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Introduction

Utopia is the good place that is no place. Intentional communities embody utopian aspirations, experiment with utopian dreams and live out utopian desires. This paper begins with the paradox at the centre of these two statements. If utopia is no place, how can a real living community be ‘utopian’? This paradox is explored as the paper considers ways in which intentional communities can be said to be microcosms for social science. Particular attention is paid to two key concepts in social science: co-operation and conflict. What, I ask, can social scientists learn from intentional communities about conflict and co-operation? Because this paper covers a lot of ground and is concerned to connect several different threads, lengthy passages of exegesis, drawn from experience researching over sixty intentional communities in the UK and New Zealand, are followed by discussions of sample communities, which illustrate the claims made in the opening sections of the paper.

Utopia: the good place that is no place

Within scholarship on utopianism there exists some tension between two different interpretations of utopia. Both stem from the ambiguous etymology of the word. Thomas More created in his neologism a phonetic pun that combines three Greek words: *topos* (place), *eu* (good) and *ou* (non, or not) (More, 1516). This creates an eternal tension in the concept of utopia because utopias are at once good places and no places. And so one interpretation focuses on utopia as good place. This permits us to think in terms of the concrete utopia (Bloch, 1986) and the idea that utopia is something to be pursued and ultimately realised. Another focuses on utopia as no place and locates utopia always just over the horizon.

There are many variations and nuances on these two interpretations and most scholars combine them in some way. However, they have serious implications. The former view is the more straightforward. It leads people to experiment, to found communities, to change their lifestyle and to try to make their dreams come true. This impulse can be traced in advertising (eat this cereal and get the body you’ve always wanted, buy this car and you will be sexually attractive to women); travel (come to this country and realise your potential); and politics (vote for me and I will make the world a better place). This is what takes utopians forward.

Utopia as no place is more complicated. On the one hand, this view informs anti-utopians, like Karl Popper, who believe that attempts to realise utopia will create an authoritarian or totalitarian world. This perspective is informed by an idea of utopia
as perfect. A perfect world, it follows, is unchallengable. There is no room for dissent in such a place. To dissent would be irrational, mad, even, and so the dissenter would require treatment or elimination. Dystopias such as Zamyatin’s *We* and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* stem from this view. Previous research has indicated that this view of utopia as perfection-seeking is a mistaken one (Sargent, 1994), (Sargisson, 1996, 2000). On the other hand, the idea of utopia as no place has informed many debates within scholarship on utopianism over the last fifteen years or so. Bodies such as contemporary feminism find this view of utopia appropriate to their own partial visions of a better life (Bammer, 1991) (Sargisson 1996). Postmodern and poststructuralist challenges to certainties about totality, identity and truth also make this a more comfortable place for some to work.

Alert to these tensions, many contemporary scholars of utopia take a nuanced view of utopia as the desire for something better, rather than something perfect (Levitas 1990). This means that utopia remains just around the corner or just over the horizon. The utopian ship sails ever onwards. One thing that remains constant in utopias (expressions of a desire for a better way of being (Levitas, 1990)) and utopianism (social dreaming (Sargent, 1994)) is a critical perspective of the now. All utopians perceive there to be something very wrong with the world they live in and aim to improve on this. This is one thing on which all scholars of utopia agree (see, for example, Manuel and Manuel 1979; Kumar 1991; and Moylan 1996, for different interpretations of the consequence of this).

**Intentional Communities**

Utopia may remain over the horizon, but many intentional communities are, I suggest, nonetheless utopian. They embody utopian aspirations, experiment with utopian dreams and live out utopian desires. They are the homes of social dreamers (Sargent 1994). They are founded in discontent with the now and their members are deeply critical of the status quo. Definitions of intentional community vary and it is, perhaps, useful to clarify terms at this point. What I am calling ‘intentional communities’ have variously been called, amongst other things, ‘communes’, ‘communal experiments’, ‘utopian communities’, ‘utopian experiments’ and ‘alternative societies’. Some commentators feel that what I call an intentional community can be identified by structural features, such as size and organisation (The Federation of Intentional Communities takes this view, as does Fogarty, who says that an economic tie is necessary (Fogarty 1980, 1990)), while others focus on function. Examples are social change (Bouvard 1975), and the deliberate creation of
alternatives (Wagner 1980). Most combine structure and function, identifying as relevant size and shared goals (LeWarne 1975; Zablocki 1980), or work and group life (Abrams et al). The simplest definition comes from Andy Wood: ‘Very generally, communal living can be described as situations in which people knowingly and willingly share aspects of living accommodation and material goods’ (Wood, 1989, 6).

For Rosabeth Kanter, a utopian community can be identified by certain organisational features and shared goals but for her the key component of such a community is commitment (Kanter, 1972, 2-3). Lyman Tower Sargent ‘define[s] an intentional community as a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose’ (Sargent, 1994, 14-15). This takes into account aspects of the term intentional community (Shenker 1981). Intentional communities are communities, and this includes both collective activity and shared physical space (Metcalf, 1995). And they are intentional, sharing a collective endeavour. And so, the working definition used in this paper is simple and inclusive, encompassing a wide range of experiments in community including communes, eco-villages, religious houses and residential co-operatives. Intentional communities are groups of people who have chosen to live (and sometimes work) together for some common purpose (Sargisson, 2000). Their raison d’être goes beyond tradition, personal relationships or family ties. They are places where people try alternatives and try to live their dreams on a daily basis. They are utopian social experiments in microcosm from which we can learn much as social scientists.

