Infrastructure and Agency:
Rural Electric Cooperatives and the Fight for Economic Democracy in the United States

by

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ABSTRACT

How do cooperative businesses influence economic and community development in practice?

Recent calls for a “new economy” argue that co-ops and other kinds of distributed ownership should be capable of transforming neoliberal market relations into place-based, community-centered, and non-extractive modes of production and exchange. In direct contrast to these hopes about cooperatives, my dissertation on electric cooperatives in the United States shows that there can be little, if any, contradiction between community ownership and neoliberal market-based business practices. Therefore, the history of electric co-ops suggests that co-op advocates should exercise caution in their enthusiasm.

My dissertation is a combined historical and qualitative study of a nation-wide network of electric cooperatives that have existed in the United States for nearly 80 years. Through historical research on the conception, funding, and implementation of these cooperatives, I explore how they were designed originally in service of rural industrial development and national growth as a solution to crisis during the precarious years of the Great Depression. Questioning how this orientation restricted these co-ops’ abilities to serve as community-focused institutions, I argue that the 1930s was a tipping point in American history when federal investment in rural electrification could have constructed a vast network of local democratic institutions, but didn’t.

However, in the interest of understanding how electric co-ops can yet be a transformative force for communities, I also conducted case studies of three co-ops where members recently pushed for changes in leadership and agenda. In my case study research, I examine how electric co-ops can in fact be a powerful venue for local democracy and community transformation; for this potential to be realized, though, co-op members must re-envision the co-op not as a single-issue business, but as a community institution in a broader political struggle. In studying these movements, my dissertation highlights the importance of focusing on the quality of democratic practice in co-ops, and ultimately asks whether and under what conditions the electric co-op model is capable of becoming a transformative economic influence.

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Acknowledgments

This doctoral dissertation is a reflection of the strength of my community as well as the generosity of the electric cooperative network.

First, I want to thank my advisor, Phil Thompson, for everything. I wish I had started working with Phil years before I did. I remember being deeply inspired by him my first year as a doctoral student, when he came to talk at an Environmental Policy and Planning lunch seminar; his approach to the frictions between environmental policies and social equity went straight to the heart of the questions that had brought me to DUSP. For a long time, though, my path of study took me in different directions. It was not until I first started talking about electric co-ops, and a number of people – particularly Deborah Kobes and Lily Song – kept telling me “you really should talk to Phil,” that I finally talked to Phil, to the immeasurable benefit of my development as a scholar. His intellectual guidance and insights are on every page of this dissertation, and, for his unwavering support and kindness during the unexpected things that happen over the many years of a doctoral program, I can never thank him enough.

My other committee members, Sam Bass Warner and Xav de Souza Briggs, have taught me not just how to be a scholar, but how to be a teacher. Working on classes with the two of them was one of the highlights of my graduate career and also where I learned about planning research as a profession, not just as a field of study.

Sam also knows that a successful dissertation requires not just intellectual but also more basic kinds of nourishment. His particular combination of critical feedback, whimsical emails, and meetings over tea and cookies has brought joy and delight to my dissertation process. I hope to continue to be the recipient of all three for many years to come.

Xav is one of those rare mentors who inspires you to work smarter and raise your personal standards without being aware that you are doing so until, in retrospect, you realize how much you have accomplished. Xav keeps me honest when I get too stuck in details or trail off into rhetoric, and he is an enduring role model for how to make scholarship do more. His commitment to research being useful and to writing in a way that draws in a wider audience is a constant and necessary challenge to me.

Many of my friends, family, and colleagues have also read or discussed parts of this dissertation and offered insightful feedback. I particularly want to thank Professors Lillian Hoddeson, Andre Sorensen, Karen Polenske, and Larry Vale; fellow grad students Lily Pollans, Todd Schenk, Leah Stokes, Atul Pokharel, and Chris Jones; and my community outside of DUSP, who brought valuable interdisciplinary perspectives to my dissertation work, including Jon Kelner, Odile and Britt Harter, Lisa Messeri, E. Ray Gard, Andrea Murray, Melissa Haefner, and Robert Bao. Sophie Klein, Andrew and Rachel McDonnell, Greg and Diana Pfeil, Rebecca Woods, Shari Dwoskin, and Rachel Leow reminded me that
there are things in life other than dissertations. My family gave me their enduring love and support, as well as their patience with trips home that were taken over by writing and occasionally by fieldwork after I realized there were electric co-ops near Seattle.

Despite my best efforts, the kind of participatory qualitative research I conducted for this study cannot help but be extractive. The co-op members, employees, and advocates I interviewed through this research freely gave their time and thoughts to me. In many cases, they welcomed me into their homes, which made my research trips full of warmth, great conversations, and, on one memorable evening, a wonderful banjo and guitar concert. The work these people do in their communities is, in my opinion, American culture at its best, and I enjoyed every minute of learning about it.

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I know without a doubt that I would not have finished this dissertation when I did without my partner-in-crime in the SPURS Program, Ofer Lerner. His incredibly generous feedback on my writing, his enthusiasm for my project, and his friendship over the last few months of my dissertation has been nothing short of a blessing.

Michael Baym has read parts of this dissertation in all of its stages, sat patiently through multiple iterations of presentations, made me dinner during countless late nights of writing, and pushed me when I most needed it. I am so lucky to have a partner who shares not only my professional goals – and therefore understands the rhythm and challenges of academic work – but also so many of the same values about what else makes a meaningful life. Words in an acknowledgement section will never begin to capture how much my triumphs are due to the life we have built together.

