

CHAPTER

1

“ALICE NEL PAESE DELLE MERAVIGLIE”
(ALICE [THE ANTHROPOLOGIST]
IN WONDERLAND)



Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said: “one *can’t* believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” (Carroll 1871)

Conditioned by conventional negativity about the usual “failures” of Utopian experiments, I went to Italy in 1972 to study the world’s oldest nongovernmental voluntary agricultural production cooperatives. I was prepared to chalk up another statistic in the chronicle of collective failures: perhaps another good explanation about “why they failed.”

Instead, I encountered the anomaly of Socialist- and Communist-led agricultural collective farms (then nearly one hundred years old) in a Western capitalist country. Located in the province of Ravenna in Italy’s “Red Belt” region of Emilia-Romagna (map 0.1), these unique worker-managed organizations secured control of 20–25 percent of the rich and valuable land at the mouth of the Po River. They weathered the storms of poverty, violent oppression, disease, economic pressure, mismanagement, depression, war, and fascism. And they did more than simply survive: they built, held onto, and expanded a land base that became a legacy to future generations. I expected to find failure, but instead I found that they provided a substantial

measure of economic benefits for the members and their families, and only required for admission to membership (which was up to 75 percent women in some areas) that one not be a fascist, that one be a farm worker (or owner of insufficient land) of good moral standing (no criminal record and not an alcoholic), and that one pay approximately the equivalent of one US dollar to join.

Over the years since 1974, I often wondered how the collective farms had changed. As the United States and world economies headed for collapse in 2008, I recalled my futile attempts to explain to the rural Italians why I had come to study them. Because my name “Alison” wasn’t translatable (and, in retrospect, because they knew had so much to teach me about cooperation), they kept introducing me as “Alice Nel Paese Delle Meraviglie,” which means “Alice in Wonderland” (figure 1.1).

Everyone there had seen the movie *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ford 1940), about my native California, and would then add to their introduction that I had come to learn how to cooperate in order to show Americans how it is done. I came to feel like the first anthropologist in the history of the discipline whose informants thought she came from a backward culture to study their more advanced ways. In 2010, in the light of all the changes that were occurring in my own country, with consumers questioning the logic or even sanity of corporate agriculture, I resolved to go back to Italy to see what had



FIGURE 1.1. Alice the Anthropologist, 1980

Photo by the author

happened. This time, I would take the advice of my informants more seriously and begin to explore the ways in which the Italian experience might be exportable to the United States.

My intent in publishing this study is to introduce the English-speaking world to the agricultural production cooperatives in the province of Ravenna along the Adriatic coast in the Italian Po River Valley. Geographically, it is like a miniature version of the Lower Mississippi Delta, which, after California, became my second home. In Ravenna, the relationship between efforts to provide for the collective good and the development of a sustainable agricultural system go hand in hand, and Americans might be surprised to learn that it is a place where small private firms and cooperatives are the economically competitive basis of a participatory democracy.

Although the *London Times*' business correspondent John Earle was the first to publish (in 1986) a nationwide historical survey, *The Italian Cooperative Movement*, it was Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam (*Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*) who introduced the “Emilian Model” to the United States in 1994. A 1996 *Nation* magazine article by Robert Fitch described the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna as having a well-managed and uniquely Italian entrepreneurial brand of “municipal socialism.” He reported that its communities, according to Italian polls, were the best places to live and that the region boasted the lowest unemployment rate in Italy and the tenth highest GDP of all 122 regions in Europe (1996).

Canadians John Restakis and Bob Williams cofounded the Summer Program for Cooperative Studies in Bologna. A 2003 article by Bob Williams described the partnership in Emilia-Romagna between the regional government, university and nonprofit research institutes, and associations of enterprises. He noted that the region had approximately one enterprise for every twelve residents (2003). In 2006, John Logue, professor of political science at Kent State, proposed importing the Emilian model to Ohio. His Ohio Employee Ownership Center at Kent State was inspired by Thomas Jefferson's idea that democracy would succeed in the United States because of the widespread ownership of productive assets, the economic independence of citizens, and the absence of a history of feudalism (Logue and Yates 2001: 9). To Logue, workers' cooperatives are a realistic modern equivalent to small owner-operated farms and shops (2006).

Published in 2010, after ten years of summers in Italy and mentoring by the English-speaking Italian economists Stefano and Vera Zamagni, John Restakis's *Humanizing the Economy: Cooperatives in the Age of Capital* includes two chapters on the region's industrial manufacturing cooperatives (knitwear, clothes, ceramic tiles, motorcycles, shoes, equipment), networks of cooperatives and small firms, value-added cooperative enterprises (including agricultural processing, consumer and marketing cooperatives),

and a construction labor cooperative with large global contracts. Restakis explains how the strong cooperative movement in Emilia-Romagna was a lifeboat in tough economic times and how clusters of small private firms and cooperatives made it possible for both to survive and prosper, even within the global economy (2010: 86).