**Studying intentional communities as utopias**

Utopias, I have suggested elsewhere, are places in which we can explore, speculate and create new ideas and new ways of both looking at and thinking about the world. They are places in which it is possible to conceive of – and then perhaps demand – the impossible (Moylan, 1986). In earlier works I have linked this to the idea of transgression, which involves stepping over accepted boundaries and thereby occupying a new space (Sargisson, 2000). Here I am concerned to explore a space between sociology and political theory, good place and noplace, community and utopia.

Textual utopias, dystopias and utopian satires – literary and theoretical ones - create imaginary spaces that permit us to explore ideas and alternatives to the now. We may not like these alternatives but there is always something to learn from them.
They may inform us about the author’s present, they may tell us something of the dangers of an idea taken to an extreme. They are ‘safe’ no-places, in which we can have a good look at things. Looking at intentional communities takes this a step further. Like fictions, they are contained spaces in which it is possible to think about utopias of, say communal ownership. Unlike fictions and theories, they are ‘some place’ and so we can look at, see and feel how experiments pan out in reality. They are living experiments, which we, as social scientists, can observe. As the panel title suggests, they are mini-worlds that we can study.

There are drawbacks to seeing intentional communities in this way. These are ethical and pragmatic. Ethically, we need to remember that intentional communities are people’s homes. The ‘experiment’ that we have under our microscope is somebody's life. This requires us to be very careful. Entering somebody's home with a toolbag full of methods with which to study them, going away and writing about them and (perhaps) publishing one’s conclusions involves all sorts of relationships of power and potential exploitation. Pragmatically, very few intentional communities have been founded with the sole intent of exploring a utopian idea to its full. Some, like Twin Oaks in the USA were influenced by books like *Walden Two* but most were not. Their primary aim, then, is usually not the realisation of the utopia that we may attribute to them. Few will self-identify as ‘utopian’ due largely to the negative connotations of that term in colloquial use. And, finally, they may aim to realise a utopian vision but reality often gets in the way. The very fact of their being real ‘someplaces’ is significant here. Sometimes this is directly related to the aim (for instance, jealousy in a free love community) but more usually it is not. More usually it stems from that fact that they are real places containing real people who encounter real problems and difficulties. That is why it is important to attend to conflict.

**Co-operation and Conflict**

For the remainder of the paper I explore some of the claims made so far about the strengths and weaknesses, dangers and benefits of treating utopias as microcosms of social science. This will be undertaken by looking at two very different but related phenomena. The first is cooperation and the second is conflict. Throughout these discussions the tensions between good place and no place will remain apparent. Cooperation is, for many founders of intentional communities, a primary or secondary aim. For some it is the good place towards which they strive. For others (like feminist or anarchist groups) it forms part of the core of their beliefs
and aims. Conflict is, for many groups, a major stumbling block. Very much stemming from the real world now, it sometimes seems that intragroup conflict renders utopia always unreachable.

Conflict and co-operation can be seen as polemical points various scales. Crudely, one leads to war and the other to peace. One tends towards dystopia, and the other towards utopia. People’s views on these concepts can tell us much about their politics and ideology. Some, following Hobbes, will claim to be ‘realists’ and tell us that conflict is the essential human condition and that society requires strong law and order. Others, closer to Locke will say that whilst people can co-operate, they are likely to conflict over scarce resources, and so the state should protect our property. Others, like Robert Owen, tell us that, given the right conditions, we can live co-operatively together. Concepts and practices such as pluralism and democracy are attempts to harness the best of both and pragmatically to live with our differences. Conflict and co-operation, then, are two touchstones of any society - it is hard to study the world without encountering them. If intentional communities are microcosms for social science then we should be able to learn something from them about these two key human tendencies.

Co-operation

Historically many utopians have sought a more co-operative society. In many utopias old conflicts are replaced by a consensual culture, and the regulating function of the state is no longer necessary. In “Cooperation and Utopianism” Sargent pointed out that co-operation and utopia are closely connected and students of utopia have long been fascinated by the pursuit of this elusive idea (Sargent 2001). If we think more closely about this we begin to see that the quest for cooperation touches and transforms every aspect of our lives, from our closest relationships to our financial investments. The search for a co-operative way of life challenges some of the major assumptions in liberal thought and society. We live in a world driven by other values, in which, for instance, co-operation is conceptually opposed to competition and in which competition is associated with success. This is mirrored in such diverse locations as the structure of political systems, behaviour in the political arena, assumptions of market capitalism and relationships in the workplace. Assertiveness, combative ness, and polemics are associated with dynamism, progress and success. All of these are aspects of competition, which in
turn is a form of conflict\(^1\). And intentional communities often have very different structural arrangements for making decisions and organising money as well as codes of approved behaviour that stress co-operation over competition.