Finally, while she did not see the completion of my dissertation, Professor Alice Amsden was its first advocate as my advisor at a pivotal time in my graduate career. This project would not have happened without Alice’s guidance and enthusiasm. When I could not yet articulate why my project was important, Alice taught me to keep pushing and to trust my instincts as a scholar. Alice had this way of making doubts seem foolish because her faith in her students was absolute; with this platform of trust, she freed us to invite vigorous debate about our scholarship. I know she would have had several incendiary things to say at my defense, and I mourn that conversation that should have been. So many times while I was finishing writing, I wished I could talk to Alice about my work. I am sure I will continue to do so for the rest of my career. This dissertation is in memory of and with immense gratitude to Alice.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ......................................................... 5

List of Tables .......................................................... 9

List of Figures .......................................................... 10

Chapter 1: Introduction – Histories of Power and power ........... 11
   The Promise and Disappointment of Electric Cooperatives ....... 18
   Electric Co-op Research and Theory ............................ 23
   The Continually Reinvented Solution of Economic Democracy ....... 30
   A More Critical Approach ........................................ 35
   A Specific History of American Capitalism .................... 39
   Research Questions ................................................... 44
   Research Design ...................................................... 45
      Combining Historical and Qualitative Research .............. 45
      Data Collection ................................................... 46
   Methodology .......................................................... 48
      An Infrastructure Approach .................................... 51
      Critical Theory and Practice .................................. 55
      Data Analysis ..................................................... 56
   Chapter Summary .................................................... 57

Chapter 2: Theoretical Background – Economic Democracy at the Nexus of American Democracy and Capitalism ............. 65
   Democratic Possibilities and Constraints ....................... 65
   The Environment, Capitalism, and Democracy ................. 71
   Local Democracy in Practice ..................................... 73
   Different Democracies, Different Capitalisms, Various Combinations ....... 77
   Labor Revisited ...................................................... 80
   In Defense of Boring Hard Work in Community Cooperatives ....... 83

Chapter 3: A Landscape of Indebtedness: American National Development Ideologies and Rural Electrification in the 1930s ............. 85
   Neither Public nor Private Power: Electric Cooperatives as Political Compromise .......... 85
   Droughts, Floods, and Farmland ................................ 88
   A Reluctant Move towards Cooperatives ....................... 90
   “For the Lowest Cost to the Greatest Number” versus Electricity for All .......... 95
   Democratic Ownership is Not Democratic Control ............ 109
   A Landscape of Indebtedness .................................... 120
   Conclusion: Electric Co-ops and Economic Democracy .......... 134

Chapter 4: Reclaiming Democracy in Vermont, Colorado, and Kentucky .......... 137
   Introduction: A Challenge to the REA Legacy .................. 137
   Case Studies Overview ............................................. 138
   Case 1: Washington Electric Co-op (East Montpelier, Vermont) .......... 141
      Building Momentum: The Committee for an Effective Co-op ....... 141
      “For Heaven’s Sakes, Keep Your Co-operative Operating Like a Cooperative Should”: The 1974 Annual Meeting .......... 148
      A Decade of Contested Leadership ............................ 153
      Environmental Values and Local Democracy ................ 163
Case II: Holy Cross Energy (Glenwood Springs, Colorado) 171
   Building Momentum: Carbon Footprints and Co-op Boards 171
   "What a Gamble!": The Cooperative Origins of Commercial Skiing in Western Colorado 178
   Environmental Values and Local Democracy 184
Case III: Eastern Kentucky Power Cooperative and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth 200
   Building Momentum: A Long History of Energy Activism 200
   Getting Involved, Coming Together 210
   If You Can’t Join ‘em: New Strategies and New Organizations 216
   Ongoing Efforts: Shelby Energy’s First Contested Election 221
   Signs of Change in the South Kentucky RECC 229
   Environmental Values and Local Democracy 230
Discussion: Power to the People? 236
   Explaining Enduring Low Participation 241
   From Technobureaucracies to Technodemocracies 246
   What Kind of Democracy? 249
   Electricity Provider or Community Service Organization? 251
Chapter 5: Conclusion: Oppositional Energy and Civil Economics 259
   Energy as Commodity, Energy as Infrastructure 259
   Moving from Alternative Energy to Oppositional Energy 260
   Co-ops as Institutions of Civil Economics and Social Transformation 263
Bibliography 267
## List of Tables

1.1 Cooperative Principles of the International Cooperative Alliance  
3.1 EHFA Payment Plan for Standard Appliances, c. 1935  
3.2 Saturation of Electric Appliances and Plumbing Facilities on REA Projects, 1939  
5.1 Alternative Energy and Oppositional Energy
## List of Figures

3.1 Electric Farming Pays the Farm, the Nation, and the Co-op, c. 1940 95
3.2 Status of REA Financed Projects as of December 31, 1936 96
3.3 A Co-op Enthusiast Talks to his Neighbor about the REA, c. late 1930s 97
3.4 Land Fit for Agriculture in Montana, c. 1937 101
3.5 Land Fit for Agriculture in Maine, 1936 102
3.6 Submarginal Living in Penobscot County, Maine, 1936 104
3.7 Tenant Customers, 1938 105
3.8 Electricity for All When Neighbors Cooperate, c. 1940 106
3.9 Members Pitch in to Build Lines, late 1930s 109
3.10 "You're slipping?", 1938 111
3.11 Installing a New Electric Range 114
3.12 An REA Electric Kitchen Cooking Demonstration, c. 1940 119
3.13 Electric Savings on the Farm, c. 1939 120
3.14 The All-Electric Lifestyle, 1953 132

4.1 WEC's *Times-Argus* Ad and COFEC's *Co-op Transformer*, 1974 147
4.2 A Long Line to Vote, 1974 152
4.3 Exercising Democratic Rights at the Annual Meeting, 1974 153
4.4 HCE Campaign Flyers, 2011 175
4.5 Downtown Aspen in 1948 180
4.6 Vail Under Construction, 1962 182
4.7 Annual Meeting at the New Ski Village, 1964 183
4.8 New Construction Practices What HCE Preaches 186
4.9 Save Snow, 2009 192
4.10 Commitment to the Environment 196
4.11 Coal Keeps the Lights On in Kentucky 204
4.12 EKPC Service Area, 2008 205
4.13 The New Power Campaign on Multiple Fronts, c. 2010 210
4.14 Tona Barkley's Campaign Message, 2010 214
4.15 A Place at a Co-constructed Table, 2011 218
4.16 The DSM&RE Collaborative Economics and Rates Work Group, 2011-2012 219
4.17 Community Outreach, Shelby Energy Member Advisory Committee, 2012 224
4.18 Sonia McElroy at the Shelby Energy Annual Meeting, 2012 229
4.19 Pole-raising Celebrations Across America, c. 1936 237
4.20 Participation Trends in Three Electric Co-ops, 1940-2013 239
4.21 Meeting Attendance Then and Now 243
4.22 Democratic Externalities of the All-Electric Lifestyle, 1976 249
Chapter 1: Introduction – Histories of Power and power

We call electricity “power” with good reason. Throughout history, access to electricity and other sources of mechanical work has dramatically shaped societies, enabled great – in some cases criminal – consolidation of economic profits, and steered politics at the highest levels.

