

Participatory Democracy and the British Utopian Tradition: Leonard Woolf's Co-operative Commonwealth in Historical Perspective

Randi Koppen 

Abstract This article examines an understudied chapter in the history of British socialist thought: the consumer-based socialism theorized by the Fabian and Labour Party advisor Leonard Woolf between 1913 and 1920. Exemplifying what used to be referred to in negative terms as “interwar idealism,” Woolf is now widely considered one of the chief architects of imperial and foreign policy for the British Labour Party between 1914 and 1945. Throughout this period, he was also a patient and committed advocate for a cooperative model of participatory, rank-and-file democracy founded on the organization and practices of the Co-operative Movement, whose socialist, transformative aspirations Woolf found most fully realized in the Women's Co-operative Guild under the leadership of Margaret Llewelyn Davies. Woolf's interest in radical democratic templates places him in a line of British utopian thought that looks to small-scale models of popular self-government as test cases for overall social transformation—ranging from Robert Owen's communes, through William Morris's medieval craft guilds, to the guild socialism advocated by G. D. H. Cole and R. H. Tawney. At the same time, in identifying the consumer rather than the producer as the means and ends of social change, Woolf's proposals for a socialist commonwealth emerge as an alternative to most socialist thought, a rarely examined case in a British politics of consumption which, as Matthew Hilton has shown, has traditionally offered itself as a “middle” or “third way” solution to a party political system dominated by the interests of capitalists and workers.

Regardless of its unapologetic idealism and unresolved tensions between realism and utopianism, the work of Leonard Woolf, the Fabian “expert” on empire and international relations and subsequent Labour Party advisor, continues to generate scholarly interest and reassessment. Following on Peter Wilson's critical reappraisal of Woolf's political theories in his 2003 monograph, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf: A Study in Twentieth-Century Idealism*, scholars have reexamined Woolf's work for the British Labour Party, his contribution to plans for the League of Nations, and his proposals for international government.¹ Woolf's fiction, which consisted of two novels and a handful of short

Randi Koppen is Professor of British Literature at the Department of Foreign Languages, University of Bergen, Norway. Her field of specialization is literary and cultural modernism. She thanks the journal's anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful comments on previous drafts of this article. Please address any correspondence to her at randi.koppen@uib.no.

¹ Peter Wilson, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf: A Study in Twentieth-Century Idealism* (London, 2003). See also Peter Wilson, “Leonard Woolf, the League of Nations and Peace Between

stories, has also received considerable attention for its critique of British colonialism and anti-Semitism.² As a result, Woolf is now widely considered one of the chief architects of Labour's imperial and foreign policy between 1914 and 1945, a leading anti-imperialist thinker, and an important early theoretician of the discipline of International Relations. Woolf is also known as a patient and committed advocate for a participatory, rank-and-file democracy founded on the organizational principles of the Co-operative Movement, which he presented in two books, *Co-operation and the Future of Industry* (1919) and *Co-operation and Socialism* (1920) and for which he continued to advocate throughout the interwar period. Wilson's book examines all these aspects through a detailed exposition of Woolf's theoretical and practical contributions, while also revealing their lacunas and limitations. Wilson's overall focus, however, is on Woolf's place in International Relations theory and, as the book's title makes clear, in a history of twentieth-century idealism. Aiming to correct the "almost universal" perception of the interwar period as "the 'utopian' or 'idealist' phase of IR thinking,"³ Wilson demonstrates how Woolf's significant contributions to international theory balance idealism against realism, connecting theoretical propositions to empirical research, and what he himself perceived as actual material and sociological conditions.⁴

The present article, while drawing on this earlier body of work, offers a new analysis of the tensions Wilson identifies by locating Woolf's ideas of cooperation among consumers in a specific socialist tradition. Woolf's advocacy of the Co-operative Movement as a template for socialist, participatory democracy belongs in a line of socialist thought that turns to existing small-scale models of radical, rank-and-file democracy as alternatives to liberal, representative democracy. These serve as examples of the organizational form that a truly democratic society might take. Test cases of this kind were found in the nineteenth-century communitarian socialism of the Labour Church and the Christian Brotherhood, Robert Owen's communes, William Morris's medieval craft guilds, Beatrice Webb's ideas of a Co-operative Commonwealth, and the guild socialism advocated by G. D. H. Cole and R. H. Tawney during the interwar period. Placing Woolf's ideas within this tradition of spiritual and aesthetic socialism, with which he was in continual dialogue, allows his conceptions of participatory democracy to appear with greater clarity, revealing

the Wars," *The Political Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2015): 532–39; Fred Leventhal and Peter Stansky, *Leonard Woolf: Bloomsbury Socialist* (Oxford, 2019); Caspar Sylvest, "Interwar Internationalism, the British Labour Party, and the Historiography of International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (2004): 409–32.

² See, among others, Elleke Boehmer, "Intentional Dissonance: Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* (1913)," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 50, no. 1 (2015): 3–9; Dominic Davies, "Critiquing Global Capital and Colonial (In)Justice: Structural Violence in Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* (1913) and *Economic Imperialism* (1920)," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 50, no. 1 (2015): 45–58; Janice Ho, "Jewishness in the Colonies of Leonard Woolf's *Village in the Jungle*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 59, no. 4 (2013): 713–41; Douglas Kerr, "Stories of the East: Leonard Woolf and the Genres of Colonial Discourse," *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 41, no. 3 (1998): 261–79.

³ Wilson, *International Theory*, vi.

⁴ Wilson traces this "almost universal" assumption to E. H. Carr's dismissive treatment of this period of International Theory in E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (1939). Wilson, *International Theory*, vi.

complex and sometimes fraught relationships to other thinkers regarding the ever-recurring question of how socialist democratic ideals might be given lasting, constitutive, and constitutional form.

Woolf's cooperative community offered a moral, idealist-inspired, yet supposedly realistic alternative to the scientific and materialist socialism of the Webbs and the Fabians, emphasizing individual freedom and self-fulfillment much in the manner of the nineteenth-century socialists, where self-fulfillment had a strong creative and aesthetic dimension. At the same time, Woolf's balancing act between realism and idealism takes a distinct form that sets it apart not only from the idealist tradition, but from the dominant strain in British and international socialism. Woolf's cooperative model of democracy involved a shift from producer-based to consumer-based cooperation where the community of consumers, rather than producers, constituted the means and ends of social change. Woolf envisaged a grassroots democracy that involved all citizens, empowering women as the family's main consumers. In giving priority to the consumer in this way, Woolf adds a socialist chapter to a British twentieth-century politics of consumption which, as Matthew Hilton has shown, has persistently offered itself as a "middle" or "third" way solution to a party political system dominated by the interests of manufacturers and workers.⁵

At the same time, Woolf's consumer-based socialism involved a radical reassessment of the nature of work and its place in individual life as well as the relation between consumption and citizenship. His ideals drew upon, yet stand apart from, nineteenth-century socialism, imagining a process of human transformation and individual "conversion," and a "good life" where the interests of the community were inseparable from individual agency, self-fulfillment, and a thoroughgoing aestheticization of ordinary, everyday life. I want to emphasize that my objective in this article is not to offer a critical assessment of Woolf's politics of consumption and its reevaluation of work, but to add to our understanding of his ideas and propositions by discussing them against a backdrop of other small-scale democratic models. In particular, nineteenth-century ethical socialism, G. D. H. Cole's interwar theory of a functional democracy based on workers' guilds, and, finally, the democratic and transformative ideals of the Co-operative Movement, which Woolf found at work in the Women's Co-operative Guild, all provide context for the radical vision Woolf promoted.