The quest for co-operation, then, represents a profound challenge to some underlying assumptions concerning the way we organise our world, which have their roots in liberal political thought and capitalism. Conceptually, we can think of this in terms of co-operation versus a cluster of ideas that are associated with and stem from conflict. These ideas shape or influence our lives. For example, the search for a more co-operative daily life challenges certain assumptions about the relationship between the individual and society. People living in intentional communities often claim that ‘mainstream’ society stifles co-operation in favour of individualism and the collective in favour of the individual. This has a number of aspects, which are economic, social and cultural and these have implications for the way our society and lives are structured. For instance, western forms of liberalism champion the individual, protecting him (and, latterly, her) in a package of rights. The quest to live co-operative lifestyle confronts key institutions, norms and assumptions. We will see how this plays out in the discussions below of actual communities. First though, we need to think about conflict.

**Conflict**

So far I have discussed, in the broadest of terms, some implications of utopian desires for a more co-operative life. Much of this stems from critiques of certain forms of conflictual relationships, and in particular competition and individualism. This should not, however, be taken as a desire to rid the world of conflict per se. Yes, some utopian novels aspire to this, but few real lived intentional communities do so. Some, like the Quaker communities, seek to contribute to world peace and hold a vision of a world without war. But this is not to say that they seriously believe that all forms of conflict can or even should disappear. While conducting fieldwork in the UK and New Zealand I have visited over sixty intentional communities and I have yet to visit one that has not experienced conflict at some time or other. In a paper in 2003 I explored this and found that conflict has been undertheorised in the literature on intentional communities and that we can learn something useful about the function and management of conflict by closely studying

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\(^1\) Feminist theorists have been quick to point out the gendered associations of the dynamics of the public sphere (see, for example, Elshtain *Public Man/Private Woman*, Philips, *Engendering Democracy*).
them (Sargisson 2003). There is not the space to revisit this here but we should note that conflict occurs in all groups at some time and that if a community is to survive over time it needs to find ways to manage conflict (see, for example, Abrams and McCulloch, 1976). Unrestrained conflict is socially unsustainable in an intentional community, and such groups need to be socially sustainable if they are to meet the needs of their members. Conflict can prevent or inhibit the achievement of goals (Hardy 1979). It can cause pain, resentment and lasting damage to relationships, which is hard to manage in a small tightly knit group. Research in other forms of communal groups supports this (see, for instance, Manning [1980] and Roberts [1980] on conflict within therapeutic communities.) However, conflict will, it seems, always occur, can be survived and can have positive outcomes. For this reason attention will be paid to conflict and co-operation in the discussions below.

**Sample Communities**

In order to provide some flesh for the bones of the somewhat schematic claims and suggestions made thus far, we need to see how some of this plays out in real community settings – in utopian ‘someplaces’. The discussions below introduce four very different communities which have co-operation as a secondary or primary aim.

**Chippenham Community**

Christchurch, South Island, New Zealand

Chippenham community was founded in 1971 and is still going strong. It is a co-operative community which has survived extreme conflict. It has a capacity of fourteen members who live together in Chippenham House, built as a large family home in the 1860s. It is an urban secular community and, as such, breaks many of the rules established in the literature on intentional communities. It is probably the oldest urban secular intentional community in the world. Urban communities normally have a shorter life than rural ones, and secular communities generally have shorter life than religious or spiritual ones. Members live communally in one house, and these living arrangements tend to be less sustainable than cases where households occupy separate homes. It is a rent-paying community, in which members pay rent to

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2 These examples come from fieldwork gathered for a countrywide survey conducted by Professor Lyman Tower Sargent and myself in 2001. Sargent conducted archival research while I undertook fieldwork.
the community which owns the property in Trust. Again, these kinds of communities tend not to last as long as communities where members ‘buy in’ to a share of the property when they join the group. The lack of a financial tie makes it easier to leave a rent-paying group. On top of this, Chippenham’s survival is striking because it was founded by political activists and such communities tend to be among the most short-lived. The community nowadays has no shared ideology (members are not, for example, committed to ecologism or socialism) but rather share a general and somewhat vague commitment to community and co-operation. Current members cite core values variously as ‘respect’, ‘equality’ and ‘co-operation’.

In 1972 Chippenham members bought a second house, Mansfield, which abuts the Chippenham garden at a right angle, and in 1973 they purchased a forty-acre farm near Oxford. This has become Gricklegrass community, which is primarily concerned with organic food production. The three communities were established under the umbrella of an organisation called Community Assistance, Incorporated, which was the Trust that owned the properties. The objects for this association were as follows:

(a) to provide benefits, facilities and assistance to the members, their husbands, wives, children or other dependants or to the widowers, widows children or other former dependants of deceased members in such manner as may from time to time be determined by the Association.

(b) to assist such persons or bodies whether incorporated or otherwise as may from time to time be determined by the Association. (CAI Trust Deed)

Early members of Chippenham were involved in both local and national politics as well as in the alternative and co-operative movements. Chippenham founded the magazine *New Zealand Environment*; published a newsletter called *Men Against Sexism*, was the address given in the first issues of *Mushroom*, a radical journal; it was host to the first meeting of GreenPeace NZ was held at Chippenham; HART (Halt All Racist Tours) held its planning meetings at Chippenham and the HART newsletter was published there; the first women’s refuge originated there; Chippenham residents were involved in the early stages of the gay liberation front in New Zealand; and members started a (short lived) alternative school started there.

