of the United Nations Environment Programme.[7] Although climate change was not a focus for cooperative pioneers, their ideas remain relevant for tackling this pressing contemporary challenge.[8]

Crucially, global warming is not merely an environmental challenge but a profoundly political one. [9] Notably, international efforts such as the Kyoto Protocols, Paris COP, and various liberal meetings have fallen short in effectively addressing the climate crisis.[10] The Kyoto Protocol, adopted in 1997, sought to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by setting binding targets for developed countries, yet it struggled to significantly mitigate the climate crisis. The Paris Agreement, established at the COP21 conference in Paris in 2015, aimed for a more inclusive approach, setting a goal to keep global warming well below 2 degrees Celsius, but has also faced difficulties in mobilizing effective and comprehensive action. Even the implementation of carbon markets and the embrace of a neoliberal green economy have not provided lasting solutions, leaving nations and communities vulnerable to devastating catastrophes and not offering any optimistic future perspective.

An article in *The Guardian* at the end of August 2023 provided a comprehensive overview of the current state of the climate crisis and planetary concerns. The piece opened with a striking and alarming question:

> *The record-shattering heatwaves, wildfires and floods destroying lives in the US, Europe, India, China and beyond in 2023 have raised an alarming question: have humanity's relentless carbon emissions finally pushed the climate crisis into a new and accelerating phase of destruction?* [11]

Amidst the ongoing crisis and pervasive concerns, the undeniable connection between climate crises and capitalism is gaining recognition, as articulated by scholars like Jason W. Moore in his *Anthropocene or Capitalocene*.[12] Notably, voices like the Canadian author and activist Naomi Klein, in her book *This Changes Everything*, emphasize the climate crisis as a fundamental struggle between capitalism and the planet, shedding light on the inherent unsustainability of neoliberalism. [13] Also, the Degrowth movements, and

particularly the American anthropologist, author, and activist David Graeber argued about the impossibility of maintaining an engine of perpetual growth, such is capitalism, forever on a finite planet: “There is good reason to believe that, in a generation or so, capitalism will no longer exist: for the simple reason that it’s impossible to maintain an engine of perpetual growth forever on a finite planet”. [14] The philosopher and Japanese scholar Kohei Saito has shown the pioneering understanding of ecological crisis in Marx’s theory of metabolism tracing a long-standing history of eco-socialism. [15]

The call for a new radical climate politics becomes increasingly imperative. Since the 1980s, environmental justice movements have emerged, addressing climate-related issues and intricately linking environmental concerns with justice. These movements highlight the profound connection among poverty, race, and environmental risk while advocating for collective participation in decision-making processes.[16] Scholars like David Schlosberg and Luke Collins, in their 2016 work, have demonstrated how Environmental Justice movements have influenced broader Climate Justice movements. [17] Since their inception in 2005, Climate Justice movements have underscored the interplay between climate change effects and existing global inequalities, as evidenced by the Atlas of Global Environmental Justice, which visually illustrates the widespread occurrence of climate-related conflicts worldwide.[18]

To combat climate change effectively, it is crucial to transform the struggle into a broader fight against both climate and non-climate inequities. This involves advocating for more sustainable production models that challenge the relentless pursuit of capital accumulation. An effective collective political response from below is imperative to address climate change, and it cannot be formulated by the free market and neither a few individual efforts. Paradoxically, blame is often placed on the individual responsibility of the poorest carbon consumers to manage waste and reduce consumption, while large corporations engage in carbon-intensive space tourism missions solely to bolster their profits.[19] Corporations, particularly behemoths like Amazon, bear a far greater responsibility for carbon consumption than the millions of impoverished individuals who are unfairly targeted.

The concept of climate justice encompasses various definitions, with scholars, NGOs, and grassroots movements each presenting their unique perspectives, leading to tensions among these diverse viewpoints. [20] Amidst this diversity, a comprehensive and modern intersectional definition, put forth by Perkins, encompasses gender-based and racial inequities within the capitalist framework.

This inclusive definition invites a nuanced understanding of climate justice that acknowledges and addresses the multifaceted challenges posed by climate change and its intertwined relationship with societal inequalities:

> *Climate justice names the vision of removing climate-related inequities both within countries/regions and worldwide. The poorest and most marginalized, who are least responsible for the consumption and emissions that cause climate change, are the first and hardest impacted, and also those least able to protect themselves due to socially perpetuated inequities including racism, gender-based inequities and violence, poverty, and discrimination. Climate justice is simultaneously a movement, an academic field, an organizing principle, and a political demand. Climate catastrophe throws into stark relief the extreme inequities that colonialism creates and capitalism relies on, which are life-threatening for growing numbers of people worldwide: building climate justice is a question of life and death for millions.* [21]

As Perkins shows, climate justice is more than just a vision; it encompasses a field of study, a movement, and a demand that confronts climate change head-on, taking into account both its primary producers and the most affected communities. Climate justice grassroots movements question ownership and the tremendous inequities on which capitalism is built and push for more inclusive participation in decision-making. The cooperative economy was born with these same goals. Historically, cooperatives have proven their ability to emancipate marginalized classes, challenge racial and gender oppression, and achieve political objectives within the economic sphere. Presently, there is an opportunity for cooperatives to play a crucial role in advancing the climate justice political agenda and constructing a sustainable economy liberated from the imperatives of perpetual growth, shareholder dominance, and gender-racial inequities. The pressing need for a distinct collective political economy to support climate justice underscores the importance of cooperatives embracing this radical alternative politics to effect real change.