Historically, electricity changed where people thought about living and the possibilities for what kinds of lives could be lived in those areas – not just in terms of individual quality of life, but extending also to economic development, political engagement, social equality, and the ownership of resources. Writing about the politics of energy ownership rights stirred up by massive federal hydroelectric projects on the Columbia River in the 1930s, environmental historian Richard White muses, for example, on how electrification developed an aura of social progress well beyond its technological goals from the beginning:

...people invested admirable hope in these dams. They fought for public control over the energy the dams produced because public power would mean more democratic control over land and resources, more fruitful lives, more pleasant work, and greater returns on labor. They foresaw more intimate human contacts with the natural world and with each other, greater independence and more cohesive communities, an end to crowding, pollution, and waste.1

Perhaps because of these great expectations for social as well as electrical empowerment, political struggles around the ownership and distribution of energy, White writes, “once...provoked passion.”2

While this research primarily seeks to understand issues of local ownership and democracy, the focus on electricity is not incidental. Energy policy and energy practice in the U.S. is currently in a tumultuous period, which many hope is also a transitional phase. New approaches to energy management abound, and a slew of new technologies offer the allure of new energy landscapes. Energy policy has been again able to capture the public attention as much as it has in part because it deeply ties together the tenets of sustainable development: environment, economy, and equity; unsurprisingly, energy has become the

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2 Ibid., p. 67.
symbol of the confluence of environmental, economic, and social equity crises we are facing at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Just as in the mid-twentieth century era of grand Modernist dam projects, today a radical rethinking of energy resources offers glimmers of hope for more economic democracy, more opportunities for stable and meaningful employment, and healthier relationships to the natural world.3 A period of flux within such an entrenched and capital-intensive industry offers the possibility of revision for a wide range of relationships, including human-nature dichotomies, the role of corporations in communities, geopolitics of trade and international governance, and so on. As the New Power Initiative, a recent Kentucky-based grassroots campaign, succinctly captures it: “New power is an antidote to old power – old political power, old economic power and old energy power. Too often, ordinary people didn’t have a seat at the table in important decisions affecting their lives. We’re ready for new power in which everyone has a voice and decisions are made for the common good.”4

Even as we note these parallels between twentieth and twenty-first century energy policy, however, it is worth pausing a moment to wonder why electricity – the quotidian current that allows us to turn on lights, charge our phones, etc. – no longer provokes much passion, and especially why it is not common in the twenty-first century to associate the history of electrification with political empowerment, given its great social promise in the 1930s. For a technology to have major social consequences, it needs to do more than connect people and relieve drudgery. Although the values of both of those may be great for individuals and suggest new ways of being in society (just see the flurry of recent literature around mobile technology and social media, for example), in order to create real societal change – that is, change that fundamentally challenges structural inequity and creates opportunities for a more democratic society and thriving civic sphere – it has to be paired with societal innovations as well.

In the following chapters, I discuss how rural electrification in the mid-twentieth century United States had the potential to be structurally transformative through a

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3 A number of civic organizations have been pursuing projects along these lines. See, for example: the Emerald Cities Collaborative (http://emeraldcities.org/about/strategies) and Co-op Power (http://www.cooppower.coop/).
combination of new technology, institutions, and social relationships, and how this societal power has been harnessed or not in different periods and places across the country over the subsequent eighty years. Viewing this process simply from an institutional perspective, rural electrification in America unquestionably gave “power to the people”: geographically, a majority of America’s electricity infrastructure in the twenty-first century is cooperatively owned. An enduring legacy of New Deal funding and a central institution in the nation’s history of rural electrification, these electric cooperatives (co-ops) have existed in the U.S. for nearly eighty years in a network spanning forty-seven states. For decades, millions of Americans have thus been participating in the communal ownership and ostensibly democratic management of a resource and capital-intensive industry.

Such widespread community control over electricity offers a rich case study for extending academic theory on economic democracy and political ecology. Environmental theorists have long argued that ecological degradation in industrial society is a symptom of a breakdown of authentic deliberative democracy. Achieving environmental sustainability, these scholars argue, will require fundamental revisions of ownership and governance models. Co-ops in particular have been lauded as community-responsive venues for democratic resource management; indeed, many have argued that electric co-ops are poised to be powerful actors in shaping energy policy in the twenty-first century. Yet, despite these expected environmental benefits of community ownership, electric co-ops have not played a large role thus far in either local or national energy deliberation, except, critics note, to lobby against legislation that threatens to raise kilowatt-hour prices. The discrepancy between theory and practice, as well as between social promise and historical reality, in the case of electric co-ops is a puzzle, raising questions about the nature of institutional design within American capitalism, as well as illuminating the need for more empirical work on the connection between democracy and environmental stewardship.

More information on electric cooperatives can be found at: http://www.nreca.coop/members/Co-opFacts/Pages/default.aspx.


In this dissertation, I explore how electric co-ops were conceptually promising but insufficient in practice for strengthening economic democracy in rural America. The electric co-op network arose largely due to the efforts of the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), a New Deal agency that offered low interest loans to rural communities from 1935 to the mid-1990s. Conceived as a solution to fierce national debates over public versus private power, electric co-ops promised a third option that would eliminate the wastefulness of large public projects and the exploitation of for-profit companies. Through historical research on the REA and individual co-ops, I show that, in reality, co-ops became an innovative way for the federal government to harness volunteer land, labor, and materials to subsidize the costs of building national infrastructure. In particular, I discuss how national growth agendas co-opted the co-ops through the structure of their loan agreements, transforming them from community organizations into engines of national industrial development. The REA's ideology of growth ultimately compelled co-ops to value increased consumption over inclusion, to the long-term detriment of both rural communities and environments. This historical research illuminates why electric co-ops have not been as participatory as co-op enthusiasts would like, despite community ownership.

However, in the interest of understanding how electric co-ops can still be a transformative force for communities, I have also conducted case studies of three co-ops where members recently pushed for changes in leadership and agenda, a process I refer to as co-op redemocratization. Arguing against claims that community participation is fundamentally infeasible within contemporary American culture, my research starts from the perspective that assumptions of non-participation are themselves an exercise of power.