THEORIES AND TEMPLATES

The question of how to envisage models of participatory democracy that might realistically be given institutionalized form is a long-standing issue in radical democratic debate. In recent years, radical democrats such as Antonio Negri, Jacques Rancière, and Cornelius Castoriadis have cast serious doubts on the possibility that freedom, emancipation, and human creativity might truly exist in any institutionalized version of democracy,⁶ while Mark Fisher's more optimistic call in *Capitalist*

⁵ Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2003), 1.

⁶ In brief, the question concerns whether, and crucially in what form, democracy may remain open to the agency and instituting capability of the many, rather than congealing as forms of representation built on elitism, discipline, and, ultimately, domination. See Cornelius Castoriadis, "On the Content of Socialism, II," in *The Castoriadis Reader*, ed. David Ames Curtis (Oxford, 1997). For further discussion and critique

Realism for resuscitating “the idea of a general will, reviving and modernizing the idea of a public space that is not reducible to an aggregation of individuals and their interests,” speaks to an ongoing concern with the *form* of rank-and-file democracy in British socialist thought today.⁷ However, my perspective in this article is turned towards the past, to the small-scale democratic models proposed by British nineteenth- and early twentieth-century socialists. Sharing many of the ideals and organizational principles of the 1871 Paris Commune and the early twentieth-century European factory councils, these blueprints were generally understood as self-organized, non-hierarchical, and non-bureaucratic organs, initiated by the working class without authorization from above, governed by the principles of open debate and the involvement of every individual. As Zygmunt Bauman observes, socialism started as “a counterculture to capitalism, a future-oriented imaginative possibility inextricably connected with utopian thinking.”⁸

Nineteenth-century utopian socialists envisaged such possibilities as small rural communities run on principles of cooperation, mutualism, and participatory democracy, with a strong emphasis on ethical and aesthetic, as well as social and economic, transformation.⁹ Thus, Robert Owen’s program for a radical transformation of everyday life was based on the establishment of “Agricultural and Manufacturing Villages of Unity and Mutual Cooperation,” a mode of life intended to create a “culture of communalism,” and a system of education that would eventually remake human character. Similarly, the medieval revival embraced by Victorian progressives such as William Morris and his disciples represented a “vision of liberty” associated with the small-scale democracy of rural village life, the medieval craft guilds, and the pre-bureaucratic “assembly of the folk” (the Germanic Mote) envisaged by Morris in *News from Nowhere*.¹⁰ In the more popular and religious movements of the Brotherhood Church and the Labour Church, Owen and Morris’s belief in human transformation translated into what Stephen Yeo has termed “a moral language of evangelical exhortation,” of conversion and change of life, which implied that individual change and structural change were connected. On an individual level, conversion to the religion of socialism involved entirely new modes of life, thought, and feeling. Structurally, individual change and the “evangelical exhortation” Yeo speaks of would gradually transform society into a community governed by Christian socialist ideals and ethics, and the grassroots democracy already at work in the Movement.¹¹

The kinds of socialism preached and practiced in the last decades of the nineteenth century, in other words, were distinguished by faith in working-class will and

of these views, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, 1990), 327–35; and Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen, “Between Constituent Power and Political Form,” *Political Theory* 49, no. 1 (2021): 54–82.

⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester, 2009), 77.

⁸ Cited in Michael Robertson, *The Last Utopians: Four Late 19th Century Visionaries and Their Legacy* (Princeton, 2018), 43.

⁹ Stefan Arvidsson, *The Style and Mythology of Socialism: Socialist Idealism, 1871–1914* (London, 2018), 32.

¹⁰ Robertson, *The Last Utopians*, 28, 82–83, 116.

¹¹ Stephen Yeo, “A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883–1896,” *History Workshop* no. 4 (Autumn 1977): 5–56, at 14, 48.

collective self-activity. Thus, a rank-and-file participatory democracy unifying means and ends prefigured the society desired.¹² The implications and consequences of nineteenth-century ethical socialism (and its subsequent decline) for twentieth-century labor policies are still being debated. Lise Butler, in her study of the British Left, sums up the widely discussed claim that the decline in moral and political philosophy during the first decades of the twentieth century, left “idealist-inspired social and public policy. . . vulnerable to the seemingly more objective and intellectually clear-cut frameworks of economics, and ultimately to the assault of neo-liberalism from the 1970s onwards.”¹³ Yeo takes a similar view on the long-term effects of religious socialism, maintaining that the Movement’s focus on “making (and being) socialists,” left little space for development of theories of agency or programmatic, organizational plans for how the change to a new society was to be brought about. Thus, while Robert Blatchford’s *Merrie England* (1893) raised the question of how socialism might be accomplished, the answer provided was simply that of making socialists. Similarly, William Morris’s “How the Change Came About,” in *News from Nowhere*, recounted the stages of a socialist revolution, though without offering help “in specific organisational or programmatic ways.”¹⁴ Ultimately, Yeo concludes, the presence and character of the religion of socialism during the 1880s and 1890s were so substantial that this may well have something to do with the large space subsequently occupied by the Labour Party in British socialism, and with the consequent small space available for creative thinking on the problem of *agency*.¹⁵

Yeo may have exaggerated the extent and abiding impact of the religion of socialism (as he himself warns), but the narrative of a transition in Fabian (and more generally socialist) thought from an affective, ethical, and utopian socialism to a secular, scientific, realist, and reformist one, draws general consent among scholars. According to this narrative, a nineteenth-century belief in social change as a matter of consciousness and feeling, spirit and sentiment, gradually gave way to a form of socialism that presented itself as rational, positivist, and anti-utopian, basing its theories and politics on scientific investigation and the rule of experts. The decline of socialist idealism along with the increasing dominance of trade unions, think tanks, and the practical scenarios of “gas and water” socialism—and the parallel transition from visions of rank-and-file democracy to representative democracy—have been traced in considerable detail by historians and other scholars.¹⁶ As others have also pointed out, however, these transitions were not made without resistance from people on the Left, among them Woolf and Cole, for whom parliamentary government could never be democratic in the original sense of the word.¹⁷ Like Woolf’s Co-operative Commonwealth, the guild socialism developed by Cole was in many ways a

¹² Ibid.; Peter Ackers and Alastair J. Reid, “Other Worlds of Labour: Liberal Pluralism in Twentieth-Century British Labour History,” in *Alternatives to State Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Peter Ackers and Alastair J. Reid (London, 2016), 1–27, at 14.

¹³ Lise Butler, *Michael Young, Social Science and the British Left 1945–1970* (Oxford, 2020), 5.

¹⁴ Yeo, “New Life,” 14, 48.

¹⁵ Yeo, “New Life,” 7.

¹⁶ For example, Peter Beilharz, *Labour’s Utopias: Bolshevism, Fabianism, Social Democracy* (London, 1992); Robertson, *The Last Utopians*; Arvidsson, *The Style and Mythology of Socialism*; Jessica Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (Cambridge, 2001).

¹⁷ Beilharz, *Labour’s Utopias*, 13.

continuation of nineteenth-century idealism. As Tim Rogan observes, “[o]ne of the distinguishing features of [the guild] idea was its interest in the spiritual as much as material welfare of workers,” specifically in cultivating what was understood as a universal “impulse toward self-realization.”¹⁸ In this and other respects, Cole, along with Woolf, can be placed in a line of moral critique of capitalism that originates in Victorian anti-utilitarian sentiment.¹⁹ At the same time, both men attempted to move beyond the ethical socialists’ focus on conversion, on being socialists, towards the theorization of agency Yeo calls for, by outlining organizational structures suitable for modern, industrialized society, along with the steps that might be taken towards their realization. Comparing the key aspects of these distinct attempts, however, reveals fundamental differences in their conception of agents and agency, workers or consumers, and of the nature of the human impulse towards community. Their approaches juxtaposed a desire for self-realization with an instinct for cooperation.