However, the historical trajectory of cooperatives reveals challenges they have struggled to surmount. Over time, many cooperatives have blurred their distinctions from traditional capitalist firms, entering a crisis of identity. [22] Some have forsaken worker participation and alternative values in pursuit of scale and competitiveness against their capitalist counterparts. [23] Criticisms have also been raised about the neoliberal co-optation of Cooperative Associations, such as the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and the National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA CLUSA), along with the overly abstract principles guiding cooperative identity and economic democracy. [24] Scholars have pointed out that, in some instances, cooperative values exist more in rhetoric than

in practice, with workers experiencing greater exploitation than in traditional capitalist firms. The pursuit of economic success in cooperatives, according to Devi Sacchetto and Marco Semenzin, can lead to a dissociation between members and workers, resulting in tensions and a transformation of the cooperative identity, characterized by unequal distribution of power and resources, with management exerting significant control and non-managerial members facing limited decision-making authority and economic disparities.[25]

The insights of radical cooperative pioneers provide crucial guidance for cooperatives to rediscover their foundational values, address traditional issues, and contribute to an alternative economy combating climate injustice, emphasizing the importance of a collective cooperative identity for a just and sustainable future.

2.

GKN FOR THE FUTURE

The prominent English economist John Maynard Keynes emphasized the influential power of political and economic ideas.[26] The impact of theories extends to the actions of individuals, businesses, and cooperatives alike. There are many cooperatives, online and offline, that are attempting to address climate injustice. As previously noted, one of the most recent examples, just outside Florence in Italy, involves the closure of the GKN automotive factory, where workers are rallying to cooperatively acquire and convert the facility into a green energy production hub. Their innovative approach involves crowdfunding, with over 170,000 euros already raised to kickstart a new venture focused on clean energy (photovoltaic panels and sustainable batteries) and cargo bikes production.[27] This sustainable reindustrialization from below endeavor not only aims to preserve jobs but also seeks to contribute to the local community. Notably, the GKN workers' collective has formed alliances with *Fridays for Future* and feminist collectives, aspiring to establish a worker-driven democratic economy that steers clear of inherently capitalist divisions while maintaining environmental sustainability. [28]

The cooperative has entered into a protocol with institutional investors such as Sefea, Banca Etica, and Coopfond, potentially securing 6,000,000 euros to execute their industrial plan, which was developed in collaboration with voluntary researchers.[29] Simultaneously resisting layoffs, they have successfully registered their cooperative, Gkn For Future, and pre-sold portions of ownership in the cooperative exceeding 550,000 euros from supporters worldwide.[30]

Interestingly, the story of GKN workers' buyout intersects with another digital cooperative in Florence: Robinfood. Part of the CoopCycle Federation, founded in Paris in 2016,[31] Robinfood is among 72 rider cooperatives united under a common platform and values. CoopCycle and Robinfood are actively supporting GKN workers in launching their cargo bike production, albeit on a small scale, fostering collaboration across cooperative initiatives. CoopCycle has gifted GKN workers a cargo bike prototype, while Robinfood utilizes customized cargo bikes from the GKN Workers collective for its deliveries in Florence.

Robinfood, established in 2021, emerged from riders who previously worked for major extractive labor platforms. It is a small rider cooperatives but prioritizes three clear values: empowering local communities through last-mile services, maintaining self-ownership and management for the well-being of workers, and delivering ecologically using electric vehicles.

These local initiatives in Florence, exemplified by GKN workers and Robinfood, are part of

a global movement for climate justice within cooperatives. Online cooperative banks like Banca Etica [32] in Italy and Clean Energy [33] in the USA advocate for green and alternative investments.

Meanwhile, newly formed platform rider cooperatives like the food delivery platform 'Tamsang-Tamsong' in Thailand prioritize recyclable packaging.[34] The collaboration among these cooperatives and climate justice movements worldwide is not just desirable but essential for politically addressing climate injustice.

3.

THE DUALITIES OF COOPERATIVISM

Historically, cooperativism is a movement that is based upon a form of enterprise.[35] The cooperative movement, with its two hundred years of history, multiple ethics and historical contingencies, is indefinable, and it may be better to speak of movements in the plural. On the contrary, the cooperative as a form of enterprise is commonly and simply defined 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.*[36]

The division between social movement and the form of enterprise just seen is a reflection of the dual nature of this very form of enterprise. This duality is symbolically represented by the image of a two-faced Janus.[37] In fact, the cooperative has two dimensions: an economic one, since it looks to the market, accepting its logic and rules, and a social one, since it "pursues extra-economic ends and generates positive externalities for other members and virtually for society as a whole".[38] British economist Alfred Marshall wrote succinctly on this matter: "Some movements have a high social purpose; others, an economic purpose. Only cooperatives have both". Italian well-known cooperator Ivano Barberini poetically expressed the concept by comparing cooperatives to the flight of a bumblebee. According to scientific principles bumblebees are inherently unable to sustain flight as cooperatives should not survive in the market, nevertheless, they both succeed.[40]

Some scholars have historically shown how, in the pursuit of scalability, cooperativism has increased its volume of business, but at the price of a significant decrease in participation and the creation of structures typical of large enterprises:

> *In almost all European countries, the traditional sectors in which co-operative activity had become established - commercial distribution, agribusiness and credit - saw a decrease in the number of these enterprises, as a result of the search for economies of scale, but an increase in the number of members and the volume of business. The significant growth in the number of members has posed a governance problem, as it has resulted in a decrease in their participation in the organisation's activities and, at the same time, the need to create organisational structures typical of large enterprises.*[41]

Italian economist Patrizia Battilani, reviewing classical enterprise theory, showed how since the 1970s a progressive hybridisation of the capitalist and cooperative enterprises had taken place. [42] The hybridisation process for Battilani is not unidirectional but has involved both actors: on the one hand, capitalist companies have begun to take an

interest in stakeholders as well; on the other hand, cooperatives have lost their reference values due to managers detached from social needs. In greater detail, since the 1970s, the capitalist firm returned both 1) to profit maximization and the overriding interest of shareholders and 2) a conception of the firm "as the expression of a set of *stakeholders* whose interests it pursues and coordinates", including corporate social responsibility. The Pandemic has tragically shown, if it was necessary, the vacuity of this latter corporate rhetoric.