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8 In 1994, the REA was subsumed into the Rural Utilities Service.
9 These case studies focus on three organizations: Washington Electric Cooperative in East Montpelier, VT; Holy Cross Energy Cooperative in Glenwood Springs, CO; and the Renew East Kentucky campaign coordinated by Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, a community development organization.
and prejudice about what governance means. I find through my case studies that electric co-ops can in fact be a powerful venue for local democracy and community transformation; however, for this potential to be realized, co-op members and staff must re-envision the co-op not as a single-issue business, but as a community institution in a broader political struggle. In studying these movements, my dissertation highlights the importance of focusing on the quality of democratic practice in co-ops, and ultimately asks whether and under what conditions the electric co-op model is capable of becoming a transformative economic influence.

In its focus on community ownership of electricity, the theoretical questions underlying this research are ultimately about who defines democratic control and to what end. In the U.S., democracy has long been implicated with a parallel belief in the power of economic development along capitalist principles: the growth of markets as the key to prosperity for all, and material prosperity as the key to a thriving democratic society. This persistent vision of a consumer-focused American democracy has brought with it through the years much debate about the inherent compatibility of democracy and capitalism as society-ordering ideologies. For one thing, a democracy intertwined with capitalist economic principles fits oddly with the idea of democracy as the general control of society and its resources by the people (including the ability to determine, through regulation and institutional support, the kind of economic transactions that govern distribution of these resources); thus, in America, public ownership and community ownership have for decades become implicated in popular discourse with socialism and communism, when they are often anything but. Historically, an explicit orientation of these institutions towards catalyzing private industrial development and economic growth seems to be one key to making such anti-free-market proposals acceptable enough to survive.

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12 In a nutshell, the problem is that capitalism in its fullest expression seeks to commodify everything, thus turning all social relationships instead to relationships between people and money (the commodity of universal equivalence) – including political relationships; while democracy in its fullest expression seeks to personalize abstractions, to make people think collectively – in a sense, the opposite of alienation, to make the broader web of social relations personal.
Through the lens of electric cooperatives, my dissertation explores this relationship in more detail, in particular the following questions: Are capitalism and democracy incompatible? If not, are they capable of being balancing forces, or are they part of the same political project in practice? What kind of democracy should be the basis for institutions of economic democracy, which try to harness the market for community ends?

With obvious relevance to the study of electric co-ops, one of the more interesting tangents of the debate about the compatibility of capitalism and democracy ties these relationships also to environmental health. For decades now, environmental degradation has been deeply linked to capitalist social relations, as both a symptom of the exploitation inherent in capitalist economies as well as a symbol of the stark inequities made possible in such a system. More recently, as I mention above, political ecologists as well as a growing community of “new economy” activist-scholars have started to focus on opportunities for enhanced local democracy as the solution to capitalism-caused environmental ills. The questions raised by this literature include: What is the relationship between environmental health and democratic vibrancy? Does more democracy really lead to better connection between people and nature? Is this connection made through a challenge to capitalism (or recent trends towards a neoliberal mode of regulation)? How can a place-based ethic of democracy effectively challenge these recent trends in neoliberal capitalism? Does this actually result in less alienation (from one’s ability to build a satisfying life, between people in a way that leads to stronger communities, between people and place)?

Ultimately, in this research, I discover the coexistence of many definitions of democracy in the electric co-op network in the twenty-first century, with different impacts on their communities and environments. In exploring the political and societal implications of these diverse democratic practices, I borrow a concept from Raymond Williams about the possibilities of culture change through societal innovation: simply, that such practices can either be “alternative” or “oppositional,” and that only oppositional practices are capable of realizing the passionate social hopes raised by new technology. The same year that Williams published The Country and the City, he also published an essay on “Base and

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13 Treadmill of production, environmental privilege, etc.
14 I owe my knowledge of this article and the idea of using Williams’ alternative v. oppositional dichotomy to talk about economic practices to James DeFilippis, Unmaking Goliath: Community Control in the Face of Global Capital (New York: Routledge, 2004), 149.
Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” in which he proposes a way of understanding how culture change occurs. Williams introduces the idea of alternative versus oppositional practices in a discussion of how “emergent” cultural forms take hold in the deeply embedded “body of practices and expectations” that constitute structural hegemony. In practice, Williams writes, the difference between the two is small but crucial:

There is a simple theoretical distinction between alternative and oppositional, that is to say between someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it, and someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light. This is usually the difference between individual and small-group solutions to social crisis and those solutions which properly belong to political and ultimately revolutionary practice. But it is often a very narrow line, in reality, between alternative and oppositional. A meaning or a practice may be tolerated as a deviation, and yet still be seen only as another particular way to live. But as the necessary area of effective dominance extends, the same meanings and practices can be seen by the dominant culture, not merely as disregarding or despising it, but as challenging it.

Hegemonic social structures contain a great deal of capacity for accommodating “alternative opinions and attitudes, even some alternative senses of the world,” Williams continues, as long as they do not “in practice go beyond the limits of the central effective and dominant definitions.” If these societal structures were not as complex as they are, if they were simply dominant, Williams writes, it would be easy to challenge them. Part of the sophistication of maintaining hegemony, however, is an ongoing process to incorporate emergent phenomena into mainstream practice before they have the opportunity to develop into oppositional phenomena. Williams adds: “it is significant in our own period how very early this attempt is, how alert the dominant culture now is to anything that can be seen as emergent.”

Once upon a time, innovations in energy ownership promised to be transformative for society, through a more equitable reorganization of people, technology, and nature. I argue that many of the institutions built on these promises never quite got there, though, because they failed to be fully oppositional to the inequitable relations they were in theory founded to contest. When a social innovation fails to be oppositional, when it becomes incorporated into mainstream ideology, it loses its social power and becomes simply

technical. Thus, community-owned electricity became boring, despite its one-time radical potential.