Most recently, American filmmakers Melissa Young and Mark Dworkin released *WEconomics: Italy* in 2016. It is a short documentary film on the cooperative economy of Emilia-Romagna featuring an interview with Vera Zamagni. The film describes “Northern Italy’s answer to corporate rapacity and state indifference” (Durrenberger 2016) and “beautifully captures the power of cooperatives in a world in desperate need of hope” (Lappé 2016).

RAVENNA’S AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION WORKERS’ COOPERATIVES

Less easily understandable from the American point of view, and as yet unknown to the English-speaking world, is the story of the success of the initial collective farms that grew out of earlier Republican and Catholic mutual-aid societies. These are the foundation for the cooperative spirit upon which the “Emilian Model” is based. Historically developed and linked to anarchist ideology and to strong labor unions associated with Italian Socialist and Communist political organizations, the Ravenna collectives are unique in that they still own or lease 12,407 hectares (30,658 acres) of some of the richest and most valuable agricultural land in Europe. The history of the acquisition and use of that land, passed on from generation to generation without being owned by private individuals or the state, provides an enviable example of a more humane economy and society in stark contrast to what developed in my home states of California and Arkansas.

The Ravenna collectives are a rare surviving example of collectivization that came about as a spontaneous, voluntary action of agricultural workers who rose to meet the challenge of reclaiming a vast swamp for agricultural use. As we shall see, the Romagnol *braccianti*, literally the day laborers from Emilia-Romagna who “work with their arms,” were no mere victims or bystanders of history. When pushed off the land that had nurtured their ancestors, they developed unique defense mechanisms to cope with forces within their culture that they saw as negative: the technological displacement of labor by machines, the lack of any kind of humanistic control over the use of technology in agriculture, and the private appropriation and use of the land for the controlling elite economic class.

Clinging doggedly to the Romagnol lands and contriving all manner of schemes to squeeze the maximum amount of labor, rigorously shared by all,

out of a skimpy economy, the Ravenna collectives developed a flexible system of security and “made” work for the individual members. When forced by urgent economic necessity, they resorted to the “strike in reverse,” moving their machines onto unused, privately owned land, eventually forcing it to be sold to the collectives (figure 1.2).

These worker-managed enterprises, where productivity depended upon the conscience of the worker-owners, were exceptionally well adapted to an economy characterized by chronic and widespread partial unemployment. They developed sophisticated planting and production plans, based not only on the simple goals of yield and profit in cash but more importantly on the human value of providing work where there may have been no work available, thereby enhancing the incalculable value of survival and human dignity. With only 10.5 percent of the land in the province, collectives in the 1960s provided 50 percent of farmworker income (Baldassari 1971: 10–11). Instead of concealing underemployment as on the peasant farms, and instead of replacing workers as on the large private farms, Ravenna’s collectives utilized technology to maximize employment, dividing it equally among largely female members who worked only part time during the year.

My objective in 1972–74 was to conduct an anthropological and ethno-historical analysis of these oldest surviving collective farms in the world, using established concepts and procedures of the anthropological method. The study was undertaken by the method known as “participant observa-



FIGURE 1.2. Strike in Reverse, 1972

Photo by the author

tion”: living in the actual setting, being adopted into families, working in the fields, and learning the language (and also, in this case, the local dialect). The participant experiences the daily routine of the people, records the oral history, conducts formal and informal interviews, and attempts to evaluate this total experience from an anthropological point of view. For me this procedure served first and foremost to achieve an insider’s understanding, and after that came the technique of contrasting the various collectives by what is called the “comparative method,” involving ideological, geographical, and economic comparisons between collectives, as well as comparisons of collectives with private forms of agriculture. Above all, through the use of these research techniques I hoped to produce a thorough understanding of the incentives for individual and group membership, using what students of culture like to call a “holistic” approach, the *raison d’être* of anthropology.

Before detailing the history and organizational development of the Ravenna cooperatives in the chapters that follow, I review some of the major theoretical issues connected to cooperation and intentional social change in human communities.

COOPERATION IN COMPLEX SOCIETIES

Quoting Clyde Kluckhohn, June Nash describes anthropology’s interest in cooperative forms as deriving from the principle that “anthropology seeks to extend the areas which reason can understand and perhaps to some extent control.” It is “this willful control of one’s own social forms” that “makes movements towards cooperative forms of organization an essential part both of the human experience and anthropology’s field of study.” Nash labels the study of cooperative forms as “prospectivist” or “urgent” anthropology, insofar as it “consists of understanding the social forms into which we may be about to move.” Paraphrasing Stanley Diamond, Nash says there is “a focus on a renewed sense of the possibilities of human nature and culture through knowledge of cultural worlds already formed.” She also quotes Marcel Mauss as saying that “the union and the cooperative society are the foundations of the future society generated within the capitalist structure” (Kluckhohn and Diamond and Mauss, cited in Nash, Dandler, and Hopkins 1976: 3–4). David Graeber, in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, concludes that “another world is possible” and that anthropologists can “look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions, possibilities—as gifts” (2004: 10–12).