Nowadays political activity is less intense. At the time of my visits in 2001 the community was recovering from a period of prolonged internal conflict and members had little energy for activity outside the group. Nonetheless, some members were active in a local campaign called ‘Stop the Fences’, which aims to encourage people to remove or lower their garden fences in order that they can see their neighbours. This is part of an attempt to foster a sense of community in the city, to encourage
people to talk to their neighbours and to look out for each other. Others were working in a supportive capacity with a new alternative school in the city. One member worked with a group called ‘Men Against Violence’, which aims to help men to learn other ways of expressing anger both in the home and globally. And Chippenham is still home to the only national community newsletter in New Zealand Chip’N’Away, which is edited by one member and funded by the group. The impact of this activity outside the community is difficult to quantify but members believe it to be valuable. Members of this community all work outside the community in such occupations as librarian, nurse, joiner (and odd jobman), student, film maker and some are full time parents. They point out that they meet people through their jobs who come to know them and thereby to hear about Chippenham and that this also has an impact on the wider community.

Conflict at Chippenham

In 1994 conflict arose amongst members over the nature and future of CAI. They disputed the principles on which the communities were founded. This lasted for over three years, caused massive harm, damaged relationships, cost CAI dear in financial terms, and eventually led to the liquidation of its assets following a High Court judgement. CAI was wound up but the communities survived, under the banner of a new umbrella organisation, Heartwood Community Te Ngakau o te Rakau Incorporated (Heartwood). Chippenham, Mansfield and Gricklegrass now exist under this umbrella organisation, which owns the three properties.

The dispute broke out over the use of the communities’ assets. At the time CAI was financially secure and solvent with surplus resources. Given its commitment to community assistance, some members felt that assets should be realised by selling the (now valuable) properties and using the money to support co-operative and community projects. This group felt that the communities (and their members) were enjoying the benefits of CAI’s assets and that this ‘social good’ should be more widely shared. Another group agreed that community and co-operative projects should be funded but did not feel that they needed to sell the properties. This would be better done, they argued, by managing CAI’s existing resources more effectively. Factions formed in what became a bitter dispute and the communities were soon in constitutional crisis because the wording of CAI’s constitution could be interpreted to support both groups. Conflict cut through the different houses, with Mansfield and Chippenham being the most closely involved (Gricklegrass was somewhat remote at
the time) and members of each faction lived in both communities. Mediation was tried and failed, and eventually the dispute went to litigation.

Feelings ran high and some are documented in *Chip’N’Away*. One writer expresses ‘a sense of outrage that a very small group can so wantonly destroy the community’s assets built up by so many; a sense of violation that the ideals upon which the community was founded can be so arrogantly trampled upon’ (*Chip’N’Away*, Vol 2 Issue 1 July 1996, 1). The communities survived, the properties were not sold but CAI was wound up. The High Court put CAI’s assets were put in the hands of the liquidators who insisted a new management structure be created, and this is Heartwood. Heartwood consists of trustees who are former members, representatives from each community, and trustees from ‘outside’ (including a solicitor and member of another intentional community). Some members of the faction wanting to sell the properties left (one still remains). This created gaps and Chippenham took new members in haste—a decision it repented at leisure because these people were not committed to community living but rather wanted an easy life in a large and beautiful home. They were eventually asked to leave and further upheaval occurred. It took another three years for things to settle down at Chippenham, and at the time of my visits in 2001, Mansfield was still having problems recruiting and retaining members. In 2004, the communities are reaching a settled state, with a combination of new and old members. The effects of this conflict, then, have lasted for almost a decade and threatened the future of the communities as well as causing hurt, mistrust and pain to the parties involved. The impacts have been financial, emotional and structural.

Conflict can cause irreparable damage to relationships. It can lead to the dissolution of the group (Barker, 1989). It can cause infighting, destabilise the value base, and threaten the social fabric. However, this community has survived. At the time of my first visit in spring 2001 Chippenham was comprised of eight adults and three children. It has since expanded to its full capacity of fourteen. The group has learned from its experience. Members spoke of the devastating effect of the conflict and were aware that they were in a recovery period. They had established new and firmer entrance and exit rules and were resolved not to take people on in desperation. The three communities were meeting regularly together, both for social occasions and business meetings. New members were joining. During my time in New Zealand in 2001, Chippenham took on a family (two adults and a child) and a

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3 Gricklegrass had its own problems at the time with some heavy users of drugs who had joined the group. These people have subsequently left and in 2001 none of the members had been there for more than three years. This group was industrious and committed to the community.
single person with a form severe autism (Aspergers Syndrome). Mansfield had experienced trouble in retaining members and realised while I was there that this was due in part to the absence of clear house rules. People would move in readily enough to Mansfield, which is an attractive house, surrounded by garden that run into the grounds of Chippenham, but they would not stay beyond the three month trial period. Arguments over who did the washing up, where to put food, who cleans the bathroom and other domestic issues drove these potential members away.

