

## **How Do Cooperatives Put into Practice New Ecological Relations? – By *Ellen Potter***

### **Introduction**

The compounding evidence for climate change and its effects reinforces the argument that capitalist modes of production and consumption, driven by the premise of limitless economic growth, are unsustainable (Roelvink and Gibson-Graham, 2009). Operating within the social economy in response to such failures, cooperatives, motivated by the social, and often environmental, goals of their members rather than profit (Valentinov, 2004), hold the potential to reconfigure society's relationship with the environment. Framed within contemporary ideas surrounding the Anthropocene, but by drawing on more longstanding concepts of Country, this essay argues that cooperatives enact new, sustainable ecological relations in which humans and nature are more closely aligned.

Two cooperatives who share a vision to live and consume more sustainably will be examined: Regather, a food-based cooperative in Sharrow, Sheffield, and the Hockerton Housing Project (Hereafter, HHP) located in Nottinghamshire. A more detailed description of both co-ops, and their place within wider Cooperativism, will be provided. Themes underpinning the Anthropocene, Country and their intersection will also be discussed. The essay then explores how Regather and HHP, whilst experiencing challenges and tensions, put into practice such themes and in turn enact more sustainable human-environment interactions, organised into three subsections: energy and water systems, food production, and food distribution. The essay then concludes that the co-constitutive relationship between humans and the environment, showcased by Regather and HHP, enable cooperatives to reconfigure ecological relations towards environmental sustainability.

### **Cooperatives: Regather and the Hockerton Housing Project**

Dissatisfied with the prevailing socio-economic and environmental degradation attributed to capitalism (Moulaert and Ailenei, 2005), cooperatives are motivated by the “ideals of another state of economic being” (Gibson-Graham, 2003: 124). In a move away from neoliberal individualism (Jarvis, 2019), member-owned cooperative organisations work collaboratively to develop shared interests through non-capitalist business ventures, placing people above profit (Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2019). Practicing values such as democracy, caring for others, and social responsibility (*Co-operatives UK*, 2021), cooperatives seek to establish new and more sustainable ways of living. Showcasing such values are Regather (figures A, B) and HHP (figure C).



Figure A - Regather Works, Sharrow, Sheffield.



Figure B - Regather Farm, Moss Valley, Derbyshire.



Figure C – The Hockerton Housing Project, Nottinghamshire.

Regather, as a service-based cooperative, runs a vegetable box delivery scheme and, before Covid-19, hosted community events such as festivals and music nights as a licensed venue. Regather operate three main sites including the main box-packing premises, the Club Gardens (an urban green space), and Regather farm, a 14-acre peri-urban agricultural site (Regather, 2021). Through employees, volunteers, and the Sheffield households they work to feed, Regather employ a value-based food chain that aims to develop a more productive and sustainable local food system (Gareth, Regather)<sup>1</sup>. Extending action beyond food systems, HHP is a co-housing cooperative (Jarvis, 2019), constituting five families living in earth-sheltered eco-homes on 25-acres of communal land (HHP, 2021). As a zero-emissions community, HHP works to “bring sustainability to life” whilst promoting social values of responsibility, fulfilment and wellbeing (HHP, 2021). Contrasting the conventional homeownership celebrated under capitalism, residents sign a 999-year lease allowing the “philosophy of the project to continue”, committing members to 300 annual hours of unpaid work both on site and for the external trading cooperative (Simon, HHP)<sup>2</sup>. HHP Trading Company acts as a

<sup>1</sup> Gareth Roberts, founder of Regather, GEO384 field day, May 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Tilley, Resident and Director of Hockerton Housing Project, Interviewee, May 2021.

“catalyst towards sustainable development”, providing training courses, tours, and services such as renewable energy asset management (*HHP*, 2021). Challenging the sustainability deficit generated by society’s overconsumption, both Regather and HHP construct alternative ways of living beyond capitalist relations, in which human’s negative impact on the natural environment is avoided (Gibson-Graham, 2009).

