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The Pioneers of Cooperativism and Climate Justice: Owen, Fourier, Du Bois

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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. In fact, as Yochai Benkler (2017) has eloquently stated, cooperativism has not played a transformative role in the past two centuries of capitalism. The path to proving that platform cooperatives can have a 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 will attempt to revisit the works of the fathers of cooperative thought to glean what they can still teach us.

However, the challenge is twofold. In response to the ambitious call of the *Platform Cooperative Consortium*, I will seek to examine them through the lens of environmental scholars. Can these cooperative pioneers also provide insights into climate justice?

From the Coop Cycle federation to Mexican fishers and environmentally friendly online banks, platform cooperatives are increasingly demonstrating sensitivity towards environmental and sustainability issues. Cooperatives all around the world have clearly shown their potential in addressing climate change. One of the most recent examples is in Italy, just 15 minutes away from Florence, the city in which I live. Following the closure of the former GKN automotive factory, the workers are currently endeavoring to cooperatively acquire the factory and convert it to produce green energy. They are crowdfunding money to initiate a new business focused on clean energy and cargo bike production, aiming to both preserve their jobs and contribute to their local community[1]. Can cooperative thought assist platform cooperatives and cooperatives in general in addressing these challenges?

I do not have the answers. Rather, this short blog post serves as a declaration of intent and a preliminary attempt to engage with this work.

Climate Justice

Despite the fact that the debate on climate change emerged more than a century after the deaths of the cooperative pioneers, their ideas may still be valuable in addressing the issue. Climate change cannot be detached from social justice, as climate justice movements (Hadden, 2015) and scholars like Jason W. Moore (2016) have convincingly argued. Combating climate change requires more sustainable production that inherently challenges the relentless pursuit of capital accumulation. A collective political response is needed to address climate change, one that cannot be formulated by the free market. It is paradoxical that the rhetoric often places the blame on the individual responsibility of the poorest carbon consumers to manage waste and reduce consumption, while large corporations engage in absurd carbon-intensive space tourism missions to boost their profits[2]. Corporations like Amazon bear far greater responsibility for carbon consumption than millions of impoverished individuals. Against the prevailing dogma of the tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968), Elinor Ostrom (1990) has demonstrated how the common management of resources can be a solution to both production and the preservation of a fertile environment. A cooperative economy could offer a solution that advances both a sustainable agenda and an economy rooted in social justice. In this broader context,

the cooperative pioneers may still have insights to contribute to the advancement of climate justice.

Revisiting the Roots: Owen, Fourier, Du Bois

There are many cooperative thinkers whose works deserve examination in order to trace the thread of radical cooperative thought. However, the time constraints of my fellowship require me to focus on a few key cooperative pioneers. Owen, Fourier, and Du Bois may be less contemporary than other cooperative thinkers, but their relevance to cooperative thought and history cannot be questioned. Exploring their works can offer highly interesting and insightful perspectives for several reasons. 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 visions for society, and contributed to ongoing discussions about creating more inclusive and equitable communities. Delving into their ideas can broaden intellectual horizons and foster 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 economies.

Robert Owen is often referred to as the father of the cooperative movement and represents a synthesis of early socialist and cooperative thought. He was one of the most prominent «utopian socialists» (Engels, 1880) and one of the first advocates for consumption and worker cooperatives. Owen advocated for the establishment of cooperative communities and businesses in which workers collectively owned and managed the means of production. His ideas emphasized the importance of cooperation, equality, and fair distribution of wealth. His writings, such as *A New View of Society* (1816), provide a foundational understanding of cooperative principles and their potential benefits for workers and society. Additionally, his autobiography, *The Life of Robert Owen, Written by Himself* (1857), and his *Report to the County of Lanark* (1821), offer practical insights into his cooperative endeavors and their outcomes.

Across the English Channel, Charles Fourier, another well-known figure in the realm of utopian socialism, developed a vision of society organized into Phalansteries, i.e. the basic unit of his utopian society, based on cooperation and retribution according to labour. While Fourier's ideas extended beyond the scope of cooperatives, his concepts of phalansteries encompassed elements of cooperative living and work. Fourier envisioned communities where individuals collaborated and shared resources

to meet their needs. Although his specific visions were not fully realized, Fourier's writings inspired later cooperative thinkers and highlighted the potential of cooperation as a means to improve social and economic conditions. His initial work, *The Theory of Four Movements* (1818), and a later anthology of his works edited by Charles Gide, another historical figure in the cooperative movement, are important texts that delve into the core questions of cooperative thought.

In the United States, years later, William E. B. Du Bois, in his quest to emancipate African Americans, developed his own perspective on the cooperative economy. Du Bois primarily focused on issues of racial inequality but also recognized the importance of economic empowerment for marginalized communities. In his work, Du Bois emphasized the significance of economic cooperation and self-sufficiency as a means for African Americans to gain agency and overcome systemic oppression. His theory on cooperation is primarily developed in works such as *Dusk of Dawn* (1940) and his writings in *The Crisis Magazine*, as well as in his seminal work *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) as outlined by Joseph De Marco (1976).

Can all these books serve as effective tools to address climate justice? The challenge is now open.

[1] Here there is the link to the crowdfunding:

<https://www.produzionidalbasso.com/project/gkn-for-future/> ↗.

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/jul/19/billionaires-space-tourism-environment-emissions> ↗.

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