All Heartwood communities ask members for a fairly low cash rent plus four hours a week of ‘sweat rent’, which is paid in labour. Each house has its own arrangements for this – at Chippenham each member selects to work in one collective area, such as the kitchen, bathrooms, laundry, gardens, ballroom, or stairways, and takes responsibility for the upkeep of this area. Help can be requested from other members either bilaterally or in the weekly house meeting so, for instance, if a crop needs to be gathered in the garden, all will pitch in. The systems at Chippenham facilitate co-operation. So does the culture of the group. They share a meal together each day (in the evening) and take it in turns to cook this. This is not done in strict rotation but voluntarily via weekly sign-up sheet on the kitchen noticeboard. So people sit down together each evening and eat and wash up and the evening often extends into one of conversation. The group is sociable and mutually supportive. New members are socialised informally.

Observation in other communities bears out the importance of the relationship between structures and culture or attitude within a group. Good structures tend not to work in the absence of a co-operative attitude within the group. And the best attitude can be foiled by the absence of clear structures and processes. At Chippenham the balance is right. Another keys to the success of the Heartwood communities, I suggest, is the combination of support and autonomy that the three communities gain from each other and from Heartwood. Living alternatively can be quite a lonely experience, as Chrissie, from another New Zealand community explains here:

That is the worst part, and all the stresses that you have to deal with when you are doing something different and you haven’t got support for it; you are isolated, and the world is not going where you want it to go; you are just hoping that you can hold a flame alight long enough until the world realises it needs it. (Chrissie, Te Ora: 02.02.01)

Heartwood communities meet together regularly and can seek advice from Trustees but have autonomy over their own community rules and agreements, which are made
by each group by consensus. They thus gain support and yet remain independent in important ways.

Consensus has emerged as a key factor of success in many secular communities and in the New Zealand survey people interviewed across some forty secular communities cited consensus as their most important and effective process. It binds the group to the decision in a way that majority decisions do not (there are always winners and losers in a vote). It is a cohesive process – real consensus decision making is impressive to observe. It is a legitimate way of making decisions in an egalitarian group. It fosters co-operation and a sense of collective responsibility.

Peterborough Street
Christchurch, South Island, New Zealand

Peterborough Street Community is another long lived secular urban community. It bears certain similarities to Chippenham and Mansfield and for this reason discussion will be brief. It is worth considering because this community offers more insight into co-operation. We will not discuss conflict here but that is not to say that it does not occur. Indeed, one member of Peterborough Street has drawn on his experience of living in the community to become a consultant in conflict management (see Swain, 1996).

Peterborough Street Community was established in 1982. The community occupies four adjacent houses in the city centre. The properties are owned by the Otakaro Land Trust, the primary objective of which is ‘to relieve poverty among the economically disadvantaged and poor of Christchurch …. by establishing an equitable and empowering social structure which does not create a class of poor and economically disadvantaged’ (Otakaro Land Trust Deed: Peterborough Charter). The founders of Peterborough Street felt that this was best achieved as follows:

- common ownership of land
- co-operative control of profit and not-for-profit enterprises
- the creation and promotion of working examples which are
  - locally based
  - democratic
  - sustainable
  - cooperative. . . .
The Peterborough Trust Trustees Group aims to attain the primary objectives by creating, running and promoting a housing cooperative (emphasis in original) (Otakaro Land Trust Deed).

Peterborough is an urban cooperative housing scheme which, in the past, has operated at high levels of communality and which has an important place in the history of the New Zealand cooperative movement. The community has historic connections to a cooperative bakery and organic food store as well as Prometheus, New Zealand’s cooperative bank. Prometheus is one of the few commercial organisations willing to lend money to intentional communities and many would not have survived without it. At the time of my visit in 2001, collective activity was lower than in the past, consisting of a weekly pot-luck meal and working bees on the buildings and gardens. What is interesting in this story for our purposes is the community’s constitutional connection of co-operation with distribution of wealth and resources.

Another salient factor is their use of the layout of physical space to foster a co-operative community. It is extremely difficult to maintain an intentional community unless the physical space meets the group’s needs. One factor is location (it is difficult to meditate next door to a nightclub); another is the arrangement of space inside the community land. For instance, a group that wants to explore interpersonal relationships will have different requirements from a group that seeks individual spiritual development through quiet contemplation. Peterborough is city based and its neighbouring houses that all have road frontage. The group aims to create and maintain a co-operative ethos.

Working from the back of the property forwards, one moves from ‘most communal’ to ‘least communal’ space. The large buildings at the back belong to the community and are available for collective use. At one time, they housed community businesses. They currently provide storage space and the community office is located in one of them. Then comes the strip of shared space, which is mostly used by the children--it is a place away from the road safe for riding bicycles, running and letting off steam. In front of this are the household gardens and in front of these (at the front of the property) are the houses. Gardens are laid out in such a way as to afford each household some privacy but they have no gates or fences. They are well maintained. In order to enter the houses, one has to walk around the back of the property to the backdoor. My first visit was in the evening, I had been invited to a community meal, which was ‘pot luck’ with everybody bringing some food. Within the houses, shared space is the first to be encountered. Some houses are home to single people and some to families. In the singles homes this space is an open plan
kitchen/lounge and dining area. Behind this, at the furthest point from the ‘most communal’ space are the bathrooms and people’s private bedrooms. In this way Peterborough has adapted and designed space to maximise communal interaction whilst preserving private spaces.