In Search of the Common Good: Utopian Experiments Past and Future, written by Charles J. Erasmus and originally published in 1977, is the most comprehensive anthropological analysis on the subject of utopian and collective social experiments to date. In a preface to the 1984 edition, Erasmus wrote that his students studying development (including this author) in the late 1960s and early 1970s were "Maoists" who were disillusioned with the corruption of the capitalist system and expecting to engineer a new world wherein everyone would work according to ability and receive according to need (1984: v). We were not "Maoists," but we did criticize development schemes involving the teaching of home economics as a solution to poverty. We ridiculed the idea that "lay leadership training" programs could produce real leaders, denounced the notion that instilling the Protestant work ethic would stimulate development, advocated listening to locals for solutions, and proposed doing research that could be practically applied. We were well meaning and naïve, and oblivious to the fact that we were following in the tradition of anthropology as a handmaiden of colonialism and imperialism.

"Green," in the 1960s and 1970s, meant the "Green Revolution." No one thought to question the wisdom of applying modern petroleum-based "solutions," the opposite of what we think of as "green" today. In a colossal example of groupthink, everyone at that time jumped to the conclusion that "backward" peasant practices were economically "irrational" and that they should be replaced as quickly as possible by scientific "miracle" seeds, pesticides, fertilizers, and machines that would save the world from starvation and disaster. Young anthropologists of my generation, unlike those of today, did not yet grasp the implications of the 1968 "Man the Hunter" symposium (Lee and DeVore 1973) as to the precariousness of our own existence or the advantages of ancient subsistence traditions over our own dangerous foraging for nonrenewable fossil fuels.

Why should studies of cooperation be so important to anthropologists? The answer is simply that underlying all anthropological discussions of human nature in different contexts is the fundamental fact that, unlike many other animals, humans require a life-support system that dictates that people must *always* work cooperatively in order to fulfill basic needs. Also basic to the anthropological approach is the awareness that assumptions about human nature and human motivation are subject to change in ways we cannot yet fathom as the political, social, and economic conditions are altered in the human environment (Webb 1952).

According to historian Timothy Miller, "No generally accepted system of terms describing communalism exists. . . . What to one author is 'communal' may be to another 'cooperative' or 'collective'" (1999: xxiv). But to John Bennett, "The more a community insists on the commonality of its property

and its rights to define the roles of members, the more ‘communal’ it can be considered” (2017: 171).

Ravenna’s agricultural production cooperatives have important similarities to and differences from other types of intentional societies. They differ from communes, for example, which are closely knit communities of people who live together on land that is owned or rented by the group and who share common interests, ideology, production, and consumption. The key characteristic of the commune is that it seeks to establish a total way of life apart from the wider society. In the terminology of one of the founders of sociology, Ferdinand Tönnies, it could be said that communes are attempts to establish *Gemeinschaft*, or traditional relationships between people. In contrast to the *Gesellschaft*, or modern type of society based on individualism, the *Gemeinschaft* society requires a whole set of conditions, namely that the group be small with “face-to-face” relationships, that the individual is subordinate in importance to the group, and that they be united by a single idea in either a “fellowship” or “authoritative” type of relationship (1957: 252–53). These types of organizations ascribe to the communist ideal of “from each according to ability, to each according to *need*.”

Longevity of communes, according to Rosabeth Moss Kanter, is based on the extent to which they employ a combination of commitment mechanisms and manage to balance *Gemeinschaft* values with a *Gesellschaft* approach to practical matters (1972). Most communes have a religious foundation and are limited in size and duration. The Hutterites are the world’s most successful example. At the outset of the worker movement in Ravenna in 1884, a group of 550 members organized on communal principles went to colonize and reclaim swamplands at Ostia, near Rome (now the location of the international airport). Although the contract was successfully completed and new contracts awarded as a result, the communal organization was soon abandoned. The flavor of the movement in Ravenna has since been primarily collective rather than communal (Lattanzi, Lattanzi, and Isaja 2008). The exception was the informal *collettivi*, or labor cooperatives, that sprang up in each rural town in Ravenna after World War II to divide work on private farms. Here remuneration was divided more along communal principles—more work for those with large families, equal pay for men and women, and payments to members whether they worked or not.

On an agricultural production cooperative (a collective farm as opposed to the informal Italian *collettivi*), production is typically organized on a group basis and remunerated by wages on the principle of quantity but not quality of labor contributed. The members of a collective farm have no individual claim to the land belonging to them as a group. Consumption is individual and takes place outside of the collective. The key to the collective is production. This is why they are called “agricultural production cooperatives.” They

are typically based on the socialist idea of “from each according to ability, to each according to *work*.”

Cooperatives, on the other hand, are mutually beneficial associations of individuals, families, or organizations who group together to make purchases and provide goods or services for members. They differ from capitalist joint stock companies in that they provide goods and services to members as individuals at cost and usually make decisions on the Rochdale principle of one person, one vote. Some cooperatives have modified the Rochdale principle to make decisions on the basis of quantity of product conferred to the cooperative. Although Rochdale members may be required to make loans to the capital fund, and may receive interest, profits are not distributed on the basis of capital shares. According to Kenneth Hoover, in “Mondragón’s Answer to Utopia’s Problems,” profits can accrue to shares based on limited capital loans (Hoover 1992). In Emilia-Romagna, John Restakis found that the price of membership in a machinery labor cooperative was \$300,000 with interest (but not profits) accruing only upon retirement (2010: 68). According to Battilani and Schröter, Italian law was modified to allow more voting rights for capital contributions (2013: 3). Differences aside, the key characteristic of the cooperative is that the property of individuals is not pooled together with that of the group.