The process of incorporating potentially oppositional social forces into a hegemonic mainstream is, however, neither straightforward nor absolute. Studying the web of political struggles, design choices and iterations, local interpretations, and contestations at and between every stage of this process can help us to better understand the complexities of the multiple forces that have shaped the modern world. Moreover, latent power remains in the structures that social innovations around energy built in the mid-twentieth century. This dissertation is thus an exploration of the oppositional potential of early ideas about energy ownership, of the historical process of making the resultant institutions alternative, and of recent rediscoveries of the transformative power of energy resource ownership for communities and the environment. By studying the history of community-owned electric utilities as well as recent efforts to make them more democratic, this dissertation explores the continual interplay between alternative and oppositional forces in powerful institutions, and illuminates the potential of energy ownership as a building block for transforming society in the service of greater equity and community vibrancy.16

The Promise and Disappointment of Electric Cooperatives

White's observation about electricity ownership "provoking passion" provided the spark for this dissertation. As I started researching community energy ownership, I quickly learned that there was a wealth of data beyond the Columbia River: at the same time the Columbia was being developed and rationalized in a system of dams, locks, and salmon ladders to serve (as well as create17) the greater Pacific Northwest's growing industrial appetite, the rest of the country was engaged in a fascinating but little studied experiment in cooperative electrification through rural electric utilities that were community-owned and democratically managed. White's brief discussion of the politics of energy ownership

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16 Ultimately, I argue that the alternative/oppositional dichotomy is not a binary state but a characteristic of particular practices that can exist simultaneously. This is not a critique of Williams, whose discussion absolutely sets up the possibility for interplay between the two; rather, it intends to be in conversation with the literature on co-ops and other potentially oppositional social forces, which has a dangerous tendency to either claim oppositionality without careful study of implementation or claim co-opted alterity as the end of the story.

was the tip of the iceberg: electricity ownership inspired fierce debates across the United States at this time, leaving an infrastructure and policy legacy which still impacts the country today.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, electricity distribution patterns exacerbated social inequalities between town and countryside across the United States. Because of the high cost of running electrical lines into sparsely populated rural areas and the dominance of profit-oriented private companies in the electricity business, rural citizens even a few miles from town centers found themselves without any foreseeable promise of electricity twenty or more years after their neighbors in town were fully electrified. By the 1930s, according to some estimates, 90% of urban dwellers had electricity, while 90% of rural dwellers lived without. Unequal access to electricity perpetuated vast disparities in quality of life – access to water, hours devoted to work and household labor, ability to store food, indoor bathrooms, the ability to read at night or listen to the radio for news and education – and it weakened communities, as the advantages of the city enticed rural youth to leave the social and literal darkness of the countryside. In many American communities, rural electrification historian Richard Pence writes, all “electricity did for them was to illuminate difference.”

The primary cause of this service lag was the low profitability of selling power to geographically dispersed farming communities. At the time, power generation and distribution in the United States was predominantly a private enterprise, and private power companies had little incentive to extend costly infrastructure into rural areas. The only way it would be affordable, many power companies argued, was if farmers were willing to pay for their own lines – a construction project often on the order of thousands of dollars, when the average annual farm income was less than $1,000. Confronted with
these costs, farmers either found alternatives to electricity or continued to do without. Not only did this enduring discrepancy exacerbate social inequalities between town and country, many argued that the lack of infrastructure artificially depressed the countryside and negatively impacted national economic growth during a time when the country desperately needed it. The nation’s comparatively low rates of rural electrification were also something of an embarrassment to the United States internationally.

In 1935, federal legislation created the Rural Electrification Administration as a New Deal federal relief program with a mandate to disperse low-interest loans to any organization willing to take on the job of rural electrification. Working with the REA, rural communities were finally able to circumvent the private power industry and build electricity infrastructure for themselves. The next year, the REA transitioned to a permanent federal agency, and, within the REA’s first decade of operations, hundreds of communities across the country formally incorporated as rural electric cooperatives, bringing electricity for the first time to over a million people and more than half of the nation’s farms, on community-owned lines.

Although electric co-ops have been called “the business prodigies of their time,” in many ways, they were merely a continuation of tried-and-true rural business methods. Many rural communities in the 1930s were already accustomed to the power of collective action, through organizations like the Grange, the Farmers’ Alliance, and the Populist movement. Such movements specifically “mobilized cooperatives [as a business model] in an effort to institute decentralized and regionally based alternatives to corporate

capitalism." Early press coverage of electric co-ops in the Midwest note that farming communities had long “participated in such mutual enterprises as various marketing pools, warehouses, creameries, and rural telephone lines” and therefore “might have been expected to turn to cooperative distribution of electricity.”

Rural electric cooperatives also happened to come about in an age in which regional development was in vogue and, therefore, the idea of multiple small towns coming together to promote regional development through management of a joint resource was not a radical or counter-hegemonic idea. Regional development theories have been controversial in planning circles for a long time, but planners and politicians in the early- to mid-twentieth century managed to implement several projects based on regional planning ideals. In 1923, a group of urban theorists including Lewis Mumford formed the Regional Planning Association of America. Comprehensive government agencies, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Pacific Northwest Regional Planning Commission, were created across the country (after protracted political battles) to manage regional natural resources and encourage economic development. This was also the era when the Olmsted landscape architecture firm was occupied with grandiose regional park network projects, which explicitly aimed to enhance urban civility and livability for the general public through innovative ways of integrating nature and open spaces into economic development; the civilizing effect of nature and the symbolic purity of rural life would come to pervade the writings and correspondence of early REA architects and advocates. Though certainly not uncontested, planning in those days was ideologically oriented towards lifting society through the power of public goods, or, as in the case of co-ops, collective private goods.

Nearly eighty years later, over 900 co-ops are still in business, and, while called “rural,” many now serve metropolitan areas; as the REA correctly predicted, electrification spurred rapid development and growth in rural America. According to a growing interdisciplinary body of literature on local control and environmental stewardship, such widespread community ownership should have profound implications for energy policy, and even some possible spillover effects on rural land and resource use. Yet, despite these expected environmental benefits of community ownership, electric co-ops have not been a major player in energy or environmental reform, either at a local or national level. In a broader view, historians of twentieth century America further point out that rural electrification contributed to the rise of industrial agricultural and the possibility for exurban development patterns. A closer look reveals that these worrisome environmental trends may be a problem with the implementation more so than the theory of local control: despite the ubiquity and longevity of electric co-ops in the U.S., even co-op members are sometimes surprised to learn that the places they send their electric bills each month are not private companies. Local ownership, in the case of electric co-ops, does not obviously translate to local control through democratic decision-making.