The community retains a stable mixture of single people and families, who live in different houses, in household units. Several singles share a unit, whereas families have their own space. This, they find, works well and minimises conflict. Each house has a private garden and access to communal gardens and buildings at the back of the properties, including a laundry, office and a large building (formerly home to community businesses and currently used for storage).

The lessons from Peterborough about co-operation concern its scope (and in particular a belief that co-operative ownership of property is the best way to eradicate poverty\(^4\)) and community design. This involves the composition of the group and use of physical space.

Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood
Waitakere, North Island, New Zealand

There is a group of communities that take the design of physical space to very seriously and these are co-housing groups. Co-housing has its origins in Denmark where Saettedammen and Skraplanet were established in the late 1960s, followed by Trudeslund (1972) and Nonbo Hede (1976). These were known as bofoe llesskaber, ‘living communities’. By 1990 there were 140 bofoe llesskaber in Denmark. They range in size from six to forty households and most are home to fifteen to thirty households (McCamant, Durrett & Hertzman, 1994, 16). Key figures in the early development of Danish co-housing were Jan Gudmand-Hoyer and Bodil Graae. They wrote and spoke of dissatisfaction with contemporary life and sought values that appeared to be disintegrating. Living in a city, they felt, led to isolation and alienation and they identified city housing to be a cause of this. Seeking something more like a village community within an urban context, they sought to live near the city in order to continue in professional employment. Working with a group of friends, they purchased land and planned a housing development at Hareskov, outside Copenhagen, in 1964. Their work has inspired people worldwide.

Co-housing communities have been established all over the world. They are especially successful in mainland Western Europe. Earthsong is the first in New
Zealand. It began life at the planning stage in 1995. Building began in 2000 and in 2004 has reached the final stage of building what will be a neighbourhood of thirty-two homes. Whilst some suggest that co-housing belongs on the borderlines of a survey of intentional communities, I include it because of its strong community ethic and, further, because it marks a new development in the search for a cooperative lifestyle. In this case, that lifestyle is city based and ecologically sustainable. Members argue that ‘normal’ housing arrangements are inadequate to modern society. Traditional housing arrangements have not, they suggest, accommodated the needs produced by economic and demographic change. Traditional housing caters for the nuclear family in which one parent works and the other looks after the children. However, families like this are a declining phenomenon. Nobody, they say, caters, in planning terms, for the needs of the adults and children in sole parent households; for two-parent households in which both parents work; for single adults; or for adults whose children have left home. Add rising housing costs and an increasingly mobile population, they say, and the result is modern cities and suburbs which lack a sense of community and people who lack a sense of belonging.

Earthsong is a showcase for community design and the group, which has met for years to plan the community, has considered each aspect of community development (such as, ethics, physical design, decision making and induction). This group combines pragmatic planning with utopian desire --the desire for a better way of being (Levitas, 1990). ‘We are a group of people currently living in regular nuclear households, but with a vision of how a different way of living could be more sustaining of us individually, collectively, and globally. Our vision includes building a cohousing community … while also caring for the earth that sustains us’ (Earthsong: http://www.cohousing.pl.net/infobook/principles.html).

The site covers four acres and will soon contain thirty-two semi-detached homes. Earthsong has incorporated the principles of both co-housing, and permaculture into its design. Permaculture aims to maximise natural efficiency and minimise human effort in the maintenance of local ecological systems (see Mollison 1999). In line with this, building methods employ low impact techniques and use readily available local materials. Rammed earth is used for external supporting walls; it is warm in winter and cool in summer. Upper stories are built of untreated and chemical-free wood from plantation Poplar, Macfarqua and Lawson Cypress trees. Solar heating provides most of the hot water. Building materials are chosen with care and regard to their energy content, toxicity, environmental impact, durability and

\(^4\) Peterborough is not an income pooling community – members work in the city in a
suitability for recycling. The design of the site has taken into account an existing orchard and makes best use of the lie of the land.

Earthsong combines mixed forms of ownership, with some homes being privately owned and some rented. Purchasers sign up to the community’s ethics and principles, which are explained by one of the group’s founders, Robyn Allison:

The three links that support our vision statement are, to be socially sustainable, to be environmentally sustainable and to be a model to demonstrate to others how it is possible to live more sustainably, really. So the environmental sustainability is obvious, really—it’s all in place: water systems, solar power and that sort of thing. Social sustainability is really about the whole nature of cohousing, which to me is about having that balance between individual autonomy and group cooperation and it is a balance of the key words for me. Looking out for each other, being part of a wider group, everybody has different skills and different time availability and things like that. There are older children who don’t have other children in their lives, who would really love to spend some time with young children, for instance. And there are young adults with babies who often struggle to get some space. It’s a compilation of different people’s circumstances, it’s just amazing. . . . The other thing about social sustainability is the cooperation over all sorts of things—minimising our use of resources—it means that we can have a really rich, full life without everybody having to own this, that, and the other thing and everybody having to manage on their own. (Robyn, Earthsong, 14.04.01)