Through four books published between 1917 and 1920,²⁰ Cole elaborated a theory of “functional democracy,” a form of direct democracy where representation was based on the functional groups—political, vocational, religious, and so forth—of which the individual is a member.²¹ Among the theoretical foundations for Cole’s proposals is a new conception of liberty by which individual freedom is consistent with “the maximum opportunity for . . . self-expression.” All humans, according to Cole, “want to have an opportunity of expressing” all aspects of their own “desire-set,” their “conceptions of the good life.”²² Voluntary associations, in Cole’s view, offered the only mode of organization capable of assisting liberty in this sense, while protecting individuals against the incursions of an external authority such as the state. In Cole’s guild democracy, each citizen would be free to join as many of these fully democratic associations as they wished, negotiating any conflicts of loyalty in accordance with their own interests. The state, in this model, serves a purely regulatory function, while a federal body, a combination of associations, is tasked with coordinating and mediating between associations, ensuring that final decisions are reached by consensus.²³

Cole was not unaware of the tensions at the center of his theory, between the emphasis on liberal individualism, on the one hand, and communalism, on the other. On several occasions he returned to the question of “the motivations and impulses” that “moved men and women to seek to supplement . . . their actions as private individuals by associating in groups,” that is, to identify individual goods with communal goods.²⁴ While cooperative theorists like Woolf considered cooperation a human attribute, Cole once more looked to the human “impulse

¹⁸ Tim Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R. H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E. P. Thompson, and the Critique of Capitalism* (Princeton, 2017), 30, 33.

¹⁹ Rogan, *The Moral Economists*, 2–3.

²⁰ *Self-Government in Industry* (1917), *Social Theory, Chaos and Order in Industry* (1919), and *Guild Socialism Re-stated* (1920).

²¹ David Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (Cambridge, 1997), 162–76.

²² Cole cited in Marc Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State: Ideologies of Reform in the United States and Britain, 1909–1926* (Oxford, 2002), 103.

²³ Runciman, *Pluralism*, 165–70; David Godway, “G. D. H. Cole: A Socialist and Pluralist,” in *Alternatives to State Socialism*, ed. Ackers and Reid, 245–70, at 248.

²⁴ Rogan, *The Moral Economists*, 33.

toward self-realization,” maintaining that social life was in fact a necessary condition for individuals to express the “‘infinitely subtle and various personality’ that ‘lives in each one of them.’”²⁵ As Rogan notes, however, “Cole had no cogent explanation for why individuals should want to express [this immanent] ‘personality’ . . . save those passed down from William Morris and John Ruskin, aesthetic appeals to the idea of moral unity. He could only observe that in order to express themselves, individuals needed society.”²⁶

While Cole’s template for the functional groups was the guild or trade union, his ideas of participatory democracy, unlike Woolf’s vision of the Co-operative Commonwealth, did not evolve from empirical studies of actual rank-and-file democratic practice as seen in the grassroots activities of trade unionists, cooperators, religious Nonconformists, and women community activists.²⁷ Woolf and Cole were in agreement about the principle of decentralized, rank-and-file forms of government, but parted ways on three fundamental issues. The first was on the question of who were to be the agents of social change—the community of consumers or the producers; the next, on the nature of the relationship between the individual and the community, and the motive force that would make individuals submit to a collective will; and, finally, in their conceptions of work and its effect on the quality of individual and communal life. Woolf’s plans for a future Co-operative Commonwealth continued the fundamental ideas and values of the nineteenth-century utopian socialists in several respects: the link between individual and structural transformation; the emphasis on communal interests and working-class self-organization; and, in the spirit (if not the practice) of William Morris and his followers, the aim of a thoroughgoing aestheticization of everyday life. What Woolf adds to these utopian hopes is what he perceived as a more realist focus on form. Unlike Cole, Woolf looked to the existing grassroots democracy of the Co-operative Movement as a middle way between realism and idealism that is, at least in principle, based on existing organizational structures and an understanding of material and political realities. Unlike his nineteenth-century forebears, he provided programmatic plans for how the best practices of the cooperative model could be extended to every part of industry and eventually to all spheres of society, thus substituting a radical, participatory democracy for the existing liberal, representative one.

Woolf’s objective of aligning idealism and practical politics required detailed empirical groundwork. His method was to identify a democratic model and show that it worked. Next, he described the necessary steps towards its full-scale employment and how society would be organized once its principles were implemented. Woolf’s inspiration for this empirical approach came from the Fabian Society and consisted in amassing vast amounts of information from which specific courses of action might be proposed.²⁸ When in 1915 Woolf was commissioned by the Fabian Society to write a study on “such international agreements as may prevent the war,” the brief given by Sidney Webb was to “arrive at a strictly practical

²⁵ Cole cited in Rogan, *The Moral Economists*, 39.

²⁶ Rogan, *The Moral Economists*, 49.

²⁷ Ackers and Reid, “Other Worlds of Labour,” 11.

²⁸ Wilson, *International Theory*, 30. Wilson points to the importance attached to “facts” and meticulous empirical investigation in Woolf’s work, stemming from a strong attachment to sociological as opposed to philosophical modes of inquiry.

suggestion, or rather alternative suggestions, explained and supported by accounts of *what has been tried with useful results*; and of past experiments and analyses suggestive of any new expedients we can devise.”²⁹ In accordance with Webb’s instructions, Woolf’s study, later published as *International Government* (1917), drew on original research into a vast and multifarious range of international and cosmopolitan bodies and groups, which he saw as representing a “new type and experiment in human co-operation.”³⁰ Woolf brought this commitment to empirical investigation and practical proposals to his work on the cooperative model of socialist democracy, an approach that set him apart from the more theoretical and philosophical writings of Cole and Tawney.

It should be noted that Woolf was not alone in his commitment to the consumerist, cooperative model of social transformation during this time. Hilton, in his study on twentieth-century British consumerism, identifies a shift in cooperative thought, from producer- to consumer-based cooperation, beginning in the 1870s. For many socialists, consumer-based cooperation remained a promising alternative to capitalism into the early decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, as Woolf was to point out many years later: “One of the first persons to see the significance of the Consumers’ Co-operative Movement was [Beatrice] Webb; her book published in 1891..., *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain*, was a revelation both to co-operators and to people who had ignored and despised the movement.”³¹

Beatrice Webb’s proposals, subsequently adopted and developed by Woolf, concerned the extension of the cooperative model into all aspects of industry in such a way that the community of consumers would in effect be the only employers, while measures would be put in place to secure the rights of workers. Consumer-based cooperation in the field of industry would be one element in a comprehensive socialist project that also involved the Labour Party and the trade unions. At the same time, however, Webb was critical of the “apathy and indifference” present in the Movement leadership as well as among the rank-and-file, casting doubt on the Movement’s ability to effect social change while acting on its own. In a subsequent book, *The Consumers’ Co-operative Movement* (1921), co-written with Sidney Webb, she went further in asserting the limits of cooperation, maintaining that municipalization and state socialism would provide more efficient forms of organization for many public services.³²

Undeterred by such pessimism, modernized visions of cooperation and consumer-based socialism continued to influence British socialist thought through the first decades of the new century. For many, the Co-operative Movement stood out as a unique working-class organization run on principles of mutuality and justice—“a new economic system in embryo”, which would in time supersede the old competitive system.”³³ The adverse effects of scarcity and profiteering during the First World War, especially for working-class consumers, brought increased attention to the

²⁹ Sidney Webb cited in Wilson, *International Theory*, 2, 3.

