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THE CATALAN INTERGRAL COOPERATIVE

Designing a new society through cooperation,
self-management, open source design and direct democracy

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The Catalan Integral Cooperative

Every so often, good ideas need refreshing, renewing, reinterpreting for contemporary times. This keeps them relevant, alive and useful. This update of my 2015 account is based mostly on the report by Dafermos, 2017.

The Catalan Integral Cooperative is a remarkable and inspiring movement in Spain that now involves hundreds of people in what I regard as an example of The Simpler Way transition strategy. The Simpler Way is about going underneath the conventional economy to build our own new, collective economy to meet community needs. It is about turning our backs on and deliberately undermining and eventually replacing both the capitalist system and control by the state.

The context

It is now abundantly clear that a just and sustainable world cannot be achieved unless consumer-capitalist society is scrapped. It involves levels of resource use and environmental impact that are already grossly unsustainable, yet growth is the supreme goal.

The form the alternative must take is not difficult to imagine. (For the detail see *TSW: Summary Case*.) The essential concept must be mostly small, highly self-sufficient and self-governing communities in which we can live frugally but well, putting local resources directly into producing to meet local needs and without allowing market forces, the profit motive or the global economy to determine what happens.

Unfortunately, even many green and left people do not grasp the magnitude of the De-growth that is required. We will probably have to go down to around 10% of the present rich world per capita levels of resource use. This can only be done in the kind of settlements and systems we refer to as The Simpler Way. Most of the alarming global problems now threatening our survival, especially ecological damage, resource depletion, conflict over resources and markets and deteriorating social cohesion, cannot be solved unless we achieve a global transition to a general settlement pattern of this kind.

For some time the ecovillage and Transition Towns movements have been developing elements of the alternative we need to build, and there are impressive and radically alternative development initiatives in the Third World, notably the Zapatistas. But the Catalan Integral Cooperative provides us with an inspiring demonstration of what can be done and what we need to take up.

The CIC response

Although only begun in 2010 the cooperative now involves many hundreds of people and many productive ventures, 400 of them involving growing or making things. Although there are far more things going on than those within the CIC its annual budget is now \$480,00 (more on the scale later.)

...the orientation differs fundamentally from the typical socialist assumption that the state has to run things.

It is not just about enabling people to collectively provide many things for themselves underneath and despite the market system. It is explicitly, deliberately, about the long term goal of replacing both capitalism and control by the state. These people have not waited for the government to save them, they are taking control over their own fate, setting up their own productive arrangements, food supply systems, warehouses and shops, basic income schemes, information and education functions, legal and tax advice, technical R&D and even an investment bank.

Best of all is the collectivist world view and spirit, the determination to prevent the market and profit from driving the economy, and to establish cooperative arrangements that benefit all people and not just co-op members. The explicit intention is to develop systems which in time will “ ... overcome the state and the capitalist system.” In other words the orientation differs fundamentally from the typical socialist assumption that the state has to run things.

We are in an era in which the conventional economy will increasingly fail to provide for people. What we urgently need are examples where ‘ordinary’ people, not officials or governments, just start getting together to set up the arrangements that gear the productive capacity they have around them to meeting their collective needs. The remarkable CIC shows that people everywhere could do this, especially in the many regions neoliberalism has condemned to poverty, stagnation and austerity.

Principles and practices

This is not a wish list of future goals or ideals. It is mostly a list of the aims, values and guiding practices that have already been implemented.

- a focus on social justice, equity, diversity, mutual support, cooperation, inclusion and solidarity for the common good
- social transformation here and now, informed by utopianism
- a focus on transformation of the whole of society, not just on securing benefits for members of the participating cooperatives
- applying resources directly to meeting the needs of people in the region, as distinct from enabling prosperity for individuals or co-op members or stimulating economic growth

- people contribute according to their capacity to do so
- getting rid of materialism; aiming at satisfaction with non-material living standards
- sufficiency, not seeking accumulation as an end
- and, above all, getting rid of capitalism.