In fact, electric co-ops have recently come under a lot of critique for their organizational cultures, and new initiatives holding similar progressive ideals about community ownership, economic development, and freedom from dependence on private corporations are either not engaging with the old co-ops or are focusing on the co-ops themselves as the social structure needing change. Recent member participation in electric co-ops has been summarized as apathetic, and co-ops’ staffs and boards of directors have been criticized for fostering closed institutional structures. On a broader scale, controversies about the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) – a national organization of electric co-ops formed in 1942 in response to wartime supply

34 See, for example: Phillips, This Land, This Nation; Nye, Electrifying America.
shortages and the need for affordable insurance, which now engages in lobbying around energy legislation – have recently raised questions over whether the national face of the electric co-op network is a building block in creating a national alternative economy based on the cooperative principles, or if it is just the political arm of a business association? In summary, critics worry that electric co-ops are becoming too geared towards making a profit, have limited profit-sharing with their members, and have been “exerting their political influence to exempt co-ops from [pollution and emissions] laws that apply to other utilities.”

In other words, the electric co-op network has become, in many cases, democratically, economically, and technologically retrogressive. Because these co-ops are clearly not a simple panacea for community-friendly economic development in the twenty-first century, they consequently challenge co-op advocates to critically examine how the cooperative business model actually works in practice, how co-ops evolve over time, and how they respond to different cultural contexts.

**Electric Co-op Research and Theory**

Communal ownership of utilities potentially addresses a number of problems with contemporary relevance. First, from the perspective of building strong communities, electric cooperatives mean that financial capital and jobs in a profitable industry are retained locally. Second, from the environmental perspective, communal control over electricity implies greater community awareness of and decision-making opportunities about managing the natural resources (e.g., coal, wind, hydro, etc.) harnessed to provide the community’s energy. More community input and awareness in the planning process has been shown to greatly reduce environmental injustices, and it has also recently been linked to greater acceptance of cleaner energy sources and voluntary energy use reductions.

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36 Cooper, “From New Deal to Bad Deal?”, 369.
Finally, by bringing citizens in different towns together to manage a shared utility, electric cooperatives coordinate financial and resource use decisions on a regional level.

Cooperative control is possible on a variety of levels in the electricity industry. Electric co-ops are primarily “consumer co-ops” – i.e. they purchase goods (electricity and, in some cases, appliances) wholesale and sell them at discounted rates to their members. However, they could also be “worker co-ops” – i.e., co-ops that also generate electricity may be owned by worker-owners at the generation facilities in addition to the member-owners who purchase the electricity. Moreover, Generation and Transmission (G&T) co-ops and other statewide, regional, or national associations of co-ops could be labeled “purchasing co-ops” – i.e. co-ops “composed of businesses that collectively buy supplies that members use in their respective businesses.” Following the guidelines of the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), electric co-ops in theory adhere to seven fundamental principles adapted from the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society, a consumer cooperative organized in England in 1844. These principles are outlined in Table 1.1, below.

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### Table 1.1: Cooperative Principles of the International Cooperative Alliance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voluntary and Open Membership</strong></td>
<td>Co-operatives are voluntary organisations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Democratic Member Control</strong></td>
<td>Co-operatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and co-operatives at other levels are also organised in a democratic manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Member Economic Participation</strong></td>
<td>Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-operative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Autonomy and Independence</strong></td>
<td>Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organisations controlled by their members. If they enter to agreements with other organisations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education, Training and Information</strong></td>
<td>Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Co-operation among Co-operatives</strong></td>
<td>Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concern for Community</strong></td>
<td>Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since the 1930s, however, the evolution of American culture and politics has created ebbs and flows of public support for and even knowledge about the many cooperative businesses that continue to exist in America. Cooperative history is pendular; the idea that community engagement can make up for a lack of financial capital is cyclically lost and rediscovered as a tool for various aspects of community empowerment and economic
development, as the specific era dictates. The fact that, despite these swings in popular perception, a large number of electric co-ops have stayed operational for nearly eighty years (including through McCarthyism, when the entire electric co-op network was seen as suspect due to its communal models of ownership and governance), as well as the wide range of operational adaptations made by co-ops responding to changing cultural and business environments over this time, form a history worth studying in its own right. As many of these long-enduring electric co-ops are not quite what co-op enthusiasts today would define as a model co-op, however, a brief exploration of how electric co-ops fit into broader research on co-ops as a business model is therefore warranted.

Those who write about co-ops tend to note a discrepancy between the large number of active co-ops in America and how much these community businesses are on the public’s radar. Curl questions why the nineteenth century co-op movement is so scantily covered in American history classrooms, and notes that it is sharp contrast to the more prevalent image of the “self-reliant, individualistic frontiersman” moving west to follow entrepreneurial dreams. Keillor berates historians for rarely detaching cooperatives from broader movements and “examin[ing] them in their own right.” DeFilippis criticizes modern co-ops for failing to connect with political movements that critique the same structure.

Perhaps because of the lack of critical attention to co-ops as a business model, previous research on electric co-ops in the U.S. is not well developed and rarely academic. There are many popular histories of electric co-ops, including two published by the NRECA, which tend to tell an uncomplicated story of local grassroots organizing meeting

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41 Curl, *For All the People,* 5; Martin Lowery, conversation with author (NRECA, Arlington, VA), 26 April 2010.