³⁰ Leonard Woolf cited in Wilson, *International Theory*, 42.

³¹ Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911 to 1918* (New York, 1963), 105n.

³² Hilton, *Consumerism*, 39, 40, 41.

³³ Gillian Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women: The Women’s Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London, 1998), 15.

politics of consumption in public debate, and in 1917 the Co-operative Party was set up to represent the movement in Parliament.³⁴ The continued presence of consumerist thought during the 1920s and 1930s is evidenced by the publication of a series of essays collected in a two-volume edition entitled *Self and Society: Social and Economic Problems from the Hitherto Neglected Point of View of the Consumer* (1930). Among the contributors were Leonard Woolf and Harold Laski, who, along with other “prominent figures of the Left . . . wrote of consumption as a new force in society acting for ‘the people’ and social justice.”³⁵ “Far from being ‘a pious hope,’” then, the Co-operative Commonwealth remained “a real ambition for many active members.”³⁶ “How little it is realised by economists and others,” Margaret Llewelyn Davies wrote in 1931, “that Co-operation is the beginning of a great revolution. The Movement shows in practice that there is nothing visionary or impossible in the aspirations of those who desire to see the community in control, instead of the capitalists.”³⁷

It is against this historical backdrop that Woolf’s two books on cooperation, *Co-operation and the Future of Industry* (1919) and *Co-operation and Socialism* (1920), are best placed. Woolf himself proposed the first for publication as early as 1913, while the second was commissioned by the Independent Labour Party (ILP), of which Woolf was an active member.³⁸ With these two books Woolf goes further than any other contemporary writer on democracy in elaborating a democratic system of industry and of socialist government based on a set of cooperative principles and ideals. Significantly, Woolf found those ideals most fully realized in the Women’s Co-operative Guild (WCG) under Margaret Llewelyn Davies’s leadership in the years between 1889 and 1921. During this period the Guild placed strong emphasis on educating its women members in a range of social, economic, and organizational matters, aiming to strengthen women’s participation in the Movement’s decision-making processes. The overarching objective, however, was to have members understand and appreciate the Movement’s communitarian and democratic ideals which, as both Llewelyn Davies and Woolf believed, contained the beginnings of a full-scale industrial and social transformation. “The vitality and inspiration of the Guild,” writes Woolf in his *Autobiography*, “were mainly due to Margaret [Llewelyn Davies],” specifically her understanding of “the potentialities of the Movement and the Guild,” not only as economic, political, and educational instruments for the working class, but equally as “an immensely valuable method or principle of economic and social organization.”³⁹

³⁴ The Co-operative Party entered into a formal electoral agreement with the Labour Party in 1927. For more details on the party’s objectives, see Rachael Vorberg-Rugh and Angela Whitecross, “The Co-operative Party: An Alternative Vision of Social Ownership,” in *Alternatives to State Socialism*, ed. Ackers and Reid, 57–92, at 58.

³⁵ Hilton, *Consumerism*, 54–55, at 79.

³⁶ Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, 15.

³⁷ Cited in Berman, *Modernist Fiction*, 130.

³⁸ Leila Luedeking and Michael Edmonds, *Leonard Woolf: A Bibliography* (Winchester, 1992), 19–20. Woolf considered the ILP the radical wing of the Labour movement, a view which may be linked to the party’s consumer-oriented policy. For further details on ILP’s consumer politics versus the stance of the Labour Party, see Hilton, *Consumerism*, 91–92.

³⁹ Woolf, *Beginning Again*, 101–08, at 102, 105.

A recent study of the Guild supports Woolf's assessment of the WCG as a vanguard radical movement. Like Woolf, Gillian Scott identifies the Co-operative Movement's closest approximation to the democratic and transformative ideals of the Women's Co-operative Guild in the years when Davies was the Guild's General Secretary. Scott explains that the organization and practice of the Guild in this period "were designed to empower the tens of thousands of housewives who became members," with its educational and political initiatives "constantly preparing and building for social transformation" through "the vision of a future ideal democracy."⁴⁰ As both Scott and Woolf assert, Davies's political and organizational competence was key to the Guild's several radical initiatives in this period, most significantly the pioneering national campaigns for statutory maternity benefits and divorce law reform. In line with the Guild's aim of empowering women, members were encouraged to contribute written personal accounts in support of the campaign, detailing everyday experience of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse. Members' letters were presented as evidence to the 1910 Royal Commission on Divorce, and subsequently made available to the wider public as *Maternity Letters from Working Women Collected by The Women's Co-operative Guild* (1915), in a collection edited and introduced by Davies.⁴¹ According to Scott, the Women's Co-operative Guild under Davies's leadership functioned as a self-governing organization with "a working-class feminist agenda, pursued single-mindedly and, where necessary, in defiance of Co-operative officials." During the 1920s, however, changes in the Guild's leadership along with wider "structural change in the working-class movement," brought the Guild into alignment with, and as Scott argues, subordination to, the Co-operative Party and subsequently Labour Party policies. With this move, Scott maintains, the WCG "abandoned its working-class feminist aspirations as well as the democratic practices and transformative ideals that had sustained its vitality as a broad-based movement."⁴²

Woolf's first experience of this broad-based democracy occurred with the Guild's Annual Congress in Newcastle in 1913, which Woolf and his wife Virginia attended, finding themselves "enormously impressed by this unofficial parliament of 650 working class women" whose "energy and vitality were exhilarating."⁴³ Impressed by the Guild's work, Woolf embarked on a thorough study of the Movement, which entailed a two-week tour of northern England and Scotland in March 1913, during which he visited cooperative societies, stores, and factories in eight cities, all the while staying with cooperators in their homes. The study, he asserted, completed his "conversion to socialism" and further resulted in a series of pamphlets on cooperative economic organization written specifically for the WCG. Woolf

⁴⁰ Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, 4. Beatrice Webb recognized the valuable work being done by the WCG in politicizing consumption thereby preparing women for citizenship. See Hilton, *Consumerism*, 41–42.

⁴¹ Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, 84–86, 118. Scott notes that the publication of the Guild letters was encouraged by Virginia and Leonard Woolf. In 1931, the Woolfs' Hogarth Press published a second collection of accounts by women, edited by Davies with an introduction by Virginia Woolf, entitled *Life as We Have Known It. By Co-operative Working Women. An Insight into 20th-century Working Women's Lives*. As the title indicates, this is another example of direct rank-and-file involvement in the Guild.

⁴² Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, 6.

⁴³ Woolf, *Beginning Again*, 101–08, at 106, 102.

was particularly impressed with the Guild's educational program, to which he became a regular contributor. The WCG used to arrange weekend classes and short courses in major cities across the country, and for many years Woolf continued to teach classes on a range of practical and theoretical subjects, such as taxation, international affairs, or the politics of empire. The women he met at his first Annual Congress struck him with their "passionate desire for education . . . it was clear that the Guild meant everything to them as an instrument of self education."⁴⁴

For Woolf, an exemplary instance of rank-and-file democracy and working-class feminist empowerment in practice occurred at the Guild's 1913 general meeting, when members voted unanimously in favor of a scale of minimum wages for women workers, against the advice of Movement officials. By their example, he writes in *Co-operation and the Future of Industry*, the WCG, "the one body that has methodically undertaken the work of self-education," has shown what cooperative education can achieve: "an educated democracy capable of controlling industry for the benefit of the community and of taking its part in all departments of civic life." In consequence, for Woolf, the Guild "stands out today as the Left wing among co-operators."⁴⁵

While praising the Guild's educational and political efforts, Woolf shared Llewelyn Davies's concern that the revolutionary nature of cooperation had not been generally grasped even by its members, and that there was a real risk that its transformative aspirations, democratic practices, and non-partisan, community-oriented organization would be lost in party politics.⁴⁶ Woolf observed "a peculiar contradiction" in the Movement: on the one hand, a passionate and imaginative belief in a social ideal; on the other, a "narrow parochialism" and "a social and economic timidity" among members who thought of cooperation primarily as a way of buying and selling consumer goods at a low price.⁴⁷ When Woolf wrote his two books on the cooperative system, his objective was precisely to explain and promote the radical democratic potential inherent in the system and to urge fellow socialists and decision-makers to take this potential seriously and use it to reform industry and society into what he believed would be a fully democratic system.