The group takes collective responsibility for all decisions that effect its future and decisions are made by consensus. They meet once a month and have planned each stage of the community’s design together with an architect. The site has been designed to promote social sustainability. At the front of the property, near the road and the site for new businesses, is a car park and the remainder of the property is car-free. Footpaths wind from the car park past houses to the community house, which lies at the centre of the site. This is so that people will encounter each other as they come and go to and from work, school or other activities outside the eco-neighbourhood. Shared space will include the community house, orchards and gardens. The group consists of a mixture of families, including single parent households, dual parent households, couples and single people and a ‘women’s house’ has recently been purchased.

range of occupations including consensus trainer, banker (Prometheus), and teacher.
Getting this dream off the ground has been difficult and the group has experienced some problems. For example, their building contractor went bankrupt and subsequent quotations for remaining work were significantly higher than the one in the original budget. As a consequence, they have borrowed from the Prometheus Bank. It has required massive amounts of energy and commitment on the part of its members to establish this community, and this has not been without personal cost or difficulty. But Earthsong is a pioneer community in New Zealand, being the first co-housing scheme in the country, and pioneers always encounter problems. Its members are committed to their dream of a more sustainable lifestyle and are working pragmatically to create a space in which this is possible and systems and processes that will enable it to become a reality. This group has clearly thought hard about fostering co-operation in this new community and it will be interesting to see how things develop.

Earthspirit
Kaitaia, North Island, New Zealand

This last example offers insight into a very different kind of co-operative utopia. So far, we have discussed structures, processes, design and attitudes and made some reference to the idea of ownership and financial sustainability. This community tells us something of co-operation at a much more personal level. In 1985 two women founded Earthspirit with the aim of creating a separatist lesbian feminist community. They were inspired to do this by several aspects of radical feminist thought, and in particular the belief that it would be possible, given the right circumstances (ie a space free from male influences) to create a community of women bound by common sisterhood, living together in a spirit of co-operation. There is not space to expand on this here but briefly, radical feminism identifies common bonds and attributes amongst women that are said to be repressed in mainstream patriarchal society. This generates competitive relationships amongst women (See, for example, Mary Daly’s Gyn/Ecology). This utopia sought something radically different: a co-operative sisterhood.

Membership has risen and fallen over the years and the property is currently owned by three members. Earthspirit is a semi-rural community not far from the town of Kaitaia. Physical space includes eight acres of land: paddocks and gardens and one permanent house. The main house was on the property when it was acquired by Earthspirit and contains shared space including laundry and bathrooms. Other
(temporary) structures have been built by members of the community. New Zealand’s restrictive planning laws make expansion difficult, as they cannot build additional permanent homes and this is one reason that the community has not grown. Nonetheless the community has historically had more members, who have lived in temporary structures or housebuses.

Members speak openly and reflectively about their experiences and the challenges of community life, dynamics and relationships; the community has been through many changes over the years. The two founding members still live there but other women have come and gone. There have been changes in living arrangements; currently, each woman has her own separate home, but earlier life was more communal. One thing that has remained a constant at Earthspirit is the commitment to cooperation and to creating a feminist life amongst lesbian women.

Earthspirit was founded on feminist principles as a politicised lifestyle choice, which has taken various forms through time. It currently involves separatism in a woman-only living space. At one stage, they felt that it would be appropriate to try to live out the principle of non-possessive love between women. Here, the lover is not a possession or an extension of the self, is not owned and not controlled. This is incredibly difficult to live with and these women has struggled through difficult times and, through some painful experiences, explored their own limits and capacities. They are currently in monogamous relationships. However, their commitment to lesbian separatism is unshaken. Asked about shared values, members responded thus:

Minerva: We want to live together as lesbian women (Minerva, Earthspirit, 11.04.01).

Nut: It has changed a bit over twenty years, but men not being here is one value that we’ve always shared. And I guess that working out relationships and talking about them, not just relationships, but things that go on--working them out, talking them out. I think talking things out. What else? Sharing things, having our own houses, having something to ourselves, we want that (Nut, Earthspirit, 12.04.01).

Arafelle: I guess the main one is living with lesbians only and basically being separatist. We did consider ourselves separatist in the beginning and I think we are still living that way, more or less. We have cooperative relationships with men, our neighbours and others, but we hardly ever have men come here at all and we don’t have them as social contacts or anything like that, and that was the basis from the start, and to do as much as we can for ourselves, to be as self sufficient as possible in all sorts of ways whether it’s
the gardens, the orchards, building our own houses and learning all the skills that women normally rely on men for as much as possible. Then there are the values of taking care of the earth and being organic as much as possible, not using poisons on the land. (Arafelle, Earthspirit, 12.04.01)

The women of Earthspirit spoke of their experiments without hiding the fact that this has been a long hard process, full of internal and external conflict. Living your ideals can be difficult, especially when these involve re-forming close personal relationships. For instance, members spoke about how difficult it was to see their lover go to somebody else’s bedroom, to feel possessive about somebody whilst also being committed to a non-possessive relationship with them. The tensions between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, utopia and reality, good/no place and real place are all apparent here. This group, perhaps even more than the others, shows us that the search for a co-operative lifestyle can be far reaching and difficult, making us consider and re-evaluate all aspects of our lives.