### **The Anthropocene and Country**

Recognising human’s impact on Earth and its natural systems, the ‘Anthropocene’ is a proposed new geological era (Castree, 2014). Its suggested beginnings range from human’s appropriation of fire to the industrial revolution (see Cook *et al.*, 2015). Although its “epochal diagnosis” remains contested, the Anthropocene presents an opportunity to consider new understandings of the relationship between society and the environment (Lorimer, 2012: 593). In contemporary society, nature is seen as inherently non-social, external to humans (Castree, 2001). Understanding the effects humans have on nature, and the material threats posed by changing environments, the Anthropocene collapses this human-nature dualism (Cook *et al.*, 2015). Such claims may appear relatively new; however, Aboriginal ideas of Country have understood people and nature as one co-constitutive entity for millennia (Rose, 1999). Country refers not only to land-based notions of homeland, but waters, rocks, plants, animals, people, and the interconnections between them (Rose, 1996). With social, spiritual and ecological dimensions, Hsu et al (2014) characterise Country as people-to-environment, people-to-people and people-to-cosmos relations. In giving agency to natural entities, both the Anthropocene and Country resonate with the materialist turn, where non-human matter are considered dynamic, powerful actants (Bennett, 2010). Emulating ideas of Country through various practices, Regather and HHP put into practice such a “coherent relationship between human and ecological rights” (Rose, 1996: 84).

### **Water and Energy Systems**

Conceptually, ideas behind the Anthropocene and Country challenge the idea that the environment is a passive container for human action (Rose, 2011; Cook *et al.*, 2015). Avoiding unsustainable energy and water systems, HHP and Regather enact new ecological relations which recognise the agency of non-human entities, utilising renewable energy and rainwater harvesting.

The average household may struggle to transition towards renewable energy, whereas HHP, living communally, are able to put their environmental values into practice by pooling their capital to invest in solar and wind power (Valentinov, 2004). The homes are fuelled by two wind turbines and three photovoltaic panels (Simon, *HHP*). The south-facing, large conservatories fitted into each eco-

home allow sunlight to penetrate through the houses, keeping the homes warm without conventional central heating systems (HHP, 2021). Both Regather and HHP also practice rainwater harvesting, albeit in different ways. For example, Regather have integrated rainwater-filled ponds into their peri-urban agricultural site for the purpose of habitat creation and land drainage (Gareth, *Regather*). HHP on the other hand, have a fully integrated water system, collecting and filtering rainwater for domestic and drinking purposes (HHP, 2021).

HHP recognise, and utilise, the power of natural, non-human systems: “*the rain rains and you collect water on the roof... they are natural systems...it's just we've linked a pipe up to a tank*” (Simon, HHP). In doing so, “agency is not just in the remit of humans” (Bawaka Country *et al.*, 2013: 95), but is given to non-human entities of sunlight, wind and rain, allowing the cooperatives to reduce their use of unsustainable resources. These relations between HHP residents and the environment are illustrative of ‘wetj’, a concept from Aboriginal Australian *Yolngu* ontology most simply translated as sharing, responsibility and responsiveness (Bawaka Country *et al.*, 2013). Humans and Country, including ‘non-living’ actors, hold mutual responsibility to one another (Rose, 1996). Whilst HHP take responsibility to care for the environment by reducing consumption of unsustainable resources, Earth’s non-human systems of solar, wind and rain care for the residents of HHP by fuelling their homes. Responsibility, or ‘wetj’, is also shared between residents, who work cooperatively to maintain their autonomous water and energy systems, taking turns to clean the water filters for example (Simon, HHP).

The sun and wind, as independent actants, are unpredictable. HHP are therefore unable to rely exclusively on renewable energy. In times of deficit, their integrated energy system allows HHP to ‘buy back’ from the national grid. However, the earth-covered design of the homes mean HHP’s energy consumption is already much lower than conventional homes (Simon, HHP).

Working collectively to harness the power of natural systems, whilst enacting a mutual relationship of responsibility, HHP, and to a lesser extent Regather, put into practice sustainable ecological relations in which the consumption of natural resources is done sustainably.

### **Food Production**

Both Regather and HHP practice sustainable methods of food production. Both cooperatives grow organic vegetables, whilst HHP keep chickens, sheep, fish and bees for eggs, meat, and honey, respectively. In producing their own food, Regather and HHP not only recognise the agency of non-human life forms, but enact sustainable ecological relations in which humans and nature become mutually dependent (Rose, 1999).