Dafermos (2017) says, *“The main objective of the CIC is nothing less than to build an alternative economy in Catalonia capable of satisfying the needs of the local community more effectively than the existing system, thereby creating the conditions for the transition to a post-capitalist mode of organisation of social and economic life.”*

The long term objective is *“ ... to be an organisational platform for the development of a self-sufficient economy that is autonomous from the state and the capitalist market.”*

The CIC is not a central agency running everything. It is an umbrella organisation facilitating, supporting and advising on the activities of many and varied cooperatives. It is not like typical cooperatives wherein members focus on a single mutual interest and work only for the benefit of members.

It is important to recognise the significance of the concept ‘integral’. The word refers to the concern with *“ ... the radical transformation of all facets of social and economic life.”*

Aims and practices of the Catalan Integral Cooperative

Social justice, equity, diversity, mutual support, cooperation, inclusion and solidarity for the common good.

Social transformation.

Transformation of the whole of society.

Applying resources directly to meeting the needs of people in the region.

Contribution contribute according to individual capacity.

Getting rid of materialism.

Sufficiency, not seeking accumulation as an end.

Replacing capitalism.

That is, they are out to eventually bring about comprehensive social revolution. Simpler Way thinking about settlement design emphasises integration, ie. the way interconnections between functions that small scale makes possible enables synergism and huge reductions in resource use. For instance, backyard and cooperative poultry production enables wastes to go straight to gardens, imperfect fruit to be used, chickens to clean up garden beds and elimination of almost all energy intensive inputs such as fertiliser, trucking and supermarketing.

The CIC is establishing projects which benefit all people in the region whether or not they are members of the CIC or associated cooperatives. *“Unlike most cooperatives, the CIC develops structures and tools which are not reserved just for its members, but are accessible to everyone.”*

For instance non-members can use the arrangements that have been set up for providing legal advice, they can use the technologies developed and they can use the new local currency. There are about six hundred people who are not in cooperatives but are self-employed and are able to use the services the CIC has created. Similarly the machines and agricultural tools developed for small scale producers are “...freely reproducible”, ie. their design information is available to all free, giving anyone the ability to build them on their own and customise them according to their needs.

The concern is to prevent goods being treated as commodities produced to make a profit, but to see them as things that are produced to meet needs. “... basic needs like food and health care are not commodities but social goods everyone has access to.”

To be part of the CIC cooperative, projects need to practise consensus decision making and to follow certain basic principles including transparency and sustainability. Once the assembly embraces a new project it enjoys legal and other provisions and its income is managed through the CIC accounting office. A portion goes toward funding the shared infrastructure.

Building an alternative through self-management

The huge significance of all this could be easily overlooked. In a world where capital, profit and market forces dump large numbers into exclusion and poverty, and governments will not deal properly with the resulting problems, these people have decided to do the job themselves. They are literally building an alternative society, not just organising the provision of basic goods and services, but moving into providing free public services like health and transport.

Note again the noble and radically subversive world view and values here. People are working to meet the needs of their community, driven not by self-interest or profit but by the desire to build good social systems. This ridicules the dominant capitalist ideology that is conventional economic theory.

About scale

Many people in different groups participate in varying degrees. There are about six hundred self-employed members, mostly independent professionals and small producers, who use the legal and economic services made available by the cooperative, such as insurance at less than the normal rate in Spain.

There are more than 2,500 who use the LETS system (Local Exchange and Trading System, a form of cashless community exchange). Many are involved in the Catalan Supply Center (CAC), which is the CIC committee coordinating the transportation and delivery of food and other items from the producers to the 'pantries', ie. distribution points. In addition there are several co-ops associated with the CIC.

The headquarters of the CIC is their 1400 square metre building which includes space for a library and for rent. The 'eco-network' has 2634 members. The scale and numbers are also indicated by the food distribution system described below.

The economics

The project involves creating an economic system which contradicts and rejects the mainstream economy. It is an economy that is not driven by profit, self interest or what will maximise the wealth of those with capital to invest. There is social control over their economy, that is, there are collective decisions and planning in order to set up systems to meet community needs. People work to build and run good systems, not to get rich.

Non-monetary forms of exchange are encouraged, including free goods and services, barter, direct connections between producers and consumers and mutual giving. The CIC regulates the estimation of fair prices and informs producers of consumer needs.

There is a LETS-type currency, the ECO, which cannot be converted into Euros and cannot be invested or yield interest. About 2600 people have accounts. Anyone can see the balance in another's account.