Simultaneously, a significant transformation occurred in the management of cooperatives: individuals who originally emerged from social movements and embodied the fundamental values of cooperatives were supplanted by the first cohort of professionally trained managers whose cultural orientations closely mirrored those of traditional corporations.[43] This has led to:

> *[...] the introduction of strategies more similar to those of conventional enterprises, in terms of e.g. remuneration of executives and managers or advertising strategies. In the 1990s, the process was further strengthened when larger co-operatives started to hire senior managers from other conventional enterprises.*
>
> *If in the American context managers had been the protagonists of the diffusion of corporate social responsibility, in the cooperative context they became the architects of management models more similar to those of conventional enterprises. In fact, the era we are living through is characterised by a much stronger hybridisation than in the past between the two business models we have analysed here. It is a hybridisation which involves multiple dimensions and which obviously places precise priorities on the cooperative agenda, first and foremost the defence of its fundamental identity which is the active participation of the member and the link with its community.* [43]

Italian economic historian Vera Zamagni recently highlighted the challenges facing cooperativism in a recent interview, citing its struggles to raise adequate capital and specifically noting the shortage of managers who embrace cooperative values:

> *Its [the cooperative enterprise's] critical points are basically two: not having enough capital (those who make cooperatives are usually not rich) and not finding enough managers who are prepared to manage an enterprise that is not capitalist. More investment in cooperative culture and management would be needed.* [45]

Even more effectively than the perspectives we have just seen, some authors have unraveled what Zan refers to as the teleological bias: looking at cooperatives from their supposedly value-consistent perspective, through careful sociological analyses that show the definitive assimilation of some Italian cooperative enterprises to capitalist enterprises.

Devi Sacchetto and Marco Semenzin have written, looking mainly at the Italian case, a crude sociological analysis of the involution of cooperativism. The same authors openly condemn those who use an abstract approach and limit themselves to studying cooperatives from the conceptual distinctions that would characterize them, [46] and concretely show the uniformity between capitalist and some Italian cooperative firms. The alternative character of cooperative enterprises to capitalist ones is but a "remnant of the past", except for the value rhetoric. [47]

They write in this regard:

> *The growth in size of cooperatives produces convergence effects towards capitalist enterprises, particularly in terms of the organisation of production and the internal division of labour. Organisational flexibility and, in particular, the focus on just-in-time production with zero inventory and total quality are also widely reflected in cooperatives. At the same time, the functional structure, particularly in large cooperatives, is similar to that of many other capitalist enterprises, following the line of division and segmentation of tasks. However, in cooperatives, unlike other enterprises, the reference to a set of solidarity values does not constitute a frill, but is a social and political construction constantly reproduced both through the rhetoric of cooperative management and by virtue of an actual acting on the sense of action of the subjects within internal labour relations and, finally, in mutual practices.* [49]

Sacchetto and Semenzin describe the distance between management and labor within large cooperatives, but also the progressive reduction of participation in the life of the association and the compression of political involvement to meet economic needs in smaller cooperatives:

> *Gigantism has in fact eroded the space for participation in cooperative life, as the functional division fragments the skills and thus also the knowledge of members. In many cooperatives, the life of the association is reduced to the assembly, usually annual, which approves the balance sheet, establishes any restitution quotas to be shared among the members and the directors' remuneration. The role of the assembly appears formal, of merely acquiring information and decisions, and of electing the board of directors that will run the company for the following period, also because sometimes it is not easy to intervene. The new forms of participation cause members' disaffection and the breaking of fiduciary ties with the co-operative managers. The experiences of managers and workers diverge particularly in large cooperatives with regard to the nature of solidarity, the ways in which participation is constructed and internal forms of democracy. In smaller cooperatives, which are not directly connected to the world of caporalato and the exploitation of mere labour, managers and workers may also share the same experience, but the political nature of social action is often compressed by economic demands.* [50]

The analysis reviewed here, characterized by different approaches, restore the criticality and reality of a cooperative movement in Italy (and probably beyond) that has progressively lost its alternative political charge and sometimes flattened into its opposite. Market pressures, individualism, dwindling social support, the growth of cooperatives, their dual structure, sector-specific challenges across countries, undercapitalization, and other unaddressed factors have contributed to their failure to play a radical transformative role, leading to a regression into their original opposite.

The development of cooperatives faces significant challenges, particularly in finance, scalability, and effectively managing operations within the competitive market environment.

The chronic lack of capital ownership by cooperative members impedes the growth of cooperatives. Legislative attempts to address this issue highlight its importance.[52] Despite access to banks, cooperative funds, and national/international funds, the capital conundrum[53] persists, hindering the expansion of cooperatives, including platform cooperatives. Despite the relatively low production costs in the platform economy, reaching critical mass, activating network effects, and developing the platform entail substantial expenses. This is especially true in an economy dominated by monopolies, lock-in strategies, and financial behemoths. For instance, Uber achieved profitability for the first time in August 2023, 14 years after its inception and after significant investment. [54]

Scaling poses a dilemma as cooperative growth may compromise internal democracy. Derek Jones and Panu Kalmi framed the debate in an article with the emblematic title: *Economies of Scale Versus Participation: A Co-Op Dilemma?*. [55] The authors show how, however, this trade-off between democracy and economies of scale is by no means so obvious, that the same tensions between democracy and growth vary depending on the type of cooperative[12] and that some, exemplified by Mondragon and Finnish credit unions, have shown that growth can coexist with democracy. [57] Particularly regarding digital cooperatives some scholars suggest that blockchain governance might be a solution to the scale problem. [58] Others single out different ways of scaling for cooperatives: up, out, deep. While the scaling up typical of capitalist enterprises would be difficult and would lead to degeneration for cooperatives, extension through aggregation into networks and 'intensive' scalability may be feasible avenues according to these authors. [59] The debate on whether cooperatives should operate within the market dates back to the movement's origins, with conflicting views on embracing or rejecting cooperatives acting within the market. [60] The same Marx describes in some of his passages communism as based on cooperatives:

> *If co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under their own control and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of capitalist production, what else, gentlemen, would it be but communism?* [61]

While elsewhere he points out the limits of cooperatives' isolated efforts. [62] On the contrary, there are those who firmly define socialism itself cooperation among cooperatives.[63]

The interlinked challenges of finance, scalability, and market pressures underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of cooperatives' challenges and their potential solutions. As just seen, cooperatives are not perfect; they are facing many challenges, and they have dealt with the same obstacles for centuries. However, the cooperative model of the firm is one of the few viable to push forward political value into the economy and expand workers' participation and collective ownership. It is only from solving these challenges that cooperatives can prove to be a viable model for infusing political values into the economy, promoting workers' participation, and addressing climate justice. In Owen and Du Bois we find suggestions to overcome all these obstacles but possible paths to solve the identity crisis of cooperativism.