Among the many types of cooperatives in Ravenna, the collective is the basic form of labor cooperative chosen by the laboring class. Construction, dock, and agricultural workers are all organized this way. Although there are variations (members of the construction cooperatives, for example, begin as apprentices, and entry is decided by votes and need for labor), the Ravenna collectives and cooperatives in all their forms provide a model of exceptional interest in comparison with the short-lived historical utopian experiments of Fourier, Cabot, Saint-Simon, Owen, and others. One critique of the noble efforts by these utopian planners says that they all failed because they attempted to create an artificially idealistic *Gemeinschaft* community and collapsed because they lacked a sense of reality (Madison 1946: 93).

While the importance of communal and cooperative experiments to social science and the humanities far outweighs their historical numbers, they are largely ignored in the scholarly literature (Whyte 1982: 1–13). Friedrich Engels was interested in communes because he thought that they proved communism could work. But the more prevalent view adapted from Social Darwinism is that the market selects the best, most profitable, and most natural economic organizations and eliminates those that are not viable. Historian Brett Fairbairn says that the prevalence of the “doctrine of competitive individualism” among researchers is not surprising given the Malthusian inspiration for both economics and ecology (1994: 1214). Economist Virginie Pérotin questions “preconceived ideas that businesses run by their employ-

ees cannot work” and points to “a substantial body of literature developed from the late 1970s” which shows that “several forms of employee participation that are practiced in workers’ cooperatives had positive effects on productivity” (2012: 195, 199).

FREE RIDERS, PLANNERS, AND PLAYERS

Mancur Olson’s 1965 classic *The Logic of Collective Action* holds that people in large groups are not motivated by the reward system in collectives because “free riders” can obtain a share of benefits without contributing an equal share of the work (1965: 15–16, 21). Out of rational self-interest, the tendency is for everyone to take advantage of others’ contributions and to shirk individual responsibility. Although empirically unproven (Udén 1993: 239–261), the free-rider problem provides a rationalization for modern-day Western cultural beliefs: First, without the pressure of a small face-to-face community, nobody is properly motivated to work unless he has the carrot of the daily reward hung out in front of his nose. Second, the individualistic pursuit of wealth and power is the basic natural drive, the natural stimulus of every human action, and the necessary condition even of progress and cultural development. It flows very naturally then that any “collective” effort that “shares the wealth” in any way, or does not reward and punish people individually, goes against the grain of human nature and is doomed to failure.

In a 1978 review of Erasmus’s *In Search of the Common Good*, philosopher Beryl Lang describes Erasmus’s view of human nature as “self-seeking” and finds fault with his conclusion that “no other society on the face of the earth has ever come closer to ‘Utopia’ than the one—despite its many faults—in which we are privileged to live” (Erasmus, cited in Lang 1978: 57). A conclusion extolling the advantages of one’s own culture, according to Lang, carries a heavy burden that Erasmus failed to meet (*ibid.*). This is the last thing an anthropologist would want said about his or her analysis.

In fairness, Erasmus did not say, as others have, that we have a “selfish gene” (Dawkins 1990) or that people will only work for individual private benefit. There are numerous examples in his book showing the effectiveness of social incentives mainly in pre-industrial or small intentional societies with high social visibility. In these situations people can actually work harder with others than they would by themselves to provision the collective good when it is to their self-advantage. This is an example of the behaviorist economic model of human nature in which people respond to incentives as individuals and not as groups. It is the reason Erasmus regarded production cooperatives (collectives) as more problematic (although not impossible) than those involving only consumption. Early Christian communes, based

on the famous passage from the Apostles that "all that believed were together, and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (Acts 2:44–45 KJV), were primarily urban with a focus on collective consumption. They did not involve production until monasteries moved to the countryside where inequalities developed and some monks "even took mistresses and had personal servants" (Erasmus 1984: 74, 42, 120–23).

Erasmus made a point of limiting his analysis of historic nineteenth-century communes to those that managed to survive for more than a quarter of a century, yet he noted their tendency either to dissolve, to transform into joint stock companies, or to split off into new groups. The privatization trend stops with the split and then restarts with establishment of a new colony (as with the monasteries and the Hutterites). Erasmus's coverage of agricultural production cooperatives indicated the possibility of success for those spontaneously originating in a social movement with a high level of social predictability, but he saw a similar direction toward privatization because the lack of individual incentives would inevitably lead to a free-rider problem (ibid.: 327).