"The currency is not just a medium of exchange. It's a measure of the CIC's independence from capitalism."

There is a Social Currency Monitoring Commission whose job it is to contact members not making many transactions and to help them figure out how they can meet more of their needs using the currency."

The CIC's financial operations do not involve any interest payments. No interest is paid on loans made by the cooperative. In this radically subversive economy finance is about enabling the creation of socially-necessary production, not providing lucrative profits to the rich few who have capital to lend. (The US finance industry was recently making about 40% of all corporate income.)

They have in effect their own investment bank. The committee entitled Cooperative of Social and Network Self-financing deals with savings, donations and project funding in order to “... finance self-managed individual or collective projects aiming at the common good”. It has 155 members. Contributions to this agency earn no interest, so “... it is truly remarkable that the total amount of deposits made in the last four years exceeds €250.000.”

It is especially noteworthy that emphasis is put on the sustainability of activities.

Permaculture, localism, and de-growth

National and global systems are avoided as much as possible and local arrangements are set up.

As advocates of the Simpler Way emphasise, unless rich world per capita levels of resource use can be cut enormously, sustainability cannot be achieved. This requires local economies and happy acceptance of frugal lifestyles. Frugality is an explicit goal of the CIC.

The importance of the commons

The creation of commons is of central importance. There is “*collective ownership of resources to generate common goods.*”

That is, they seek to develop common properties for the benefit of whole communities. Some lands have been purchased by cooperatives and some donated by individuals.

Included in the category of commons are non-material assets such as the LETS system, the software for accounting purposes and other services made available. Each of these commons is managed by a committee. “*We promote forms of communal property and of cooperative property as formulas that ... enhance ... self-management and self-organisation...*”

One participant said, “*I cultivate a garden and I hardly buy any food in euros: I acquire everything I need in the eco-network and through the CIC with the ecos I earn by selling my vegetables.*”

Fairs and market days are organised. “*Going to the markets and the fairs is like recreation, it’s meeting up with friends and family in a spiritual sense.*”

Note again the anti-capitalist element that loans are extended to assist the establishment of new ventures enabling people to begin producing, but no interest is charged. (Kennedy, 1995, estimated that in the normal economy interest charges make up 40% of all prices paid.)

Another radical element is the refusal to regard things like food as commodities to be produced and sold to make a profit. In seeing the point of economics as producing to meet needs they are contradicting a central taken-for-granted premise of the conventional mentality.

Income

The CIC has two main expenses:

- the basic income paid to the members of its committees
- the funding it provides for projects.

It pays half of these expenses with fees levied on the 600 member individuals, firms and co-ops (eg. E25/month from the self-employed businesses). Most of the remaining 50% of income comes from tax refunds the CIC's legal people are able to engineer. In addition, donations are received.

Distribution outlets

Many goods are distributed through the Catalan Supply Centre, one of the most active CIC committees.

The Centre is a network for the transportation and delivery of the products of many small producers across the entire Catalonia region. These are brought to *"...the self-managed pantries that the CIC has set up all over Catalonia – twenty of them ... Each one of them is run autonomously by a local consumer group that wishes to have access to local products as well as products made (by producers associated with the CIC) in other parts of Catalonia. This system cuts out middlemen, reducing costs. The CIC currently lists more than a thousand products. The Supply Centre provides the markets throughout the region with about 4500 pounds of goods each month, most of which come from the cooperative's farmers and producers."*

"Of all the initiatives, by far the most successful is the one focused on food."

Again, note the scale of operations.

The technology R&D committee

There is a technology committee responsible for the development of tools and machines adapted to the needs of member producers. They often find that devices on sale are not appropriate for the needs of small scale or commons-oriented projects. They develop machines mostly for agriculture and small firms.

These devices *"...exemplify the principles of open design, appropriate technology and the integral revolution – geared to the needs of small cooperative projects."*

This committee also organizes training workshops to share knowledge. The agency occupies a 4000 square metre site and no longer needs financial assistance from the CIC.

Example projects

Dafermos sketches several of the settlements and projects whereby people are coming together to set up arrangements to enable communities to apply their productive capacities to providing a wide range of things for each other.