4.

ROBERT OWEN AND W. E. B. DU BOIS

There are many cooperative thinkers whose works deserve examination to trace the thread of radical cooperative thought. However, the time constraints of my fellowship have required me to focus only on two key cooperative pioneers. Robert Owen and W. E. B. Du Bois may be less contemporary than other cooperative thinkers, but their relevance to cooperative thought and history cannot be questioned. Even if some do not commonly consider W. E. B. Du Bois a father of cooperative thought; he focused on cooperatives extensively to empower Afro-Americans. Exploring his and Owen's works has offered interesting perspectives. These thinkers made significant contributions to various fields, such as social and economic theory, philosophy, and race relations, which continue to hold relevance and influence today. They challenged conventional thinking, presented alternative societal visions, and contributed to ongoing discussions about creating more inclusive and equitable communities. Delving into their ideas broadens intellectual horizons and fosters critical thinking about contemporary social issues. Their ideas prompt us to question traditional economic systems, explore alternative models that prioritize collective ownership and decision-making, and consider the potential of cooperation in creating more equitable and sustainable societies.

4.1. Robert Owen: Philantrophy-Determinism

On the 17th of November 1858, Robert Owen passed away in Newtown, Wales. At 87 years old, he left behind a legacy that would continue to shape social movements for generations to come. Shortly after Owen's passing, George Jacob Holoyake, one of his closest disciples and a key figure in crafting the narrative surrounding the Rochdale cooperative of 1844 penned a pamphlet, *Life and the Last Days of Robert Owen*,[64] where he portrayed Owen as an unstoppable philanthropist. The epitaph on Owen's Grave in The Memorial in Kensal Green Cemetery in London succinctly captures his enduring contributions to society:

> *He originated and organised infant schools. He secured a reduction of the hours of labour for women and children in factories. He was a liberal supporter of the earlier efforts to obtain national education. He laboured to promote international arbitration. He was one of the foremost Englishmen who taught men to aspire to a higher social state by reconciling the interests of capital and labour. He spent his life and a large fortune in seeking to improve his fellow men by giving them education, self-reliance and moral worth. His life was sanctified by human affection and lofty effort.*[65]

Friedrich Engels, in 1880, echoed the sentiment, proclaiming, "Every social movement, every real advance in England on behalf of the workers links itself to the name of Robert

Owen" .[66] Leslie Stephen, a philosopher, dubbed Owen "one of the bores who are the salt of the earth", emphasizing his life's dedication "for the love of humanity", as reflected in Francesca Coin's interpretation. [67] And more, Robert Owen, the "son of a saddler and an ironmonger", the "Utopian Socialist", the "Illuminist Materialist", the Manager and the Trade Unionist, the Cooperator, the father of New Lanark and New Harmony and finally the reference of socialist "Owenites" movements in Britain and America.[68] The litany of mythic appellatives surrounding Owen illustrates the richness of his life and thoughts, which spanned over fifty years of prolific writing.

Attempting to distill Owen's extensive contributions is a daunting task, however, a selection of his readings, biographies, and critical literature reveals three main issues pertaining to the current identity crisis of cooperatives:

1) The Alleviation of Misery and Workers' Betterment
Owen's central goal in cooperation and communitarianism was the improvement of working conditions and the reduction of misery.

2) Entrepreneurial Action within a Political Revolution
Owen saw the entrepreneur's role as integral to a broader political radical revolution achievable only through collective efforts. He envisioned cooperatives as part of a broader and radical societal-collective transformation.

3) The Original Unity of Cooperatives and Socialism
Owen represents the original unity of cooperatives and socialism, his figure emphasizes the need to explore and reinforce this connection in a broader effort to rebuild a eco-socialist political identity of cooperatives.

Before delving into these issues, it is crucial to grasp Owen's fundamental philosophical stance. From his initial essay in *A New View of Society* [69] to his later works, Owen ardently asserted that "human character is formed for, and not by, the individual." [70] He posited that a person's character is not self-formed but instead shaped by a combination of factors including their environment, education, and inherent dispositions. This deterministic perspective left no room for free will. In his view, circumstances, education, and innate disposition shaped individuals. Owen's philosophy revolved around this deterministic core, driving his efforts to educate the poor and working classes in New Lanark [71] and advocate for the creation of a national minister of education. [72] In Owen's account, the New Lanark community exemplified his theory in practice, demonstrating how improved circumstances and education could elevate the lives of the working

classes. His rejection of punishment stemmed from the belief that humans were not responsible for their misery; instead, it was the result of bad education. In his early writings, Robert Owen addressed the concept of determinism as a pivotal factor in understanding the root causes of societal evils and misery. This "hydra of human calamity" [73] prevents Owen's utopian imagination:

> *I know that society may be formed so as to exist without crime, without poverty, with health greatly improved, with little, if any, misery, and with intelligence and happiness increased a hundredfold; and no obstacle whatsoever intervenes at this moment, except ignorance, to prevent such a state of society from becoming universal.*[74]

In an England influenced by Malthusian ideas, Owen's unconventional perspective aligned more with the illuminist materialism of the 18th century. In this context, Owen's progressive views on social reform and education contrasted with the prevailing Malthusian belief in England that population growth would outstrip resources, highlighting his unique approach inspired by Enlightenment ideals of reason and societal improvement. Owen's ideas, despite being rooted in determinism, continue to resonate, offering insights that may help address the contemporary challenges and identity crisis within cooperativism. Determinist theory suggests the idea that all events, including human actions and decisions, are ultimately determined by causes external to our will.