Other reasons utopian societies might fail or become privatized besides the free-rider problem are not seriously considered. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, for example, suggests that a study should be done of shirkers in large bureaucracies. She offers other reasons such as deterioration of ideals, changing environments to which they cannot adapt, erosion of membership, growth of skepticism about the possibility of fulfilling the ideals, and the fact that "the kinds of organization that are functional for production and business operations may often conflict with the commitment mechanisms that serve to maintain community feeling" (1972: 220, 150). Difficulties in capitalization and operating under a hostile political climate are other issues that face intentional communities of all kinds.

Erasmus's emphasis on the free-rider problem is based on his adoption of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's notion of *Homo ludens*, or "man the play animal," as a model for human motivation. "*Homo ludens*," he says, "will always need selective incentives to become involved in a game, whatever it may be. So the next question is whether these incentives can be made less materialistic than they are today." Nonmaterial or social incentives can be effective motivators in groups where the human animal is involved as a participating player, but not when manipulated from above as a puppet player by planners or social engineers (Erasmus 1984: 351, 115). It is the comprehensive planning from above, and the behaviorist operant conditioning of the people below, that leads to despotism.

Erasmus borrowed libertarian philosopher Robert Nozick's concept of "invisible-hand" and "hidden-hand" to explain how "man the play animal" is

an active participant player in an invisible-hand game but becomes merely a passive puppet when manipulated from above. He did not wholeheartedly ascribe to the idea that there is no manipulation in an invisible-hand game where “freedom” only means the ability to quit. But he was so impressed with the positive impact of individual incentives in stimulating economic growth in Mexico in the 1950s, in stark contrast to the utter failure of bureaucratic top-down government planning, that he was led to assert that it was consumers, and not entrepreneurs, who were the engine of economic development:

As ordinary people throughout Europe during the Middle Ages sought and obtained more and more of the material things that made life comfortable—“consumer choice” in the book—they created the market that made industrialization possible. Thus the market economy was truly a democratic development. We need only to separate it from capitalism—all evils such as exploitation and monopoly—to finally purify it. (Erasmus 1984: 230, 240, vi)

While none of the fictional and real-world utopian experiments described by Erasmus propose a democratic market-based solution, they all recognize the evils of capitalism and represent what Charles Nordhoff called a “mutiny against society.” Written in 300 BC, Plato’s *Republic* describes how “the rich and their children serve society in no useful way, becoming merely consumers of goods . . . [and how they live] in effeminate indolence with no higher motive than their own immediate pleasure.” In Thomas More’s *Utopia*, written over eighteen hundred years later (in 1516), the rich “pay as little as possible for the labor of the poor people they oppress, and they manipulate the government and its laws to safeguard for themselves all that they have unjustly acquired.” And, writing about Edward Bellamy’s 1888 *Looking Backward*, Erasmus described “the famous metaphor of the coach driven by hunger and pulled by the masses” (Nordhoff, Plato, More, and Bellamy cited in Erasmus 1984: 136, 200–201).

In describing five fictional utopias all designed by the authors to eliminate despotism and corruption (Plato’s *Republic*, Thomas More’s *Utopia*, Cabet’s *Icaria*, Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, and Skinner’s *Walden Two*), Erasmus concludes that they “would all be despotism if put into practice” (1984: 198). Author Chris Jennings offers an even harsher critique: “Anyone nuts enough to try building heaven on earth is bound for a hell of his own making,” but he also argues that there is a “deficit of imagination” in our era and that, “uncoupled from utopian ends, even the most incisive social critique falls short” (2016: 18, 383–84).

Erasmus was not worried about the concerns of the writers of utopian fiction. Along with the “eco-doomsters” of the 1980s, they were too pessimistic for him because they lacked faith in human creativity and the mar-

ket. Erasmus was optimistic about the future of *Homo sapiens* but skeptical about its ability to achieve economic democracy through manipulation of the money supply and taxation, because it is another utopian idea that relies on the "common sense of the people" (1984: 360). He favored George Land's "pro-growth" observation in *Grow or Die* that failure to grow is a recipe for species extinction instead of the other way around (Land 1973).

Because he agreed with economist Peter Drucker that the whole purpose of business is to "supply the wants and needs of the consumer," Erasmus believed the task of purifying the market of its capitalist evils is a burden that "we" the "ordinary people" must assume through "consumer choice." But if he is right that Martin Buber's decentralized "community of communities" would reflect only the moral assessments of planning specialists, the perpetual evils of capitalism are bound to persist because "ordinary people" can never become "participant" players: "Utopia," or "Good Place," as Thomas More cleverly implied, exists in "No Place" (Erasmus 1984: 293, 41–42, 35).