For instance, the Calafou village of twenty-two people has a housing cooperative managing twenty-seven small houses. Tenants pay €175 per month for each house. The aim is to become “... a collectivist model for living and organizing the productive activities of a small self managed community.” It has “... a multitude of productive activities and community infrastructures, including a carpentry, a mechanical workshop, a botanical garden, a community kitchen, a biolab, a hacklab, a soap production lab, a professional music studio, a guest-house for visitors, a social centre ..., as well as a plethora of other productive projects.”

There is a general assembly each Sunday, operating on the consensus principle.

Members of the Aurea Social cooperative can choose to live in an affiliated block of apartments in Barcelona or at a farming commune with teepees, yurts and horses, where residents organise themselves into ‘families’.

Macus is a group occupying a 600 square metre space hosting a close-knit group of modern as well as traditional craft producers of wooden furniture, clothes and herbal medicine, photography, sculpture and digital music, as well as fixing bicycles and repairing home electronics.

A better type of government

Their form of government is a direct deliberative, participatory democracy involving decentralisation, self-management, voluntary committees, town assemblies... and no bureaucracy and no top-down ruling or domination.

Note that ‘direct’ means more than ‘participatory’. All individual members meet to make or ratify the decisions. *“Each cooperative project, working commission, eco-network or local group makes its own decisions.”*

Committees and fortnightly general assemblies work out mutually agreed solutions. Decisions are not handed down by executives, CEOs or political parties.

In all meetings the goal is consensus decision making; there is no voting.

“In case of a predicament, the proposal is reformulated until the consensus is reached, thus eliminating the minorities and the majorities. All previous agreements are revocable... the quality of the agreements is a great success and there hasn’t been any major decision-making conflict in all these years.”

All issues are handled at the lowest level possible, as distinct from being taken by higher or central agencies. This is the basic anarchist principle of subsidiarity.

There are about a dozen main committees, including Reception to handle inquiries from groups wishing to join, an Economic Management Committee, a Legal Committee, an IT Committee and one managing Common Spaces.

The Productive Projects Committee facilitates self-employment and the exchange of knowledge and skills and helps job seekers to match their skills to jobs using an online directory of self-managed and cooperative projects in Catalonia. That is, they have set up their own employment agency independent of the state, and its focus is on helping people to find opportunities to get into socially useful productive activity.

“CIC committee members receive a kind of salary from the cooperative, known as ‘basic income’, which has the purpose of freeing them from having to work somewhere else, thus allowing them to commit themselves full-time to their work at the CIC.”

Creating public services

No aspect is more remarkable than the concern to set up public services. The intention is *“...to displace the centrally-managed state apparatus of public services with a truly cooperative model for organising the provision of social goods such as health, food, education, energy, housing and transport.”*

The legal services, the technology contribution and the currency are also in this category. Again, these are projects that are not designed by or for the members of specific cooperatives. They are services for the benefit of people in general.

One of these service operations, organised by the Productive Projects Committee, is the employment facilitation agency mentioned above. It helps people to become *“self-employed, and to share knowledge and skills enabling people to increase their earning capacity.”*

It makes it possible for *“... job seekers to match their skills to jobs posted by productive projects associated with the CIC...”*

There is an online directory of self-managed and cooperative projects in Catalonia in which people can function using the ECO currency. The committee assists people who are unemployed, without many skills and likely to be poor to find some socially useful activity they can take up in order to earn an income. *“...anyone has some abilities that they can offer to people and with that acquire what they need.”*

The activities of the above mentioned supply centre constitute another public service. It enables small producers to sell their produce and many to buy what they need without having to earn ‘normal’ money.

This public service providing realm is only developing slowly, which Dafermos thinks is because Spain’s service sector is relatively satisfactory.

Problems, questions, doubts?

It is important to look for problems and faults in alternative initiatives because we urgently need to clarify what the best options are.

Although I have little information apart from the Dafermos report, I am not aware of any serious problems or criticisms that might detract from its potential. However, following are some of the concerns I have come across.

Does the underlying 'theory of transition lack depth?

Does the rationale derive from a comprehensive global analysis of the many alarming and terminal problems consumer-capitalism is generating, (including environmental destruction, Third World poverty, resource wars...) and is the CIC seen as the solution to them all?

I firmly believe it is the beginning of the solution. The Simpler Way analysis of our situation includes detailed argument on the global scene.