Exploring Robert Owen's writings in a world deeply entrenched in the rhetoric of individual responsibility presents a distinct challenge. While it may not be the forum to definitively settle the age-old debate on free will, grappling with Owen's determinist theory in today's context is indeed complex. Yet, delving into Owen's essays and life narrative is a perplexing journey. Despite staunchly advocating a determinist view of human nature, Owen embarked on an unwavering quest to alleviate human misery. His innovative approaches to cooperative management and community building were groundbreaking, and he took on the political leadership of British trade unions in 1834.

There is paradoxical interplay among his philosophy that does not leave room for human agency and his relentless innovative-free actions to improve human conditions. It is a puzzle that, from my selected readings, remains unsolved. How did a philosophy based on determinism inspire such relentless innovation and social reform?

Upon reflecting on this more, it becomes clear that the interplay between Robert Owen's practical efforts and his theoretical ideas suggests a broader interpretation of society that may not be strictly deterministic.

Although Robert Owen paid a lot of attention to how society's setup and material conditions can lead to people's suffering, he didn't believe that people's actions were completely controlled by these conditions. He seemed to understand that people can still make their own choices within these limits. Owen's work shows that he thought there was a balance between the way society is organized and the ability of individuals to act on their own.

4.1.1. The Misery

> *The world is now saturated with wealth – with inexhaustible means of still increasing it – and yet misery abounds!* [75]

Since his first essay, Owen unequivocally declares that his primary objective is the alleviation of the widespread human misery prevailing among the impoverished and working classes of England. Owen argues extensively that this misery is detrimental to all societal strata, diminishing the profits of capitalists, hampering worker productivity, and dampening the demand for goods. [76] His belief is rooted in the notion that the principles he advocates should be embraced by both capitalists and workers for the mutual benefit of all. Notably, Owen's early correspondences are directed towards kings and industrialists, as he does not initially position himself as a revolutionary figure. Rather, he promotes cooperative and communal solutions as a means to avert the looming revolution fueled by the escalating misery of the working classes. Owen, at this stage, is apprehensive about the potential for revolution and its accompanying violence:

> *I saw the poor and working classes surrounded by circumstances that necessarily entailed misery on them and their posterity; that if they were allowed to continue and proceed much longer, they would further demoralize and violently subvert the whole social system. To prevent this catastrophe, it becomes absolutely indispensable that their habits be changed; and this cannot be done without altering the existing arrangements with regard to them and to the rising generation.* [77]

These convictions ultimately place Owen within the cauldron of Utopian Socialism, as vividly portrayed by Marx and Engels in the pages of the Communist Manifesto. Here, they highlight Owen's apprehension of revolution, his appeals to the ruling class, the interclass perspective, and the Enlightenment roots shared by Owen and other early socialist thinkers. Marx and Engels's passage emphasizes Owen's undeveloped understanding of class struggle and his misunderstanding of class antagonisms that brought him to seek societal improvement across all strata, particularly among the privileged:

> *Only from the point of view of being the most suffering class does the proletariat exist for them. The undeveloped state of the class struggle, as well as their own surroundings, causes Socialists of this kind to consider themselves far superior to all class antagonisms. They want to improve the condition of every member of society, even that of the most favoured. Hence, they habitually appeal to society at large, without the distinction of class; nay, by preference, to the ruling class. For how can people, when once they understand their system, fail to see in it the best possible plan of the best possible state of society?*

> *Hence, they reject all political, and especially all revolutionary action; they wish to attain their ends by peaceful means, necessarily doomed to failure, and by the force of example, to pave the way for the new social Gospel.* [78]

On the one hand, Engels, reflecting on Owen's legacy years after his death, would articulate Owen's utopianism even more explicitly, attributing it to a lack of maturity in understanding the class struggle. On the other hand, Engels lauds Owen for all the tangible advancements achieved by the British working class up to that point. Owen, unlike later figures such as Engels and Marx, did not attempt to represent the working class as an independent revolutionary subject. His focus consistently remained on ameliorating the misery experienced by the poors and the working class. [79] This dedication is evident from his early advocacy for policies preventing the exploitation of child labor and reducing the working day to his later involvement in the New Harmony community in America and his leadership in British trade unions.

Owen's endeavors to establish cooperative and communal villages stemmed from a reaction to the pervasive misery. The Industrial Revolution, while sometimes praised for its role in generating wealth, also had a darker aspect that Robert Owen highlighted eloquently in his writings. The introduction of machinery within a capitalist framework, although it increased overall wealth, left the working class, who were the producers of that wealth, in even greater misery than before. [79] Owen vividly depicted the plight of child workers, toiling from 6 am to 8 pm with only an hour for supper.[80]

Owen's unwavering attention to enhancing workers' conditions and his persistent efforts to mitigate human misery to achieve collective happiness remind present-day cooperatives of their reason for existence and the ultimate goal which still today they still have to pursue. In the current crisis of cooperative identity and the broader neoliberal shift in cooperative values, where profits sometimes supersede values and workers' conditions, Owen's words serve as a poignant reminder not to lose sight of the fundamental *raison d'être* of cooperatives: the reduction of human misery and the improvement of workers' lives. Failure to uphold these values risks the erosion of cooperative identity, transforming them into entities antithetical to their original purpose.

4.1.2. "A First Step Towards a Much More Radical Revolution of Society"

As previously shown, Robert Owen's primary aim was unequivocal: the reduction of misery among the poor and working classes. Not merely a theorist, Owen was a pragmatic individual who believed in applying his ideas practically, viewing the success of his initiatives as evidence of the validity of his ideas. Owen, more of a worker and manager

than a philosopher, criticized theorists whose arguments lacked real-world applicability. Owen's thinking is straightforward, clear, and focused on practical application. It is maybe for this reason that Engels introduced him as "a man of almost sublime, childlike simplicity of character, and at the same time one of the few born leaders of men". [81]

In a few pages that would deserve to be read fully, Engles, while acknowledging Owen's simplicity and practical approach, also outlined Owen's intellectual evolution. Despite Owen's initial focus on improving conditions for workers within the existing capitalist framework, he eventually recognized the need to challenge private property for genuine improvement. Engels delineates Owen's transformation from a philanthropist to a communist, emphasizing his courageous stance against private property, [82] professions, [83] religion, [84] and marriage as major causes of misery and adversaries of his social reform.[84] This evolution is evident by reading his text of the 1830s and 1840s.