Erasmus ridiculed the "anti-progressive, pro-egalitarian, anti-materialistic" young college-educated utopians who think people "have more material wants than are good for them or the environment" and believe that "the innocent everywhere are being corrupted by the hidden-hand, conspiratorial machinations of Wall Street and Madison Avenue," but he then went on to say,

Actually, this is the kind of controversial utopianism that stimulates increasing information exchange. It is healthy utopianism as long as we do not get administrators and elected officials who decide to impose it upon us. As a point of view to be argued and sold to as many as can be converted, it is stimulating and welcome. After all, some society, somewhere, someday, must surely reach a saturation point in the consumption of trivia. But it must be a saturation point arrived at by the spontaneous order and the give and take of debate and consumer choice, not by administrative decree. (Erasmus 1984: 354–55)

The international "Slow Food" movement, discussed in the conclusion, comes to mind here: it is an example of a consumer-driven movement raising awareness about the unhealthy, environmentally destructive, and unfair labor practices of capitalistic agribusiness. Ravenna's collectives offer a model for a realistic potential alternative. They demonstrate how socialist incentives and worker management in a decentralized regional economy can compete within the capitalist market. Because they originated spontaneously as a social movement, not only do they meet the conditions of social predictability that Erasmus found crucially important, they also meet Rosabeth Moss Kanter's commitment criteria of "sacrifice and investment" (1972: 188).

The same could also be said for Mondragón, founded in 1956 in the Basque region of Spain. Although sociologists William Foote Whyte and Kathleen

King Whyte's *Making Mondragon: The Growth and Dynamics of the Worker Cooperative Complex* was not published until 1988, it is surprising that there was no mention of Mondragón (in either the 1977 or 1984 editions) in all 361 pages of Erasmus's worldwide search for examples, especially since Erasmus was fluent in Spanish. The Mondragón labor cooperatives are the closest in terms of type of organization to those in Ravenna, but the major difference, which was the reason Sharryn Kasmir titled her book *The Myth of Mondragón*, is the rejection of the type of class-based political and union social movements upon which the Ravenna collectives were based. The cooperatives of Mondragón were founded "as an entrepreneurial alternative to working class activism and socialism" (Kasmir 1996: 195).

In Erasmus's careful analysis of the conditions for success of communalism, he did allow for the possibility that modern-day utopian experiments could succeed. They might be successful if, as Charles Nordhoff concluded, they could be "of one mind upon some question which to them shall appear as important as to take the place of religion" (Erasmus 1984: 136). Were it not for the pro-growth versus limits-to-growth issue, Erasmus may very well have aligned himself with anarchist Josiah Warren, who wrote critically of both capitalism and communalism but continued to hope for success of the latter (Brown 2002: 155–56).

Erasmus knew about the existence of the Ravenna collectives, recognized their uniqueness, and sent me to study them. If he knew more about them, I believe he would have celebrated their success as a voluntary, "participant-player"-driven, nongovernmental, democratic, bottom-up response to limited jobs in the area—and perhaps even as a model applicable to future problems if the limits-to-growth advocates turned out to be right.

ECONOMICS DOES NOT HAVE TO BE A "DISMAL SCIENCE"

Harvard economist Stephen A. Marglin, in *The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community* (2008), questions the assumption of the self-interested individual upon which the field of economics is based. He says it is a reflection of Western culture and history and that Western economists see the world in a way that "makes community invisible, ignoring "mutual dependence." Although it has been said, by no less than socialist economist Robert Heilbroner, that "the contest between capitalism and socialism is over: capitalism has won. . . . Capitalism organizes the material affairs of humankind more satisfactorily than socialism" (1989: 98), this does not mean that socialism somehow goes against "human nature." In Marglin's 1974 article "What Do Bosses Do?," which led to him becoming one of the youngest professors ever to be granted tenure at Harvard, he contends that

“the capitalist organization of work came into existence not because of superior efficiency but in consequence of the rent-seeking [unfair advantage] activities of the capitalist” (2008: 154).

The startling thing about behaviorist, non-cooperative “conclusions” regarding the individualistic nature of human behavior is that they seem to ignore or belie most of the actual experience of the human species on this planet. A case can be made that within family, band, clan, and tribe, either by cultural design or necessity, man, woman, and child have cooperated in a nearly total sense for most of human and semi-human existence. This total cooperation was apparently based on shared value systems and on the concept that private property, as we perceive it, did not exist. The land, the bounty of hunt and collection were shared equally by all as a birthright. And the development of the capitalist “game” of competitive consumption, which Erasmus says engaged the masses and led to economic development, is separate from the game of acquiring productive property (capital). That is a game played only by a small elite (Erasmus 1984: 79). In Mondragón, Sharyn Kasmir found that “property ownership is not important to members.” She also “found a similar situation among women workers studied in Fall River, Massachusetts” (1996: 197).

To blame human nature for the supposed failure of worker management—our inability to provision the collective good, protect the environment, or achieve economic justice—is the equivalent of “taking the modern American bourgeois and placing him into a mythical ‘beginning of history’” (Blunden 2003: 12). Instead of this, we have to realize that all economies are “culturally embedded” (Granovetter 1985: 482). According to Stephen Gudeman, the very idea of *Homo economicus* (Robinson Crusoe or “Mr. Rational Chooser”) is a cultural myth that came into being to mitigate uncertainty in trade relationships. Fundamental human sentiments of “love, desire, and human sociality do not matter for they are not required in this explanation of behavior and would disrupt its predictability.” He concludes that this is nothing more than a “modernist assumption” that “asserts the presence of a timeless human core while denying its local fabrication by humans” (2006: 21–22). Gudeman is not alone. The universality of competitive rivalry is also unsupported by game theorists (Ross 2014); and the field of institutional economics now recognizes that actors are rational not only when they pursue personal self-interest but also “when they promote the interests of kin, kith, group, and firm” (Blim 2000: 29). According to John Bodley, “All people are driven by a human nature that seeks domestic security and the future welfare of one’s children,” but he clarifies this by adding that

the driving force behind global environmental change is the natural human desire to improve the material security of their households under cultural conditions of eco-

conomic scarcity produced by inequality and competitive striving. The important point is that economic scarcity and environmental problems are produced culturally by social inequality, they are not natural conditions. (2002: 2, 4)