43 Curl, *For All the People,* 7.


45 DeFilippis, *Unmaking Goliath,* 143-150.
progressive national policy, and the incredible quality of life improvements that this fortuitous development nexus bestowed upon the countryside.46

Notable exceptions include D. Clayton Brown’s *Electricity for Rural America: The Fight for the REA* and David E. Nye’s chapter, “Rural Lines,” in his canonical history, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology*. Two state-specific cooperative histories also give a more nuanced political perspective on electric cooperatives: Stephen J. Keillor’s *Cooperative Commonwealth: Co-ops in Rural Minnesota, 1859-1939* includes a short but detailed discussion of the political struggles that went on between state-level cooperative associations and the REA in Minnesota in the 1930s, and Frank J. Busch’s *Power for the People: Montana’s Cooperative Utilities*, has a detailed discussion of early oversight by the REA on individual co-ops and the trial-by-fire development of professional expertise in many rural communities. While acknowledging the advantages electricity brought to rural Americans, these works also highlight many of the politics, awkward assumptions, and development impacts inherent in REA style electrification47

*Electricity for Rural America* has come to be used in the academic literature as the definitive history of electric co-ops.48 Brown provides a detailed history of the internal politics of the REA and the NRECA, highlighting the tumultuous first few years of establishment and funding the REA, the ideological shift during which the REA switched to focusing on cooperatives over private utilities, and later decisions to fund power generation facilities versus simply distribution infrastructure. Although Brown’s political history is nuanced, however, he clearly has a fondness for the cooperative ideal and the design of rural electric co-ops that limits his analysis of broader structural influences. Only in what is essentially a side note at the very end of his book does Brown express dismay that the visions of the REA never quite reached fruition: neither did the REA restrain the

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48 More popular histories tend to rely more on *The Next Greatest Thing*, which is problematic as an NRECA publication.
“growth or corporate wealth,” nor did it safeguard “the rural way of life,” Brown observes. He concludes, with a sprinkling of technological determinism and an unexpected wallop of capitalist sensibilities: “The ultimate effect was not a revival of an older order but entry into the new. As the United States became an industrialized society with a high percentage of urban inhabitants, electrification enabled the rural sector to keep pace in a social and cultural sense and also retain its place in the world as supplier of food and fiber.”

As a historian in the STS tradition, Nye is more inclined to ask about the cultural and symbolic work of electricity in rural America. Nye’s treatment of the REA examines the tumultuous relationship between the for-profit electricity industry and government desires for rural electrification, as well as the process by which ordinary rural residents incorporated electrification into their lifestyles. Extending Brown’s brief observations, Nye ends with an insightful discussion about the cultural impacts of electrification on rural America. In particular, he points out that the propaganda used by the REA mirrored corporate images in that it “reinterpret[ed] the farm family by transforming it from independent producer to mass-market consumer.” There was ultimately little difference in government and corporate visions of rural electrification’s effect on the farm family, Nye argues, because “they shared an underlying goal: to integrate farmers into the national market.” Nye comes to the same conclusions as Brown: that electrification brought conveniences to farms, but failed to safeguard rural lifestyles. Ultimately, Nye writes, the REA was plagued by contradictions. Citing as its major themes, “technology as the key to economic renewal; government as the guiding force that can channel new technology to desirable social ends; and the resurgent democracy of cooperatives,” Nye writes:

Yet neither big government nor advanced technology was necessarily consistent with maximizing democracy or preserving the small farmer, and rural electrification certainly would not realize the agrarian dream of a decentralized blend of technology and Jeffersonianism. In practice, new agricultural technologies that increased efficiency only aggravated the problems of chronic overproduction, low prices, tractored-out farms, and roads full of Okies headed for California.


50 Nye, *Electrifying America*, 331; See also: Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), which provides a detailed history of how the REA encouraged use of electrical appliances in rural homes and farms.
In this musing in his discussion, Nye sets the stage for a broader critique that examines rural electrification as a colonization of sorts of urban markets into rural lifestyles, in which the “contradictions” inherent in the REA are not unintentional blindness to cause and effect, but a particular political project of solving an economic crisis, in part through appealing skillfully to deep-rooted American ideals and contemporary anxieties.\(^{51}\)

While Nye does not delve deeply into the internal workings of electric cooperatives nor dwell on the specifics of the REA’s program of rural consumerism, his observations are illuminating in light of broader cooperative history and theory on the leverage and politics of different kinds of cooperative. For example, Kathleen Donahue notes that turn of the (twentieth) century thought on cooperatives was starting to position consumer co-ops (such as most of the REA co-ops became) as the most political form of co-op, because they hit industrialized societies at their heart. “In an industrialized economy,” Donahue argues, in a discussion of the rise of consumer cooperatives, “the consumer identity had a far greater theoretical potential to transcend class than did the producer identity. ...While it may have been possible in a preindustrial or early industrial economy to label most members of society producers, the complexity of a mature industrial economy dominated by large corporations called such an all-inclusive definition of producer into question. ...The consumer identity, by contrast, was an all-inclusive identity. And it was an identity that became more rather than less relevant as the economy industrialized.”\(^{52}\) As I will discuss further in Chapter 3, the REA co-op model essentially created consumers and organized them into consumer cooperatives simultaneously. In Chapter 4, I further discuss how recent civic engagement in co-op territories has shifted some electric co-ops to become energy producers, not just distributors, thus, in a move consistent to twenty-first century neo-Marxist politics, repoliticizing the class conflict of workers and owners.

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51 Nye, *Electrifying America*, 334. The idea of “colonization” of the countryside by the market is obviously a Marxian framework of how social relations become mediated by money in particular ways. A good discussion of this is in Brett Christophers, “Follow the Thing: Money.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29(6), 2011: 1068–1084. Christophers notes the “growing influence of financial themes, metrics, and assessment criteria in almost all spheres of daily life – in terms, that is to say, of money’s colonisation of our lifeworlds” (p. 1074).

Arguably, consumer co-ops are likely to be alternative while producer co-ops have more capacity to be oppositional. While consumer co-ops might reach a wider audience, they still impact relations of production that order the uses and flows of capital and resources indirectly through social relationships with the producer – usually a private profit-oriented producer – while producer co-ops retain the ability to fundamentally question and recreate these basic relationships; thus, following the movement between the two is instructive.

This particular cooperative history fits oddly, however, with cooperative theory as well as popular portrayals of co-ops. In a nutshell, the point of contention is that not just ownership matters for co-ops to be a transformative political and economic force in a broader capitalist society, but ownership of what matters a great deal, as well as how that ownership is translated to governance. All of these institutional design decisions, as Donahue points out, moreover have significant class dimensions that also shape the ultimate impact of community ownership within society.

This is where my story of American rural electrification picks up. In the following research, I question how electric co-ops, in addition to creating consumers, revalued land and refashioned rural landscapes to construct a national market-oriented infrastructure. In doing so, I question the nature of democratic practice in electric co-ops, and explore how these co-ops navigated contradictions between local goals and the REA’s economic agenda. While historians have painted the failure of co-ops to create a democratic rural landscape as an interesting inevitability of twentieth century capitalism, I challenge this, investigating instead how an orientation towards economic growth at the expense of local democracy was in fact a feature of electric co-op institutional design.