Furthermore, Owen's collective conception of happiness [85] contrasts sharply with contemporary entrepreneurial rhetoric. Happiness, in Owen's vision, is a collective pursuit, with his cooperative village prototypes designed to dismantle class, [84] professions, [85] competition, [86] and religious differences while promoting harmonious marriages.[87] This stands in stark contrast to the individualistic and entrepreneurial solutions often touted in today's neoliberal discourse.

It is only at the end of Engels paragraph, however, that Engels points out a second lesson that cooperatives today can draw from Owen's thought. **Engels notes that Owen did not view cooperatives as a panacea for all societal ills but rather as "a first step towards a much more radical revolution of society". Cooperatives are not meant to be a cure-all but rather a first step toward a more profound societal transformation.** This insight challenges contemporary cooperatives to reflect on their political identity crises and reorient towards a collective politics aimed at achieving collective happiness. Owen's ideas serve as a reminder that cooperatives were conceived to address broader political issues, and deviating from this purpose risks succumbing to neoliberal rhetoric and potential failure. In light of the current challenges faced by platform and non-platform cooperatives, the lessons from Owen's ideas urge cooperators to avoid being co-opted by individualistic and entrepreneurial narratives. Cooperatives must balance market concerns with a commitment to their values[88] and cultivate a collective politics focused on attaining collective happiness. Previously it has been shown that cooperative enterprises have partially lost their values, and often activists have been changed for neoliberal managers with their consequent capacity to attract people. Rediscovering this broader political perspective is crucial to maintaining the alternative utopian drive of cooperatives

and resisting co-optation by neoliberal ideologies.[89]

At the same time, it is important to highlight it again, downplaying the business side could be detrimental. Failures often stem not from political entanglements but from getting caught up in the intricacies of cooperative governance, bylaws, and culture at the expense of focusing on the business aspect.

Cooperatives are enterprises first and foremost. Neglecting this reality results in failure, eliminating any platform for cooperative culture or politics. The business acumen and cooperative radical values are both of paramount importance.

4.1.3. A Step Back Toward Socialism?

We have highlighted Owen's constant attention to reducing human misery and improving working classes, and then his understanding of cooperatives as a first step to a more radical revolution of society. However, Owen's life and ideas encourage us to explore further the nature of this revolution and the political stance that cooperatives should adopt. Owen's writings pose pressing questions for today's cooperators: What is the political essence of the cooperative movement? What defines its political identity?

Owen's dual identity as a cooperator and a socialist in an era when these distinctions were less clear compels cooperators and socialists to reconsider the complex relationship between socialism and cooperatives. Charles Gide, a French economist and a leading figure in the cooperative movement a century ago, highlighted the historical association between cooperation and socialism, noting that the two movements were indistinguishable until the late nineteenth century. The eventual split, shaped by the rise of Marxism, invites reflection on the reasons for this division and its impact on both movements. [90]

The historical debate on the separation between socialism and cooperatives, now more relevant as both movements face identity crisis, raises the question: could a convergence between cooperatives and a reimagined socialism be both successful and desirable in the present context? Marx and Engels critiqued Owen and other Critical-Utopian Socialists for their perceived reactionary character, emphasizing their lack of understanding of the evolving power dynamic between capitalists and working classes. Today, with the working class scattered and lacking class consciousness, Owen's ideas encourage us to reconsider organizational models that can empower the same working class, and marginalized groups, reduce misery, and contribute to collective happiness. Paradoxically, in a world where climate justice is a pressing concern, Owen's utopian ideals, coupled with the material sustenance provided by cooperatives, may play a pivotal role

in envisioning and realizing a new political utopia. As suggested by the British historian Gregory Clayes, the pursuit of climate justice may necessitate a rethinking of utopia,[91] and cooperatives could emerge as crucial agents in shaping and sustaining this new political vision.

4.2. W. E. B. Du Bois
Cooperatives for "the Utter Erasure of the Color Line"

> *What we need today is not fighting, but that basis of economic security which will permit us to fight. What we need is not vociferous complaint but such victory over threatened starvation as will give us stamina to back our future complaints with power.* [92]

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, on the other side of the Atlantic, W. E. B. Du Bois, a key figure in the Afro-American emancipation struggle, developed his own conception of cooperatives. In his over ninety-three years of intense life and production, Du Bois, renowned for his work on the "double consciousness" [93] and his literary talent,[94] contributed significantly to the economic thought of Afro-Americans. His brilliant career as a scholar and speaker includes 20 books, and numerous reports and speeches. This paragraph briefly portrays his theory of cooperation and highlights what we may learn from his account. However, to be considered exhaustive it should at least include an extensive reading of his articles on *The Crisis* and other works that here have not been taken into account. [95]

Some consider Du Bois's economic theories to be less original compared to his other contributions. [96] However, dating back to at least 1897, Du Bois focused on economic matters in his relentless effort to empower African Americans, emphasizing the significance of economic self-sufficiency—he often highlighted the importance of "earning a living" [97]—for their emancipation. [98] Both in his 1897 conference paper [99] and his 1898 report for Atlanta University, he articulated his vision of autonomous social and economic institutions aimed at fostering consciousness among Afro-Americans. In a 1907 report, Du Bois continued to stress the importance of economic cooperation among Afro-Americans for their emancipation. He meticulously traced the roots of Afro-American cooperation within the context of escaping plantations, the subsequent organization of migration, and particularly the economic activities of the Afro-American church.[100] He dedicated pages to describing his contemporary cooperative businesses among Afro-Americans in various sectors, acknowledging the challenges such as a lack of managerial competencies and capital that led to many business failures.[101] Despite these failures, Du Bois remained a supporter of cooperatives and "group economies" (i.e., cooperation among cooperatives of Afro-Americans) envisioning them as playing a fundamental role in the emancipation of the "Negro Race." [102]