Conclusion: Cooperation and Conflict

We saw with the example of Chippenham that conflict can be devastating and can take years to recover from. Earthspirit too has experienced times of conflict and pain and yet these communities are still here. One of the aims of this paper has been to show that we cannot plan for a co-operative community without taking conflict into account. It will occur and needs to be managed. There is no place without conflict and the good place needs to learn to negotiate this. Members of communities are aware of this:

So long as there is a world, we can never get rid of conflict (Ajahn Viradhammo The Resolution of Conflict http://www.bodhinyanarama.net.nez/munindo1.htm)

I remember once thinking ‘community is about solving conflict’ and that was true at the time but it doesn’t take away from the good things about being in a community Trystan, Peterborough, 03.01.01).

Conflict is a natural part of being human; it’s what you do after the conflict that makes a difference to how it all goes down later. What I think we have to
learn from each other is how we manage to live with conflict (Chrissie, Te Ora, 02.02.01).

I have expanded on this elsewhere but for now want simply to note that the relationship between conflict and co-operation is not one of mutual exclusion. Conflict will occur even in a co-operative group and there are more or less co-operative ways of managing it. Chippenham took the adversarial route and ended up shattered. Some conflicts are more difficult to negotiate than others in these kinds of communities. Conflicts over principle, like the one at Chippenham, are the most difficult to negotiate. Living in a community is not easy and often the commitment to a common cause (even such a loose one as ‘co-operation’) is the glue that binds the group in times of difficulty. Conflict over this core commitment is devastating. Other forms of conflict arise over domestic issues and relationships and these can also tear a group apart (see Sargisson, 2003). However, groups that have a co-operative internal culture and clear structures and process for entrance, exit, decision making and conflict management, are empirically proven to stand a better chance of surviving conflict than groups that do not.

This makes it doubly important to foster co-operation. Firstly, because for the communities discussed here, it forms part of their raison d’être. During our the countrywide study of intentional communities in New Zealand, Lyman Tower Sargent and I reached the firm conclusion that a significant measure of ‘success’ for an intentional community was not so much its longevity (Kanter, 1972) but rather whether or not it meets the needs of its members (Sargisson and Sargent, 2004). Life here needs to be better than the one they left outside and what they felt to be wrong with the mainstream needs to be addressed. This may include such things as materialism, environmental degradation but also invariably involves one or more factors that point to a need for more co-operation. Examples discussed above include poverty (caused by private ownership of wealth), a lack of ‘community’ as a sensibility, alienation, individualism, and exploitation. Secondly, and related, if a community is to meet the needs of its members it must be a good place to live. As stated several times, communal living is difficult, partly because of the tendency for conflicts to arise or explode amongst people who are close to each other. The more co-operative the ethos of the group, the more likely it is to survive and manage these conflicts.
One final point on conflict and co-operation returns intentional communities us to the ‘good place’ and ‘noplace’ of utopia. Intentional communities are utopian. They stems from people’s critical takes on the now, and they seek a better way of being. Sometimes they have a clear vision of what this ‘better way’ will look like, but more often they do not. Rather they have ideas about the need for a ‘more co-operative’ or ‘more egalitarian’ daily life, which they refine as the community matures and changes. Conflict can be an important part of this process. Conflict can, as functionalist accounts suggest, have positive outcomes (see Coser, 1968). Conflict initiatives change, it is a dynamic force (Dahrendorf, 1958). Change, like conflict, can be difficult and painful to experience but it is, I suggest, necessary. It is, to follow Ernst Bloch, what keeps us alive and ever striving for that elusive utopia. Utopias, visions of the good life, are sometimes criticised for being static and dull. Indeed some are. One key difference between utopian communities and utopias, I suggest is that intentional communities are always in a process of change and flux and this is part of what makes them interesting, as well as fun, rewarding and difficult to live in. In this sense then, these ‘concrete utopias’ (Bloch) are also noplaces, never arriving at their destination.

The material and knowledge gained from my research supports a view of utopia as both the good place and the noplace. Members of intentional communities often share a vision of the good life and are attempting to realise this in the here and now. However, these communities are not perfect. Their members view them as better than life in the mainstream, or life ‘outside’, but not as utopia realised. It would probably be more accurate to describe them as utopias in process. Members feel that living collectively and exploring alternatives is better than remaining where they were. Often it is hard, physically, financially, emotionally and spiritually, but they say, it is worth the effort.

All the things I’ve ever wanted to do, things I’d hadn’t even dreamed of really, are possible at Gricklegrass (Andrew, Gricklegrass, 06.01.01)

I think the most important thing has been to have the opportunity to try to live like this. I suppose looking at it from an outsider’s point of view, it is actually a huge thing, to do something like this (Arafelle, Earthspirit 12.04.01).

5 Not all, by any means, see (Moylan 1986), (Sargent 1994), (Bammer, 1991) (Sargisson 1996) for discussions of partial and multiple (fictional and theoretical) utopias.
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