Erasmus's rationale for unapologetically celebrating the presence of individual competitive striving was what it accomplished in the elevation of living standards in many parts of the world. To him, the universal human incentive that drives people to work harder, instead of looking for a "free ride," is obtaining goods for private consumption. Yet he is no apologist for capitalism. He is aware of the argument that "all the good things of our age have been bequeathed to us by the peoples of the past" and that "this social fund" should be "divided equally among the heirs"; however, he still seems to think that all did not contribute equally to this fund and that hard-working individuals, only a "tiny, gifted few," bequeathed most of it (Erasmus 1984: 338). This may sound similar to Ayn Rand's "makers versus takers" notion that has resurfaced in recent political debates (1957), but it is actually more of a "nature of man" idea nowhere near as extreme as that of Yoshihiro Francis Fukuyama's "last man," who essentially "ceased to be human" without unequal recognition (1992: xxii). Erasmus's "man the play animal" simply will not work hard enough to compete with private enterprises without selective incentives.

But the Mondragón labor cooperatives in Spain, for example, *are* competitive with private enterprises. They attract visitors from all over the world (and even major US companies) who are looking for solutions to worker participation in management and ownership, job creation, and economic development. The Mondragón system (with eighty-five thousand members) is larger than, but nowhere near as old as, those in Ravenna. Italy as a whole has twenty-five thousand workers' collectives (called "cooperatives" in Italy). Although there are few English-language studies of Italian labor cooperatives, they support what Mark Lutz has to say about the Mondragón system:

What is really crucially important is the simple conclusion that we now have a living and prosperous example of an alternative to the capitalist absentee-owned corporation. Economic democracy can indeed be made to work on a rather massive scale, and no capitalist corporation seems capable of really threatening its success in the marketplace. This is the lesson from Mondragón. At the same time, it must be remembered that this new structure of an enterprise is not a panacea for the solution of all economic problems. As long as we have an international and global economy with low wage producers in China and elsewhere, it is doubtful that even the best-organized and most efficient co-op can remain competitive in the long run. (1997: 1404)

Elinor Ostrom, the first woman to receive a Nobel Prize for economics in 2009, put a nail in the coffin of the free-rider meme with the simple ob-

servation that it “contradicts observations of everyday life. After all, many people vote, do not cheat on their taxes, and contribute effort to voluntary associations” (Ostrom 2000: 137–58). Ostrom acknowledges that people are tempted to avoid provisioning the public good, but based on her extensive studies of provisioning of police services and management of water supplies, fisheries, forestry, and development programs, she is convinced that group monitoring and sanctioning are effective and that “a society of free and responsible individuals . . . [who are] able to form voluntary associations will solve the social dilemmas they confront through various means of self-governance” (Ostrom, cited in Boettke 2009).

THE IDEA OF THE COMMONS

Not only are Ostrom’s findings helpful in trying to explain the success of economic cooperation in a Western capitalist country, the extent to which her findings threaten deeply ingrained ideas in our own culture illuminates and underscores the significance of the theoretical issues raised herein. For example, Walter E. Block of Loyola University is not pleased, to put it mildly, that Ostrom won a Nobel Prize in economics. He says that Ostrom’s *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* is “an evil book . . . because it contains a nasty, vicious attack on private property rights, the lynchpin of a civilized order.” He adds that “anything that weakens private property rights promotes barbarism.” Block maintains that there should be no difference between large private conglomerates and democratic labor-based groups voluntarily monitoring common resources because both are “partnerships” that exert control over resources and do not allow access to outsiders. His ultimate insult is that if Ostrom had written about partnerships, she would have been just a “middling sociologist” (Block 2011: 1, 3, 8).

Even Erasmus doesn’t approve, in theory, of the inheritance of productive resources such as land. This is because ownership of productive resources is not necessary to the competitive game of increasing personal property for consumption. He says, “I am inclined to agree with John Stuart Mill and H.G. Wells that ‘. . . non-moveable’ wealth as land and natural resources should be owned by all the members of society and should be exploited for the benefit of all by those best qualified to do so” (1984: 356).