It is noteworthy that, at least in these early reports, Du Bois's focus was not on the democratic

governance of cooperatives. He described various businesses that might not fit the contemporary definition of cooperatives. On the contrary, the emphasis in his early writings was more on the economic empowerment and collective economic efforts of Afro-Americans rather than on specific cooperative structures or democratic governance within these economic entities:

> *There again we are studying the conscious effort in economic lines not, primarily, so far as individual effort is concerned, but so far as these efforts are combined in some sort of effort for mutual aid, that is: it is a matter of group co-operation that we have before us. [...] Coinsequently very often we must touch upon individual effort and touch upon things which strictly speaking are not co-operative, in the narrow sense, and yet in the preseut state of Negro development they have a significance which is co-operative, because the leader has been called forth by a group movement and not simply for his own aggrandizement. In other words, the kind of co-operation which we are going to find among the Negro Americans is not always democratic co-operation; very often the group organization is aristocratict and even monarchic and yet it is co-operation, and the autocracy holds its leadership by the vote of the mass, and even tile monarch does the same, as in the case of the small Baptist church.* [103]

Despite the aristocratic management of many businesses he describes, lacking real democratic governance, Du Bois perceived them as a means to empower Afro-Americans. The collective goal of these businesses, in his conception, was not for the sake of individual gain but for the collective empowerment of the Afro-American community. [104] This empowerment, particularly in economic terms, was a recurring theme in Du Bois's editorials for *The Crisis.*[105] In his autobiography, Dusk of Dawn, he claimed that his three most important post-World War I activities were focused on Pan-Africanism, encouraging artistic activities among blacks, and speculating on economic cooperation. He defined these latter efforts as crucial for the economic stabilization and rehabilitation of African Americans, considering them more fundamental and prophetic.[106]

Du Bois, from his early writings, demonstrated a sensitivity to the economic suffering of Afro-Americans. [107] However, in both Dusk of Dawn and his long-unpublished work, The Negro and the Social Reconstruction, it is clear how the economic depression reinforced these thoughts:

> *Meantime the immediate problem of the Negro was the question of securing existence, of labor and income, of food and home, of spiritual independence and democratic control of the industrial process. It would not concentrate all effort on economic well-being and forget freedom and manhood and equality. Rather Negroes must live and eat and strive, and still hold unfaltering commerce with the stars.*[108]

It is likely that the Great Depression played a significant role in shaping two key features of Du Bois's approach to cooperatives: their strategic role for the same survival of Afro-Americans and the importance of consumer cooperatives. In The Negro and the Social Reconstruction, Du Bois acknowledged that Afro-Americans were confronted with conditions so dire that, before engaging in broader social and political fights, they needed to secure their economic subsistence:

> *What we need today is not fighting, but that basis of economic security which will permit us to fight. What we need is not a vociferous complaint but such victory over threatened starvation will give us stamina to back our future complaints with power.*[109]

Du Bois sees economic independence as a means to empower the community and, in turn, dismantle the color line. And a few lines above, he argued with optimism about the possibility of such economic independence:

> *Today there is a chance for the Negro to organize in fact the cooperative and socialistic state within his own group by letting his farmers feed his artisans and his technicians guide his home industries and his thinkers plan this integration of cooperation, while his artists dramatize and beautify the struggle to achieve economic independence. To doubt that this is possible is to doubt the essential humanity and the quality of brains which American Negroes possess.*[110]

Du Bois does not consider cooperatives as the end of the political struggle, but keeps to value broader political actions from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to the workers struggle of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). [111] In his mind, cooperatives became however a priority in a time of crisis where Afro-Americans were not even able to survive. [112]

DuBois scholar Joseph P. DeMarco's analysis indicates that Du Bois's approach to cooperation cooperation was not utopian; instead, it served as a pragmatic and effective

response to the pressing issues of cultural division, segregation, and economic deprivation that were central to Du Bois's concerns:

> *DuBois presented racial economic cooperation as the solution to the problems of the black community not simply because cooperation had proved to be a successful movement in Europe, but also because he saw economic cooperation as the only effective and practical solution to problems facing blacks: namely, cultural division, segregation, and economic deprivation.*[113]

It is evident that Du Bois underwent a transformation in his understanding of the root causes of segregation. Rather than attributing it solely to ignorance and irrationality, he began to recognize the underlying economic motives behind segregation. Du Bois elucidates this intellectual evolution in his Dusk of Dawn. This shift in perspective signifies a departure from viewing segregation as solely a result of irrational biases and points towards an acknowledgement of the economic interests that fueled and sustained such discriminatory practices:

> *In addition to this, the meaning and implications of the new psychology had begun slowly to penetrate my thought. My own study of psychology under William James had pre-dated the Freudian era, but it had prepared me for it. I now began to realize that in the fight against race prejudice, we were not facing simply the rational, conscious determination of white folk to oppress us; we were facing age-long complexes sunk now largely to unconscious habit and irrational urge, which demanded on our part not only the patience to wait, but the power to entrench ourselves for a long siege against the strongholds of color caste. It was this long-term program, which called first of all for economic stability on the part of the Negro; for such economic foundations as would enable the colored people of America to earn a living, provide for their own social uplift, so far as this was neglected by the state and nation, and at the same time carry out even more systematically and with greater and better-planned determination, the fight that the NAACP had inaugurated in 1910.*[114]

Du Bois ultimately understood that political power was fundamentally connected to the economic sphere. This radical understanding was due probably to the great depression, his visit to the Soviet Union and his reading of Marx and Lenin, [115] and – paraphrasing Italian political theorist and philosopher Sandro Mezzadra – his understanding of the gap between the success of ideas and the perduring discrimination of Afro-Americans that make him fundamentally address the question of power, and of the economic power to sustain the political struggle. [116] Furthermore, DeMarco's work underscores the strategic role of segregation in Du Bois's conception of cooperatives. Du Bois saw the color line and existing segregation as tools that could be leveraged to expedite cooperation among

classless[117] Afro-Americans who shared the common goal of emancipation. In his view, divisions and subjectivities resulting from segregation might have facilitated cooperation among minority groups. Du Bois explicitly advocated for segregation when it served the interests of the African American race, recognizing it as a potential means to advance their collective goals: "Whenever we found that an increase of segregation was in the interest of the Negro race, naturally we had to advocate it". [118]