At the time when Woolf was making his propositions, the Co-operative Society had a membership of over four million and was on the way to becoming the country's largest commercial concern. The organization gave consumers control of what was to be produced, in what quantities, to what standards, and at what price. Cooperators also had control of investment decisions through the annual meetings of their respective societies, they decided who they wanted as managers, and elected their delegates to the Co-operative Wholesale Society.⁴⁸ As employers, cooperators strove for fair and ethical conditions of production. The Movement was also quite radical in its international orientation, "remain[ing] one of the few political forces in Great Britain to push consistently for international co-operation and peace throughout both the First World War and the inter-war period."⁴⁹ For

⁴⁴ Woolf, *Beginning Again*, 101–08, at 105, 106.

⁴⁵ Leonard Woolf, *Co-operation and the Future of Industry* (London, 1919), 99, 62, 120.

⁴⁶ Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, 54–55.

⁴⁷ Woolf, *Beginning Again*, 104, 110.

⁴⁸ Wilson, *International Theory*, 158–59.

⁴⁹ Berman, *Modernist Fiction*, 128.

Woolf at this point, then, the embryonic ideal contained in the Co-operative Movement provided the model as well as the means of transition towards an international, and ultimately transnational, socialist commonwealth.

COOPERATIVE SOCIALISM

To determine the nature of Woolf's particular brand of cooperative socialism, the lengths he went to in detailing its organizational form, and his hopes for a future ideal society, it is instructive to consider more closely the arguments and ideas elaborated in his two books. From Woolf's perspective, the primary advantage of the cooperative consumer's democracy was its inclusiveness and non-partisan organization. He understood it as a system evolved by the working class, but not as a class movement in the way of trade unionism or syndicalism. For Woolf, the producer control aimed for by socialist thinkers and organizations unknowingly perpetuated a capitalist psychology of competition, whereby each producer collective sought to maximize its own interests against other producers and against the consumer. As Woolf explained it: "Industrial workers can never be more than a large majority," a majority, moreover, where men outnumber women and where children and the old are excluded. On the other hand, "everyone, man, woman, and child, is in the nature of things a consumer. In a sense, therefore, . . . consumers represent the whole community in a way in which the capitalist or the workers could never represent it."⁵⁰

The second advantage of cooperation, for Woolf, was that it ran production not on the principle of individual profit, but to promote the interests and quality of life of the community, thus eliminating the waste of excessive production and consumption. In this way, cooperation contained the beginning of a system for negotiating between the interests of consumers and producers, and of establishing direct links between production and consumption—thus, by implication, between democratic action and its outcomes. When the consumer decided what was produced and under what conditions of labor, Woolf maintained, decisions were informed by principles of ethical production and consumption and the good of the community. Distinct from other proponents of cooperation, Woolf took these principles further through a detailed scheme for sharing labor in such a way that each adult citizen had a clear understanding of the human and material costs involved in commodity production. What Woolf finds in the cooperative consumers' organization, then, is the embryo of a democratic system for the management of industry where the consumer is not only actively involved in decision-making but is rendered accountable and responsible to an unprecedented degree and in a direct manner. As he writes in *Socialism and Co-operation*, the Movement "throw[s] the local unit open to every member of the society."⁵¹ At the general meetings "the democratic spirit" manifests itself in the engagement of the rank-and-file, the "steady pressure of public opinion," and the presence of working-class experts in industry. The expertise and democratic involvement of women as consumers is of particular importance.⁵² All of this serves to foster what Woolf describes as "the democratic mind":

⁵⁰ Woolf, *Industry*, 36.

⁵¹ Leonard Woolf, *Socialism and Co-operation* (London, 1921), 67–68.

⁵² Woolf, *Industry*, 51–52.

[A] belief in and a desire for co-operation in common interests, a desire neither to rule or be ruled, but to act together, as men often do in various forms of sport, on an equality for a common end; a desire to express one's own individuality freely combined with a very large tolerance of the free expression of their individuality by other people; and finally a conception of society as composed not of competing individuals and classes, but of citizens making individually or collectively their distinctive contributions towards the common life.⁵³

The democratic spirit manifest in the Co-operative Movement also implied, according to Woolf, that cooperation was by far the best way of creating a peaceful international economic system through the expansion of international cooperative trade. "The consumer is your only real internationalist and true citizen of the world," he writes in the pamphlet *The Way of Peace* (1928).⁵⁴ To consumers, international trade is "a vast and intricate co-operative enterprise, the sole object of which is to supply the world's needs," hence their psychology—unlike that of producers, especially in a capitalist system of competition—is "pacific" rather than competitive, "cosmopolitan" rather than narrowly nationalistic.⁵⁵ Woolf's views on the transnational and pacifist nature of cooperation are echoed in cooperative policy statements that affirm the Movement's continued commitment to international solidarity and world peace, as evidenced by its "hearty" support for the League of Nations.⁵⁶

Like other proponents of council democracy, then, Woolf looked to an existing model of working-class self-organization with the same fundamental principles: rank-and-file participatory democracy run on principles of debate and the involvement of every individual; a network of councils and general assemblies with the potential for transnational expansion; and a non-partisan organization grounded in the everyday needs and practical concerns of the community, ensuring that all political action is linked to outcomes for which every participant is responsible and whose consequences will be felt in the everyday life of the individual. Where Woolf's ideas differ from those of other proponents of participatory democracy, is, first, in his insistence on the consumer as the means and ends of social transformation; secondly, the extent of empirical work supporting his propositions; and, finally, as we shall see, the way in which he rethinks the nature of work and everyday life.

It is significant that Woolf's commitment to a transnational democracy of consumers involved him in debate and disagreement with others on the political Left such as Sidney Webb and G. D. H. Cole. This was also one of the reasons behind his disillusionment with the Webbs and the Fabian Society in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In *Downhill All the Way*, his autobiography of the years 1919–1939, Woolf explains that his break with the Fabian Society was due to their failure to support his anti-imperialist policies.⁵⁷ In line with his anti-imperialist commitment, Woolf also

⁵³ Woolf, *Socialism*, 30.

⁵⁴ Leonard Woolf, *The Way of Peace* (London, 1928), 14, cited in Wilson, *International Theory*, 164. This pamphlet recapitulates many of the points made in Woolf's previous books. Its key argument is that the capitalist mentality leads to war, while consumer cooperation makes for international peace. According to Luedeking and Edmonds, *Leonard Woolf: A Bibliography*, 39, this was Woolf's last separate publication devoted to the Co-operative Movement.

⁵⁵ Cited in Wilson, *International Theory*, 164.

⁵⁶ For examples of such statements, see Berman, *Modernist Fiction*, 128.