...how precisely are your community gardens and clothing swaps going to lead to us taking state power and eliminating the capitalist class?

Does the CIC vision extend far enough beyond setting up coops?

This involves the question of long term strategy for getting rid of capitalism. It is a question is studiously ignored by the Transition Towns movement, at least my attempts to get them to deal with it have failed. Their strategy is just do something, anything alternative in your town and eventually it will all add up to the existence of a beautiful, sustainable and just world.

The red left rightly scathes at this. They want to know how precisely are your community gardens and clothing swaps going to lead to us taking state power and eliminating the capitalist class?

Simpler Way analysis has an answer to this question, but whether it is satisfactory is another issue. It could be that CIC people also have an answer but if so it's important that they should make it clear to us.

The need for a manual

One would hope that we can all soon benefit from a document designed to assist us to set up similar projects, especially suggesting mistakes to avoid.

Some people believe the CIC was established using funds acquired via questionable financial activities. I am not able to pronounce on this but I think it is irrelevant. What I want to focus on is the fact that the CIC now seems to be an extremely effective

movement and model, one that I think could be followed with little or no funds. I can see no reason why it cannot thrive in the wreckage neoliberalism has wrought.

The role of alternative currency

There is an issue that I think requires careful thought. That is the role and nature of alternative currencies.

The CIC uses a LETS system and this seems to me to be the ideal. However, much effort is going into establishing another system — Faircoin — which is intended to enable new alternative economies.

I am uneasy about this. It seems complex, costly to set up, a substitution currency requiring normal money to purchase and not easily capable of enabling the amount of economic activity that would occur in a whole economy. It seems to be geared to longer distance trade and in the coming world of intense scarcity and localism we won't need much of that. It seems similar to Bitcoin in being a commodity open to speculative investment and price rises. But a sacred principle on the left is that money, labour and land should not be commodities. Above all, it seems to me to be unnecessary. A kind of LETS will do.

I am uneasy about any focus on currency. I would rather see most attention being given to getting people to understand the goals and to join the co-ops.

It is not clear to me the extent to which the success of the CIC has been due to an initial access to capital. It is said to be self funding now. What we want are strategies that require little or no money to set up. I believe these are available.

Spreading the revolution

Considerable effort is being put into spreading the model.

"The members give talks about eco-networks, the cooperative and social currency in various parts of the country. As a result there are seeds of integrated cooperatives in Basque Country, Galicia, Madrid and other regions of Spain and France."

In 2017 the Athens Integral Cooperative made a start.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the significance of the CIC achievement. The scale of its activities and the good that is being done are now huge. But what is most remarkable is its subversive focus and power, and potential. To repeat, the CIC is *"...an activism for the construction of alternatives to capitalism."*

In my view it is one of the leading initiatives in a movement that constitutes by far the greatest threat that capitalism has ever confronted. Along with the Zapatistas, the Kurdish Democratic Confederalism, the Senegalese eco-villages and many others it is demonstrating that there is an alternative way, that it can be built by ordinary people, quickly and without overt conflict or violence (at least not yet).

It is shredding the taken-for-granted TINA legitimacy and inevitability of allowing capital, market forces and profit to determine what happens to us.

Above all, it is showing that ordinary people can and must come together to collectively take control of their own economic and political situation without having to depend on capital or the state.

Implications for Third World development

Consider the implications for Third World development.

The conventional view takes it for granted that development can only mean investment of capital to crank up more business activity, more production for sale into the global economy in order to earn money to enable purchasing from it, and to create jobs.

It is taken for granted that profit and the market must drive the process, meaning that it enriches the already rich and the rest must wait for trickle down while their national resources are shipped out to rich world supermarkets. Thus about four billion are very poor and will remain so for a long time, yet the CIC is showing how quickly and easily they could implement a totally different model of development, a different path to different goals without approval or assistance from existing governments. Obviously, even a little state assistance would make a huge difference to what could be done. In Senegal, thousands of villages are moving in the eco-village direction, assisted by the government. (St Onge, 2015.)

Why Catalonia?