Du Bois's support for consumer cooperatives among Afro-Americans was instead probably influenced by his understanding of the crisis of demand beyond the Great Depression and the significance of consumers for the economy. This perspective resonated with the Keynesian spirit of the time and the New Deal policies. DeMarco highlights Du Bois's belief that the collapse of capitalism was fundamentally linked to the organization of industry around the producer. [119] Du Bois foresaw a shift toward organizing around consumer needs as a way to address this weakness. He advocated for a consumers' movement, positioning African-Americans at the forefront of this new economic structure.[120]

Additionally, Du Bois's visit to the Soviet Union played a crucial role in shaping his conception of the conquest of economic power and thus his strategic understanding of cooperatives. His exposure to the Soviet Revolution, coupled with his readings of Marx and Lenin, influenced a radical shift in his efforts toward realizing an Industrial Democracy as a new strategy for emancipating Afro-Americans. This radical political transformation was a key factor in his decision to step down from *The Crisis.*[121] It probably explains also his later descriptions of cooperatives, that align more with the traditional European conception, emphasizing democratic governance and collective ownership, while the "added dimension of race" [122] remains a distinctive feature in his approach.

In *Dusk of Dawn,* Du Bois reflects extensively on his trip to the Soviet Union and the profound impact of the Russian Revolution on his thoughts. There he describes a transformative shift in his thinking, recognizing the need for a fundamental change in economic structures to address poverty and inequality. He admired the revolution's attempt to empower workers and confront societal issues. **While rejecting violent revolution, Du Bois championed a democratic transition within the economy, challenging the oligarchy's control over work and resources.** He critiqued the limited voice of the masses in the democratic process, emphasizing the necessity of democratizing industrial life.[123] Despite not aligning with communism for the dogma of the violent revolution, Du Bois valued Marx's insights on economic foundations shaping civilization and expressed a commitment to advocating for economic justice. [124]

It is on the basis of these materialistic beliefs that he described his new communist political plan to emancipate African Americans, leading to a subsequent rupture with the NAACP due to conflicting old liberal positions: [125]

> *By 1930, I had become convinced that the basic policies and ideals of the Association must be modified and changed; that in a world where economic dislocation had become so great as in ours, a mere appeal based on the old liberalism, a mere appeal to justice and further effort at legal decision, was missing the essential need; that the essential need was to guard and better the chances of Negroes, educated and ignorant, to earn a living, safeguard their income, and raise the level of their employment.*[126]
>
> *I was disappointed. I had hoped for such insistence upon the compelling importance of the economic factor that this would lead to a project for a planned program for using the racial segregation, which was at present inevitable, in order that the laboring masses might be able to have built beneath them a strong foundation for self-support and social uplift; and while this fundamental economic process was going on, we could, from a haven of economic security, continue even more effectively than ever to agitate for the utter erasure of the color line.* [127]

Du Bois's conceptions of cooperatives offer valuable insights that could assist contemporary cooperatives in addressing their crisis of identity. His view treats cooperatives as instrumental tools, emphasizing their role in gaining economic power to emancipate and amplify the political struggle "for the utter eraser of the color line". Implicit in Du Bois's perspective is the recognition that cooperation itself is a technology – one of many ways to organize a business. Robert Owen, as seen above, has shown how machines and technologies are not inherently beneficial; rather, they can exacerbate human misery, as can cooperatives. Du Bois's conception resonates with Owen's, suggesting that cooperatives measure their success by their ability to assist minorities in emancipation, poverty reduction, and the advancement of democracy.

It is crucial to underscore that Du Bois viewed cooperatives not as the ultimate goal but as a component of his broader political action.[128] In this context, he encourages cooperatives to see themselves not merely as endpoints but as means to pursue their political objectives through various necessary avenues, such as policies and struggles.

Du Bois's insights highlight the paramount importance of the economic foundation of struggles in times of crisis, where the survival of struggling minorities is at stake. His perspective encourages cooperatives to reflect not only on their own material subsistence but also on the subjectivities they wish to embody and the potential alliances they might forge. Ultimately, Du Bois provides a powerful reminder of the interconnectedness between economic stability and the amplification of political struggles, urging cooperatives and minority groups alike to navigate these challenges strategically.

Conclusion

This report has aimed to outline a comprehensive perspective on both offline and online cooperative movements and their potential role in addressing climate injustice.

Despite its theoretical nature, the report emphasizes the importance of empirical analysis, echoing Owen's emphasis on practical solutions. It has been shown that cooperatives encounter challenges related to scaling, funding, and market competition—issues that theoretical insights from Owen and Du Bois, from my selected readings, may not fully address. Instead, resolving these challenges, which are crucial to their success,[129] necessitates a combination of theoretical analysis and new empirical studies to identify what enables cooperatives to scale and thrive effectively.

Furthermore, the report has underscored the crisis of identity within cooperatives, noting their increasing resemblance to traditional businesses and the co-optation of their managers and representative organizations by neoliberal agendas.

Climate change is a complex, collective issue that individual cooperatives alone cannot solve without a unified political agenda. Owen and Du Bois's view of cooperatives becomes relevant here, suggesting that within these organizations, a profound reflection on their relationship with socialism could be fruitful. Owen's and Du Bois' reflections indicate that political struggles, the fight for conducive legislation, and alliances are crucial elements for cooperatives aiming to empower minorities.

Owen and Du Bois suggest that by focusing on the expansion of democracy, the empowerment of marginalized groups, and improved working conditions, cooperatives can define a new collective identity and politics. Only through this serious reconsideration of their political identities can cooperatives reclaim their alternative values and contribute to reimagining a new utopia that aligns with the realization of climate justice.

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I am the only one accountable for any mistake.

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