⁵⁷ Leonard Woolf, *Downhill All the Way: An Autobiography of the Years 1919–1939* (New York, 1969), 221.

rejected as narrowly nationalistic what was then “the dominant model of socialism on the British Left,” and, as Wilson points out, “Woolf was a lonely voice in opposing the growing power of the state” in the 1920s. Whether in its capitalist or socialist form, Woolf feared the negative effects on democracy of centralization, bureaucratization, and a state apparatus that might be manipulated to serve the interests of the few rather than the many.⁵⁸ The Fabians’ general distrust of the formlessness of mass democracy, exemplified by the “anarchic irresponsibility” of the shopper—became another point on which Woolf and the Fabians disagreed.⁵⁹ Where Beatrice and Sidney Webb held that the national railway services could not be controlled by “the votes of the incoherent mob of passengers,” nor “municipal services by any other membership than that of all the municipal electors,” Woolf saw this as “a curious misconception,” not only “of the whole problem of socialist, democratic, and co-operative control of industry,” but equally of the ontology of cooperation itself. He explains, “The general problem is how to organize the community. The co-operative system would do this, not as a mob of people issuing from a railway station, but as a number of individual consumers residing in different localities.”⁶⁰ Where Cole looked to the individual’s impulse toward self-realization as a unifying and stabilizing force, for Woolf the “problem of organ[izing] the community” could be overcome by cultivating what was essentially an anthropological attribute, found in its most developed form among the urban working class, which Woolf clearly romanticized. Structural, demographic, and economic differences accounted for the uneven distribution of this attribute among classes and geographical locations. Thus, for Woolf, a predisposition toward individualism dominates among the middle class and rural laborers, in the first case caused by a general fetishization of private affairs, in the second due to the nature and conditions of work. By contrast, the urban working class, brought together by the single purpose of industrial production, are naturally “weld[ed] together . . . with a sense of comradeship” that is among the first principles of cooperation:

Co-operation denotes a very definite purpose, a highly developed sense of the dependence of one human being on another, a liking for crowds and “corporate bodies,” a neighbourly feeling for one’s next-door neighbour. All these things, and therefore co-operation flourish most where the factories and their smoke are thickest, where wages are under £3 a week.⁶¹

Woolf’s approach aimed to be practical and empirical rather than theoretical and utopian in the sense of a “grand plan.” Accordingly, Wilson argues, Woolf’s “principal recommendation was not the creation of new institutions but wider and more effective use of the methods and machinery already in existence.”⁶² Despite this predilection for facts and thorough research, Woolf’s plans for a future organization of government were only loosely formulated.

Resembling Cole’s functional democracy, Woolf’s model of government relegated Parliament and the municipalities to a coordinative or legislative function,

⁵⁸ Wilson, *International Theory*, 146.

⁵⁹ Hilton, *Consumerism*, 91–92.

⁶⁰ Woolf, *Socialism*, 103.

⁶¹ Woolf, *Industry*, 98–99.

⁶² Wilson, *International Theory*, 174.

representing the population in their general capacity as citizens. The job of managing industry, whether “administering a railway service” or “supplying bread,” could then be delegated to local or national organizations of consumers, while joint boards or conciliatory boards of workers and consumers (like the boards already in existence within the Movement) regulated conditions of work. Individuals, organized as consumers in local branches, would elect representatives to local management committees for services and goods. Woolf thought the local consumers’ associations might be federated regionally and nationally, again following the system currently in operation within the Movement.⁶³ Such a system, Woolf maintained, would be more practicable than that of the functional associations envisaged by Cole in *Guild Socialism Restated*. Woolf dismissed Cole’s scheme as:

[A]n amazing pullulation of Guilds, co-operative organizations, Collective Utilities Councils, Cultural Councils, Health Councils, Communes, in which the “good life” of the society and the individual is made to depend upon an infinite series of elections and upon the astonishing assumption that water-tight groups of producers, possessing an absolute monopoly in the various departments of industry, will suddenly shed the psychology of capitalist production and accept that of social service.⁶⁴

The plans Woolf outlined in *Socialism and Co-operation* also pertained to the steps to be taken towards the realization of a full-scale cooperative democracy. Ironically, however, he failed to offer a convincing alternative to Cole’s “astonishing assumption.” Where Cole counted on individuals’ immanent desire for self-realization as the driver of social change, Woolf simply assumed that the advantages and sheer rationality of the cooperative system would become apparent to all through coordinated efforts in education and rational persuasion. Rather than a “sudden and cataclysmic shift,” Woolf envisaged a period of transition extending over one or two generations during which time cooperative principles would come to be gradually understood and accepted by the general populace, and the “crude elements of the capitalist psychology. . . eliminated.”⁶⁵

Leading up to this period of transition, widespread propaganda of cooperative principles and ideals would be required, for which cooperators must seek to “regain [the] missionary spirit of Robert Owen and preach his community crusade in a new and more practical form.”⁶⁶ Enlisting the support of the middle class, which had so far not been represented in the Movement, was a priority. To Woolf’s mind, such a venture was perfectly realistic. Set against the irrationality of the current system, evidenced in the inability to deal effectively with food shortages, fair distribution, and profiteering during the War, the sheer rationality of the cooperative idea spoke for itself. Beyond education and propaganda, Woolf strongly supported the new policy adopted by the Movement in 1917, involving closer collaboration with the trade unions and a bid for Parliamentary representation through the newly established Co-operative Party which pledged to work in “close and friendly relations” with the Labour Party, though, crucially “not in such a way

⁶³ Woolf, *Socialism*, 104–05.

⁶⁴ Woolf, *Socialism*, 106.

⁶⁵ Woolf, *Socialism*, 112.

⁶⁶ Woolf, *Industry*, 101.

that it becomes a class-based party.”⁶⁷ Such friendly relations, Woolf observed, were already in place. As a significant employer of labor, the Co-operative Movement was leading the way in the matter of fair wages and short hours. Trade union conditions were widely accepted, and many societies stipulated that all employees must be members of their respective trade unions.⁶⁸ On several occasions, the Movement had also assisted unions during strikes by keeping prices low, sending food supplies, and offering loans at a minimum rate of interest. The mutual interests between producers and consumers, in other words, were not only generally accepted among the working class, but acted upon. For Woolf, then, the conditions for the first steps towards a Co-operative Commonwealth appeared to be in place.

WORK, LEISURE, AND THE COMMONWEALTH

As already indicated, Woolf’s ideal of a Co-operative Commonwealth involved a radical rethinking of work and its place in both individual and communal life, which is mostly distinct from the socialist tradition. Since its inception, socialist thought had been marked by shifting ideas and assessment of the place of labor in everyday life as well as the connection between labor, citizenship, and transformative agency. According to Peter Beilharz, “the issue of status or legitimacy of citizenship with reference to productivity” that “pervades all socialist traditions” can be traced back to Saint-Simon: “Saint-Simon’s hoped-for world is not only one where those who do not work shall not eat; it is also a place where they shall not rule.”⁶⁹ The duty to be productive is thus at the center of individual and social life, and for early Marx, “labour is the defining attribute of the human being.” Beilharz points out that in consequence of this “ontology of labour,” utopian images of unalienated labor, whether in the form of a craft laboring society or in the prospect of a technological and automated economy, are pervasive in Marx’s writings.⁷⁰ Fantasies of unalienated, ennobling labor also informed William Morris’s socialist program for the revival of craftsmanship: a return to the freer and happier work of the medieval village that would bring an end to capitalist exploitation and transform society into a total work of art.⁷¹ For the Marx of *Das Kapital*, however, although production remains the foundation of citizenship, true freedom is located beyond labor: freedom in the economic field is achieved through the control exercised by “socialized man,” the “associated producers,” over the means and conditions of production; “[b]eyond that there begins the development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom.”⁷²

A similar view was taken by Cole who, as Runciman observes, “readily accepted the Marxist view of the true value of labour, a value which capitalism, committed to treating labour as a commodity, was unable to recognize.”⁷³ For Cole the solution

⁶⁷ Woolf, *Industry*, 130–31; Woolf, *Socialism*, 122.