In opposition to intensive agriculture, both Regather and HHP use polytunnels and beds to grow seasonal, organic food, creating more sustainable food systems. HHP has an allotment where residents work collaboratively to become two-thirds self-sufficient in vegetables (HHP, 2021), whilst Regather incorporate their produce into food boxes. Monoculture and intensive cultivation at Regather's inherited agricultural site have left soil quality poor, and so Regather practice composting and crop rotation to promote biodiversity and "*let the plants do the hard work instead of ploughing*" (Gareth, Regather). Composting helps HHP reduce their food waste as well as fertilise the soil, creating a circular flow of materials (Gregson, *et al.*, 2007). Using an organic agriculture approach, Regather practice agroforestry, whereby trees are planted to create "*microbiomes*", which supply surrounding soil with nutrients required for crop growth (Gareth, Regather). Here, the plants and trees are considered powerful agents in the journey to their own growth (Bennett, 2010). In a healthy Country all elements nourish one another (Rose, 1996); trees nourish the soil, aiding the growth of crops, which eventually nourish humans. This example highlights the environment-to-environment and people-to-environment interdependency enabling Regather to grow organic food (Rose, 1999).

In another example of the mutually beneficial ecological relations developed by the cooperatives to aid sustainable food production, HHP let sheep graze on the land, providing residents with one meat meal per week whilst helping to maintain the grass (HHP, 2021). This is an example of interspecies production (Plumwood, 2005), in which non-human needs are recognised and sustained, and non-human economic inputs are valued (Roelvink and Gibson-Graham, 2009). Regather practice a similar people-to-environment ecological interaction, allowing 'beetle belts' to develop between vegetable beds, which increase biodiversity and reduces the number of crop-eating slugs, thus avoiding conventional reliance on pesticides (Gareth, Regather). In contrast to industrialised practices of natural resource management which privilege human needs above that of nature (Rose, 2011), in Regather and HHP's modes of food production, it is in the interest of members to sustain non-human life forms (Rose, 1999). Here humans and nature are not just living simultaneously, in separate systems, but exist in inextricably linked ecological relations.

Aside from people-to-environment interactions, both cooperatives also showcase the importance of people-to-people relationships in enacting new ecological relations (Rose, 1999). Both cooperatives use resource pooling to aid food production. HHP draw on social capital, an essential resource used by cooperatives to achieve common interests (Valentinov, 2004). As Simon (HHP) describes: "*[others] and myself look after bees...other people grow more vegetables, and other people are more involved in looking after the sheep.*" Utilising individual skillsets to the advantage of the group, HHP produce meat, eggs, and vegetables on site, shortening the journey from field to fork and reducing

their reliance on shop-bought goods. Regather also practiced resource pooling, calling on their community to crowd-fund a tractor to enable agricultural activities (Gareth, *Regather*). As highlighted by Jarvis (2019), however, cooperation is a highly reflexive, challenging process, and so HHP hold regular meetings to overcome disruptions. As a team, social pressure also reduces the possibility of members diverting from joint tasks (Simon, *HHP*). Here the importance of people-to-people interactions, an important element of Country (Hsu *et al.*, 2014), is revealed, helping Regather and HHP to practice sustainable methods of food production.

The mutually beneficial relationships between plants, insects, animals and humans constructed by Regather and HHP, are illustrative of ideas of Country in which the interdependence between all life-forms is considered vital (Rose, 1996). Such people-to-people and people-to-environment interactions enable the cooperatives to overcome challenges such as poor soil quality and group co-operation to produce organic food, therefore forging new ecological relations in which unsustainable agricultural methods are avoided.

### **Food Distribution**

HHP members share their home-grown food, thereby reducing costs, time, and wastage, whilst facilitating meaningful social relationships (Jarvis, 2019), whereas Regather distribute their produce to customers in and around Sheffield (*Regather*, 2021). In creating sustainable food networks, both cooperatives put into practice an essential idea of Country - human's connection to the land (Bawaka Country *et al.*, 2016). Reconfiguring this connection, which has arguably been lost to society's off-the-shelf supermarket culture, Regather and HHP enact new ecological relations in which people understand the socio-environmental processes that feed them.