It is not surprising that the CIC has originated in the Catalan region. That's one of the places where the Spanish anarchists of the 1930's established an entire economy on worker-cooperative lines. In the Barcelona region up to a million people in voluntary citizens committees ran factories, transport systems, hospitals, health clinics etc, strenuously rejecting any role for paid bureaucrats or politicians. The CIC seems to be a text book example of anarchism, at least the variety I'm in favour of.

Consider again the themes above:

- citizens coming together to turn their backs on the market system, the capitalist class and central government and on any form of top-down rule
- citizens resolving to govern themselves and setting up arrangements for collective benefit using thoroughly direct and participatory processes that do not involve bureaucrats or politicians of superior authorities
- striving for consensus decisions, subsidiarity and spontaneity, thereby prefiguring ways they want to become the norm in the new society.

For decades, this is precisely what The Simper Way vision has been about. It is the only way the required revolution can come about.

Many benefits

Consider the built-in but easily overlooked wisdom, the inclusiveness and empowerment of all and the prioritising of arrangements that attend to the needs of all and which generate community morale, public spirit, enthusiasm and willingness to contribute. Thus, synergism is increased. For instance, giving is appreciated and generates further generosity. Motivation is positive: doing good things like joining a working bee or giving away surpluses is enjoyable, not a burdensome duty. Contrast this with present competitive, individualistic, winner-take-all society which often forces us into situations that do not bring out the best in us.

The power to release resources and spiritual energy is also easily overlooked. My study of an outer Sydney dormitory suburb (*TSW: Remaking Settlements*) found that by reorganising space and use of time, the suburb might be able to produce a high proportion of its own food and other needs while dramatically reducing resource and environmental impacts. Consider the fact that if people in the suburb gave only two hours a week to community working bees rather than watching trivia on a screen, the equivalent input of 150 full time council workers would be going into community gardens etc. And they would be more happy, conscientious and productive workers than council employees. Community familiarity and solidarity would be generated.

And then there are the consequences for the personal development of citizens. Murray Bookchin pointed out the profound educational benefits the Ancient Greeks saw when every individual had the responsibility of participating directly in the process of government. This means that there is no government up there to do it for us and we had better take responsibility for thinking carefully, discussing ideas, considering the good of all, being well informed, or we might make the wrong decisions and have to live with the consequences.

Good citizens have the sense of owning their communities, of knowing that they share control over what's going on and willingly sharing responsibility for making things work well.

If we take a long historical perspective it is evident that accepting being governed and ruled over represents an immature stage of political development. We will not have grown up until we all take part in governing ourselves in direct and participatory ways.

Also easily overlooked is the significance of empowerment. Ivan Illich stressed the passivity and lack of responsibility characteristic of consumer society. Your role is to obey the rules set by others. If something goes wrong it's up to some official or professional to fix it.

As I see it, the crucial turning point in the Transition Towns process is the shift from being a passive acceptor of the system designed and run by unseen others, to seeing it as your system. If its not working well it's a problem you worry about and want to do something about. Good citizens have the sense of owning their communities, of knowing that they share control over what's going on and willingly sharing responsibility for making things work well. In other words they feel empowered. *"This is this my town. I'm proud of it. If there's a problem that's my/our problem, let's get at it."* This seems to be a strongly held orientation among CIC participants.

...it is clear that the alternative society must be extremely localised, not centralised, that it cannot be established or run by the state, and that it can only work satisfactorily if it is run by communities via participatory means.

All this clarifies the distinction between eco-socialist and eco-anarchist perspectives. Both recognise the need to transcend capitalism but the former assumes the transition must come through the taking of state power and then leadership by the state. But fundamental to Simpler Way analysis is the fact that when the realities of limits and scarcity are grasped it is clear that the alternative society must be extremely localised, not centralised, that it cannot be established or run by the state, and that it can only work satisfactorily if it is run by communities via participatory means. Although there will always be a role for some central agencies it will be a relatively minor one as most of the decisions and administration will (have to) be handled down at the small community level. Note again that the CIC emphatically rejects the state as a means for achieving or running the new society.

The Simpler Way vision of a workable and attractive alternative society (See *TSW: The Alternative*) is sometimes criticised as unachievable because it is unrealistically utopian. The existence of the CIC demolishes that criticism. Its significance cannot be exaggerated. It and related movements are showing that the path that has to be taken if we are to get to a sustainable and just world can easily be taken.

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