⁶⁸ Woolf, *Industry*, 65–66, 69.

⁶⁹ Beilharz, *Labour’s Utopias*, 3.

⁷⁰ Beilharz, *Labours’ Utopias*, 7–9.

⁷¹ Arvidsson, *Socialist Idealism*, 74.

⁷² Cited in Beilharz, *Labour’s Utopias*, 10.

⁷³ Runciman, *Pluralism*, 165.

to this problem lay in the workers' control offered by the guild, where associations of workers were in charge of the means and conditions of production. While, as Cole's associate Harold Laski argued, such control was not likely to remove the unpleasantness of everyday work or "stop the average worker from being a 'tender of machines,' . . . it would 'make the worker' *feel* as if he 'count[ed] in the world.'" Nonetheless, managing industrial production more efficiently ought to be a priority, as this would release more free time and enrich individuals' lives accordingly, while also securing the increased levels of output on which the workers' standard of living depended.⁷⁴ By contrast, as we shall see, Woolf accepted neither Laski's idea that industrial work could ever "'make the worker' *feel* as if he 'count[ed] in the world,'" nor Cole's advocacy of increased levels of industrial output.⁷⁵

In the tradition of Marxist thought, Woolf locates true freedom beyond industrial labor, while acknowledging the latter's necessity in a modern industrialized, technological economy. Where he differed from his fellow socialists, as already indicated, is in the widely held socialist belief in the transformation of labor as the driving force and the community of producers as the agents of social and political change. For Woolf, fundamental and radical change could only come through the community of consumers and the democratic practices of the Cooperative Movement. To insist on production as the foundation of citizenship was to remain trapped in the capitalist system of value, its psychology of competition, and its wastefulness. "The Socialist who has rejected State socialism might take one of two alternative lines," writes Woolf in *Socialism and Co-operation*: "make either production or consumption the basis of his socialistic organization of the community." Woolf continued:

The whole tendency of modern socialism is to adopt the first alternative. The Marxist, the syndicalist, the Guild Socialist, the Bolshevik, all, either consciously or unconsciously, regard the socialist commonwealth as a community of producers and look forward to a new world in which the control of the economic life of the community would be vested in the organized producers as representing the whole community.⁷⁶

While Woolf recognized the historical causes of this policy, as well as the view that the present function of trade unions and other forms of producers' organization is "rightly to fight for its own hand against the capitalist and his system," sympathy with the cause of the workers "ought not to lead us to accept production as the basis and the producers' organization as the unit in socialistic society."⁷⁷ For Woolf, thinking of the producer as the agent of political change is to perpetuate the psychology and philosophy of production which define Christianized capitalist society. This is a psychology that considers work the most important thing in people's lives, while judging production quantitatively or by the standard of individual profit and assigning value to individuals based on their place in a system of economic transaction, thereby instituting a principle of competition, of class against class, individual against individual. Consequently, Woolf argues, aiming for a

⁷⁴ Harold Laski cited in Stears, *Progressives*, 174.

⁷⁵ Stears, *Progressives*, 174.

⁷⁶ Woolf, *Socialism*, 32, 37–38.

⁷⁷ Woolf, *Socialism*, 32.

transformation of labor, as the socialist does, without rethinking the place of work in individual life and the value of the thing produced to the community's quality of life, implies the continuation of an ontology of labor that unconsciously regards production as an end in itself. He explains: "The most striking characteristic of our society is the enormous importance assigned to production, and particularly industrial production, and the immense part which they play in the lives of individuals." For Woolf, the consequence then was that producing and selling industrial commodities occupied the greater part of people's waking existence:

This is what constitutes the "work" of millions of men and women, and we not only believe that a man's work is the most important thing in his life, but we so organize society that in fact it is so. It is upon this system and psychology of "work" or production that the hierarchy of classes in the capitalist community is built. A man's class is determined by the work which he performs or does not perform, by his production or non-production.⁷⁸

Drawing on William Morris's conception of meaningful labor as the production of objects of utility and beauty, Woolf's moral and aesthetic critique of the capitalist's fetishization of production makes a rigid distinction between industrial and non-industrial production. Under capitalism, as Morris and Woolf agree, the worker's experience of alienation, the inevitable companion of fully automated labor, arises from a mode of production that is quantitative, serialized, and standardized, in which the producer has no control over the process or the final product, just as the consumer has no control over the availability or quality of goods. In Morris's utopia, meaningful labor is consistent with the freedom, individual control, and creative expression of the fully democratic medieval craft guilds, "[in which the] craftsman worked for no master, made his wares from beginning to end himself, and sold them himself to the man who was going to use them."⁷⁹

Echoing Morris, Woolf imagined a future where "[w]e should no longer attempt to produce industrially things which are beautiful, only things which are useful, necessities of life," with the implication that, in the domain of work, the value of production will come to depend upon "the social or aesthetic value of the product or upon the mental attitude of the producer towards his work." For society's organization of production, this would entail a conception of production consistent with communal consumption and the common life; for the consumer, it would imply "a minimal consumption compatible with the comfort and real activities of the community."⁸⁰ In the tradition of Morris, then, Woolf brings an ethical and aesthetic perspective to bear on the relation between the laborer and his work, as well as that between the product and the consumer. This perspective aims to replace the capitalist commodity culture with a philosophy and organization of work that measures production and the objects produced qualitatively rather than quantitatively, minimizing industrial mass production and eliminating waste while asserting the inherent value of beauty and creativity in human life. Where Morris promoted the idea of

⁷⁸ Woolf, *Socialism*, 33–34, 38–39.

⁷⁹ William Morris, "Architecture and History," Marxists.org., <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/spab10.htm>.

⁸⁰ Woolf, *Socialism*, 61.

craftsmanship as a driving force for social and political change, however, Woolf was under no illusion regarding the persistence of the large-scale production of the factory system as a necessary evil in which every consumer, male and female, should be required to share. For this purpose, he outlined a system of conscription for industrial production, which he estimated would take up four months of each person's time per year. For the rest of the time, every individual would be "at liberty to pursue the work or hobby of [their] choice."⁸¹

Woolf's conscription model encapsulates some of the ideas he espoused regarding participatory democracy. Woolf stipulated a system of conscription that would apply to every consumer above the age of 23, all of whom would be called up for annual medical examinations to assess their physical ability and thereby their fitness for different categories of work. The system would also involve calculations of the amount of labor required by each municipality, as well as each division of industry, to meet the needs of the community. Woolf does not give any indication of what would happen to those who resisted conscription.⁸² Once more, he relied on individual conscience and collective reason, expecting that citizens would come to accept cooperation and industrial conscription as the most rational and fair mode of social organization, and one that would provide equal time and opportunities for individual self-realization in the form of intellectual, aesthetic, or other pursuits.