Working to reconstruct Sheffield's food system, Regather supply households with seasonal, local, and organic food boxes, diverting people from the unsustainable ecological interactions behind supermarkets (Gareth, *Regather*). Embedding members into such a sustainable produced food system has the potential to reconfigure the local community's relationship with the environment. A deep "connection, belonging and affinity" to land is a fundamental element of Country (Bawaka Country *et al.*, 2013; Hsu *et al.*, 2014: 370). "*The box scheme and learning about seasonality, and ideally even accessing opportunities to get your hands in the soil and grow, is about reconnecting people with first of all nature, but then the food system that that nature enables*" (Gareth, *Regather*). In creating their box scheme, Regather are constructing new ecological relations between members and the land that sustains them, emulating a fundamental aspect of Country (Rose, 1996). In growing their *own* food, however, residents of HHP arguably form a deeper, more intimate "*connection*" to the land compared to those receiving food deliveries (Simon, *HHP*). However, by

incorporating over 750 customers into their local food system, Regather could be argued to enact such ecological relations on a much larger scale than HHP.

Country also relates to the generation of knowledge, in which humans understand the land and how to take care of Country (Wright *et al.*, 2012). As highlighted by Gareth, Regather's box scheme also works to educate members about natural process behind food production, for example seasonality. HHP also seek to educate the wider community on more sustainable ways of living, passing on knowledge through tours, practical workshops and training courses (HHP, 2021). Supermarkets supplying out-of-season, packaged vegetables all year round has left consumers with a "*fundamental disconnect*" to their food system (Gareth, *Regather*). As a result, consumer misconceptions surrounding food production is one of the biggest challenges faced by Regather (Gareth, *Regather*). Due to limited land capacity and the climate, Regather do not produce enough food, of enough variety, to be completely self-sufficient, and therefore still rely on produce from regional wholesalers and imports (Gareth, *Regather*). To combat romanticised ideas that all of Regather's food is grown on a local allotment, and the ignorance of issues such as seasonality, Regather are creating an educational customer induction process (Gareth, *Regather*). By passing onto members localised and detailed knowledge of the socio-environmental process behind food systems, Regather are enacting a fundamental aspect of what it means to care for Country, developing sustainable connections and flows of knowledges between humans and nature (Wright *et al.*, 2012).

In embedding their members in shorter supply chains with sustainably produced, in-season food, Regather and HHP are rekindling people's connection to, and respect for, the land that feeds them. As "the basis for being in Country" (Rose, 1996: 13), Regather are creating localised networks of knowledge alongside such food systems, both practically and via online education, thus enacting new ecological interactions in which society's disconnect to nature is rebuilt (Castree, 2001).

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

To summarise, Regather and HHP, enabled by the values of co-operation, put into practice ideas of Country which in turn reconfigure new, more sustainable ecological relations. Despite challenges and limitations, the varying practices of both co-ops, from building design to food boxes, materialise several fundamental ideas of Country: the recognition and harnessing of the agency and power held by nature, the creation of mutually beneficial nature-human relations, and a deep connection to and understanding of such processes. The people-to-people, and people-to-environment relations constructed by Regather and HHP through practices surrounding energy, water, food production and distribution, however, should not be considered separately. For example, harvested rainwater is used by Regather to irrigate the land, beetle belts then prevent pests from damaging the crops, and

the crops are eventually harvested and distributed in local food networks. As within Country, the various interactions enacted by the cooperatives form a “holistic system” in which each element is vital (Rose, 1996: 49).

Challenges presented by the Anthropocene require humans to find new ways of living with one another and the environment in order to preserve the future health of our planet (Gibson-Graham, 2011). By putting into practice not-so-new ideas of Country, Regather and HHP have been shown to practice sustainable ecological relations in which humans and nature are not separate entities, but live in mutually respectful, inter-dependent relationships. To conclude, co-operative and value-oriented ways of living and consuming, working to collapse the human-nature dualism arguably created by industrial capitalism, hold the potential to reconfigure society’s relationship with the environment towards a more sustainable future.



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