The great Henry George (1839–97), who was a contemporary of (and almost as popular as) Mark Twain, came to the same conclusion about the inheritance of productive property for reasons based on history and morality. George is known for the idea that everyone should own the products of their labor, but that everything found in nature, most importantly land, belongs equally to all of humanity. The land theory of value he advanced so

eloquently is that “the ownership of land is the great fundamental fact which ultimately determines the social, political, and consequently the intellectual and moral conditions of a people.” “Turning back,” he said, to “wherever there is light to guide us,” we see everywhere that “all peoples have recognized the common ownership in land, and that private property in land is an usurpation, a creation of force and fraud.” As an example,

The white settlers of New Zealand found themselves unable to get from the Maoris what the latter considered a complete title to land, because, although a whole tribe might have consented to a sale, they would still claim with every new child born among them an additional payment on the ground that they had parted with only their own rights, and could not sell those of the unborn. (George 1926: bk. 7, ch. 2, n. 47)

George could very easily have found inspiration for his beliefs in the British *Magna Carta*, which led to the limiting of the powers of kings and included both “The Great Charter” and a “Charter of the Forest.” According to Noam Chomsky, early common-law scholar Sir William Blackstone found it difficult to produce the first edition because it had been “gnawed by rats.” Chomsky cites Peter Linebaugh’s *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberty and Commons for All*, which describes the current gnawing away of restraints against tyranny; Chomsky focuses on the companion “Charter of the Forest,” which

demanded protection of the commons from external power. The commons were the source of sustenance for the general population: their fuel, their food, and their construction materials, whatever was essential for life. The forest was no primitive wilderness. It had been carefully developed over generations, maintained in common, its riches available to all, and preserved for future generations—practices found today primarily in traditional societies that are under threat throughout the world. (Linebaugh, cited in Chomsky 2012)

The Charter of the Forest imposed limits to privatization. The Robin Hood myths capture the essence of its concerns (and it is not too surprising that the popular TV series of the 1950s, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, was written anonymously by Hollywood screenwriters blacklisted for leftist convictions). By the seventeenth century, however, this charter had fallen victim to the rise of the commodity economy and capitalist practice and morality (Chomsky 2012). By 1792, James Madison had enshrined into the US Constitution the idea that “[g]overnment is instituted to protect property of every sort. . .” (1792: vol. 1, ch. 16).

Anthropological literature abounds with descriptions of land tenure based on use (Herskovits 1952). It is well known that in Africa and North America the indigenous inhabitants unwittingly relinquished title to white

men who arrived with cultural concepts of property incomprehensible to native value systems. Shawnee chief Tecumseh said, “No tribe has the right to sell, even to each other, much less to strangers. . . . Sell a country! Why not sell the air, the great sea, as well as the earth? Didn’t the Great Spirit make them all for the use of his children?” (Tecumseh n.d.).

Marc Bloch recognizes that, even in Europe, there were “strict laws forbidding men to enclose their patrimony.” He says that “prohibition of enclosure, communal grazing on the stubble and compulsory crop rotation were all so strongly felt to be ‘laws’ that when the great agricultural transformations of the late eighteenth century made their suppression unavoidable, it took an entirely new code to replace them.” Bloch explains the transition from communal to individual use of the land as a result of technological innovations in agricultural production, but he still feels (while offering no proof or specifics) that the real explanation for it lies in a “thousand and one subtleties of human behavior” (1966: 44, 55). Unenclosed pastures, including “New Forest” near London, still exist and are managed cooperatively.

The truth is that the radical idea of collective ownership of land in modern market-mentality economies is neither impractical nor implausible. French mathematical economist Léon Walras studied cooperatives as a business form in 1895. He favored nationalization of land and declared that “either society destroys pauperism or pauperism will destroy society” (Battilani and Schröter 2012: 85). Even today, in Southern Italy, land was recently confiscated by the government from the Mafia and given to agricultural collectives to provide jobs in a poverty-stricken area and to establish a brand name for agricultural products that will underscore an anti-crime message (Rakopoulos 2017).

The modern cooperative movement, which “began primarily as a response to industrial capitalism . . . to provide greater security and equity to those whose lives were being shaped and reshaped by powerful economic changes,” was not just another utopian pipe dream (Battilani and Schröter 2012: 2, 5). Workers’ collectives were formed in France in 1834, and Germany’s cooperative movement “was enormous—the largest social movement in the history of Germany, at least before the 1920s” (Fairbairn 1994: 1215). Even among Anglo-Americans in the United States, there is a tradition of cooperation that dates back to the Pilgrims, who held property in common for the short term in order to realize a profit sooner (Zernike 2010). Jessica Gordon Nembhard’s *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* concludes that African Americans and other low-income people have obtained significant benefits from cooperative ownership and social entrepreneurship (2014). As will be seen, the Ravenna collectives managed to take back swamps and other land that had been illegitimately removed from the commons. Because the population of

workers was so large and the need so great, working together was the only way this could be done.

In the following chapter, readers will be introduced to the ancient Byzantine city of Ravenna and the oldest voluntary collective farms (agricultural production cooperatives) in the world. Whoever is expecting to find an example of utopia may be disappointed. As in the case of communes described by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, “any assessment of such communities . . . depends on what the observer chooses to observe—the ‘failures’ or the ‘successes.’” The skeptics who find “perfection” stifling will not have that to worry about. According to Kanter, “the ‘perfection’ of utopia means an end to change and struggle. Once utopia is attained, one has nothing more for which to strive” (1972: 217).