In line with Marxist tradition, Woolf envisaged a release of human energy with the changed conditions and psychology of labor. His perspective on individual freedom, creativity, and happiness, however, was more indebted to the quality of everyday life envisaged by Morris. It is well known that Morris's utopian essays of the 1880s linked the transformation of labor to the creation of art: "Art is the expression of man's pleasure in labor." Using machines to carry out degrading and "distasteful" work would allow workers to pursue meaningful labor, producing objects of beauty and utility. Another part of his program consisted in the implementation of a truly liberal, emancipatory education that would prepare all citizens equally for pleasure and productivity, and above all for "the arts of life," among which he counted "swimming, riding, boating, carpentry, cooking, baking, and sewing." In Morris's utopia, then, as Robertson points out, "the distinction between labor and recreation has disappeared." Accordingly, in *News from Nowhere* the inhabitants "labor at work they love, pursuing multiple occupations" at once.⁸³

Woolf remained unimpressed by Morris's medievalist fantasies and his aesthetic programs for what he called the lesser arts, while sharing his vision of an authentic, dis-alienated everyday life closely linked to a thoroughly democratic organization of labor and to individual creativity and artistic experience capable of resisting and transforming the serialization and uglification of capitalist mass production. For Woolf, once the communal, ethical, and aesthetic principles of cooperation were grasped:

[W]e should rapidly see that it is infinitely more important for a society or individual that a man or woman should enjoy or produce a play or a book or a picture, or should play football or dance, or should talk or go on the river or picnic or cultivate a

⁸¹ Woolf, *Socialism*, 56; Woolf, *Industry*, 126–27.

⁸² Woolf, *Industry*, 126–27.

⁸³ Robertson, *The Last Utopians*, 110–14; 127.

garden or teach children and adults or make love to one another than that they should make the fraction of some article which is neither beautiful or useful.⁸⁴

In Woolf's commonwealth of the future, distinctions between work and leisure remain, but the socialist domain of leisure would be radically opposed to the capitalist mass leisure industry with its top-down control and passive modes of consumption:

Art, literature, music, science, learning, the drama, recreations, would . . . be completely divorced from industrialism and commercialism, and, since for the first time in the world's history the whole community would have the leisure necessary for their development and enjoyment, one might look for an outburst of scientific and artistic activity, and a concentration of effort upon activities which make for a humane and pleasurable existence.⁸⁵

Distinct from Morris's vision, Woolf's alternative to the capitalist organization of labor and leisure depends on a distinction not only between qualitative and quantitative labor, but also between qualitative and quantitative time. Where qualitative labor is freely undertaken and given, quantitative labor—fully automated, standardized, alienating, and dehumanizing—is undertaken out of social and economic necessity, hence must be shared among all eligible citizens. From this distinction another dichotomy arises, between free and unfree temporalities. In Woolf's utopian temporality every citizen has time, given that all accept their share of quantitative labor. Such reimagination of temporality would have consequences not only for individual and social life, but for political life conceived as an idealist, imaginative, and fully participatory practice. No longer understood as a period of respite from a capitalist system of production, Woolf's domain of leisure would release a creative force, a mode of social, political, and aesthetic praxis that would feed into the socialist commonwealth as an ongoing, creative, and idealist project.

EVERYDAY UTOPIAS

Utopian aspirations are invariably products of critique. Woolf's vision of a Co-operative Commonwealth places him within a British socialist tradition of moral critique of capitalism, mass production, and excessive consumption. Distinct from the producer-based alternatives dominant in socialist thought, Woolf's consumer-oriented politics was founded on the grassroots democracy and transformative aspirations of the Co-operative Movement. For Woolf, the politics of consumption offered a viable and wholly democratic alternative to capitalism, on the one hand, and the partisan policies of the trade unions and the labor movement, on the other. In this respect, Woolf aligned himself with the ILP's consumer-oriented

⁸⁴ Woolf, *Socialism*, 61.

⁸⁵ Woolf, *Socialism*, 95–96. Woolf's equation of the "good life" with intellectual and artistic activity bears a close resemblance to the ideals and practices of the Bloomsbury movement, in which Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell were key figures. Leonard Woolf's relationship with "Bloomsbury" was more ambivalent and his influence far less evident. Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that he shared their valuation of aesthetic, intellectual, and other creative pursuits as expressions of individual freedom. For a more comprehensive account of these issues, see, among others, Victoria Glendinning, *Leonard Woolf: A Life* (London, 2006); Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1997); Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity* (New Haven, CT, 2004).

policies, which gave precedence to the “Right to Live” over Labour’s “Right to Work.” For Woolf, the Co-operative Movement at its best demonstrated socialist consumer politics in practice through a democratic organizational form that grew out of the everyday needs and practical concerns of the working class and served to empower women and the poor. From a historical perspective, Woolf’s consumerist policies cannot claim to be unique. As Hilton notes of twentieth-century Britain, “For women . . . consumption has often been the means by which they have entered political debate. For the poor, consumption has provided an alternative focus to the wage to understand the day-to-day difficulties of getting and spending.”⁸⁶

While Woolf’s proposals undoubtedly bear similarities to this tradition, it should be clear that his particular brand of socialist consumerism with its synthesis of nineteenth-century ethical socialism; Morris’s reimagining of labor and aestheticization of everyday life translated into a modern industrial context; and the transformative, transnational, and pacifist aspirations of the Women’s Co-operative Guild was only marginally representative of the “middle-path pragmatism” Hilton describes.⁸⁷ Woolf’s approach is of a different order, a series of (to his mind) practical propositions for “how to get there.” Unlike the nineteenth-century belief in social change simply by means of individual transformation, Woolf identifies the agents, spaces, and conditions of transformation through programmatic, organizational plans founded on extensive research, huge amounts of data compiled and analyzed, along with real-life participation, observation, and conversation with agents and informants. From one perspective, this predilection for detailed description and planning might place his propositions close to the finality of the utopian blueprint. On the other hand, the emphasis on individual creativity and a dialogic public space involving all citizens suggests an ongoing process, rather than Marx’s hopeful assessment of the Paris Commune as the “form finally discovered.”⁸⁸ Significantly, for Woolf, the means and ends of all intellectual, creative, and practical work were always the organization and quality of everyday life. His concept of creativity, moreover, was always founded on responsibility: an awareness of how individual and social decisions have direct consequences for each individual life and, ultimately, a political practice for which each consumer is answerable.

Like other utopias, Woolf’s Co-operative Commonwealth never materialized. Its claims to practicality notwithstanding, “getting there” always assumed a change in social psychology that in the end comes close to that “radical anthropological project,” identified by Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, which persistently haunts the revolutionary tradition, naively designed to liberate “a homogenous and rational, but above all free and self-creative humanity.”⁸⁹ A less pessimistic perspective would anticipate in Woolf’s theory late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century thought. His belief in small-scale models is reflected in communal experiments such as the “real utopias” project initiated by the sociologist Eric Olin in the mid-1990s. This project promised “to envisage specific changes in politics and economic

⁸⁶ Hilton, *Consumerism*, 1–2.

⁸⁷ Hilton, *Consumerism*, 2.

⁸⁸ More precisely, Marx expressed his hopes in the form of a question: “the political form, finally discovered, for the economic liberation of labour?” Cited in Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London, 1965), 257.

⁸⁹ Cited in Michael E. Gardiner, *Weak Messianism: Essays in Everyday Utopianism* (Oxford, 2013), 175.

and social theory that are pragmatic, in that they could be accomplished in the here-and-now through the use of existing resources, knowledges, and organizations, yet at the same time “utopian,” because they break with the reigning logic of neo-liberalism and seek to promote . . . genuinely democratic participation.”⁹⁰ Furthermore, one might recognize in Woolf’s politics of consumption the concerns and policies of today’s eco-movements or other “consumer radicals,” who, as Hilton notes, “are returning to the ethical and political considerations [of] the politics of necessitous consumption.”⁹¹ And finally, Woolf’s radical imaginary informs ongoing attempts, like that of Mark Fisher, to imagine alternatives beyond the self-evident truths of capitalist realism.⁹² Whether we believe in them or not, Woolf’s utopian aspirations for a democracy of the future are still with us.

⁹⁰ Gardiner, *Weak Messianism*, 173.

⁹¹ Hilton, *Consumerism*, 21.

⁹² Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2.