**The Continually Reinvented Solution of Economic Democracy**

In exploring the ways that co-ops can be designed for national rather than local purposes, especially for economic growth at the expense of democratic practice, my work is implicitly coming into conflict with a resurgent movement in economic democracy that has been quickly gaining popular presence since the financial crisis in 2008. The “new economy” movement has created an intellectual upswing of interest in co-ops and similar organizations, sometimes called the social economy, the civic economy, the solidarity economy, shared capitalism, or the “fourth sector” (the idea being that community
ownership of economic institutions is a fundamentally different model from private investor-owned businesses, public institutions/utilities, and traditional NGO or non-profit civil society organizations). This body of work connects community ownership and social entrepreneurship to a host of community “goods” that will sound familiar to critics of neoliberalism, including local wealth generation, environmental protection, and civic capacity-building. Against a global backdrop of hypermobility of people and capital that has led to a set of damaging environmental and social externalities, optimism for a new political economy centered on economic democracy is increasingly widespread.54

The main goal of the “new economy” literature, it seems, it to issue a call-to-arms to would-be practitioners of economic democracy in the twenty-first century. As such, it highlights the many ways that economic democracy can be built into businesses and communities. One of their main arguments is that there is already a thriving subculture of “fourth sector” businesses and community development practices that the “new economy” can use as role models.55 Recognizing the need for political and not just organizational change, these authors hold up such businesses as the seeds of a coming transformational movement.56


55 For example, Restakis claims: “Co-operatives employ more people in democratically run enterprises than all the world’s multinational companies combined” (though without any citations supporting this figure, p. 3); Alperovitz also identifies “thousands of new worker-owned firms, community-owned enterprises, even state and national examples of alternative ways wealth might be owned to benefit small and large publics” (5), offering it as a “toolbox of practical precedents” (xxviii).

56 For example, Restakis sees economic democracy as a culmination of an inevitable process: “a revolution in human society that began with the rise of democracy in politics [and] continues to unfold as the democratic idea struggles to find its place in the world of economics” (2)
This literature has a difficult relationship with the concept of capitalism. Most of these writers claim they are not trying to overthrow the capitalist system – I suppose that, with the resurgence of Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches in recent years, it is fashionable today to assure readers that you’re not that kind of Marxist – but then they inevitably call for the “end of capitalism” or an America “beyond capitalism” and so on.

Capitalism is certainly the ultimate target of revision by the “new economy” theorists. “Capitalism is not ‘delivering the goods’ to most people, and they know it,” Richard D. Wolff, writes. The general consensus of the “new economy” is that the dominant economic institutions and practices of the twenty-first century was “in no way a natural process in the sense of being an inevitable product of human nature or a kind of culmination of social, much less natural, laws,” but is rather “an artifact born of sustained and laborious effort in the service of a privileged minority.” Questioning the viability and legitimacy of a political democracy in the context of rapidly increasing economic inequality, these activist-scholars call for internal checks on the production and distribution of wealth that can prevent the cyclical economic crises that seem to be a staple of capitalist economic organization and reorient economic relations to be in better service of the common good.

Whether these revisions need come in the form of revolution or reform is, however, unclear in this literature – possibly intentionally so. Focusing on co-ops in particular, Restakis acknowledges that community ownership of a market-based institution is still capitalism, and he praises this model for being a compromise between “market rejection” and “the unbridled power of capital as expressed in neoliberalism.” Others call for “upgrades” to capitalism that incorporate the tenets of sustainable development, including *Capitalism 3.0*, *Economy 4.0,* and so on. Alperovitz attempts to reconcile the inherently disruptive nature of calling for a “new economy” through proposing a process he calls *evolutionary reconstruction*. “Like reform,” Alperovitz writes, there are a wide range of experimental practices of economic democracy across the country (“in the traditional

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57 Wolff, *Democracy at Work*, 16.
58 Restakis, *Humanizing the Economy*, 246.
59 Ibid., 3.
'laboratories' of democratic process") that are precipitating "step-by-step nonviolent change. But like revolution," he sees the end goal as structural change: "the development of different institutional structures to replace traditional corporate forms."62

The question of revolution versus reform is in some ways restating the question of the potential of emergent phenomena. It is worth asking, therefore: is the "new economy" oppositional or alternative? And, if it is not yet oppositional, do these scholars have a sense of a path that will lead from current stable alternative practices (as Restakis points out, "Co-operatives employ more people in democratically run enterprises than all the world's multinational companies combined.") to oppositional structural politics?

While these activist-theorists reference Marxian ideas of superstructure and hegemony, they grapple little with the process of cooptation Williams succinctly illustrated in his alternative-oppositional dichotomy. For example, in his updated preface to America Beyond Capitalism, reprinted on the heels of the Occupy movement in 2011, Alperovitz claims the following:

at a time when the top one percent owns almost half of the nation's investment wealth, and has more net worth than the bottom 90 percent put together... different forms of ownership in general – and forms that democratize ownership in particular – are possible. Put another way, developments like...worker-owned companies serve to challenge what Antonio Gramsci called the dominant hegemonic ideology – and do so in a very practical, down-home American fashion.63

Wolff, similarly, argues that "production works best when performed by a community that collectively and democratically designs and carries out shared labor" and then promotes uncritically a model of Workers' Self-Directed Enterprises (WSDEs) as the key to economic transformation. Ultimately, the challenges Alperovitz and others pose vis-à-vis capitalist hegemony are deep and relevant, but they fail to extend the critique of the continual colonization of capitalist practices to their cherished emergent practices of economic democracy.

Raymond Williams would undoubtedly scold them that they risk being incorporated into mainstream practice, that their "assignments of energy" through which they think they know the world will be channeled back into propping up the system they are trying to

62 Alperovitz, America Beyond Capitalism, 235.
63 Ibid., xvii-iii.
change. This allows the “new economy” to be contradictorily historically and economically sophisticated but somewhat politically simplistic, and therefore, some would argue, dangerous. In particular, Alperovitz’s praise of the “practical, down-home American fashion” of cooperative ownership should raise alarms about an enduring process of cooptation versus transformative potential. As I briefly discussed earlier, co-ops and other community-based businesses have a long history in America, sometimes populist but not always. Imbuing all co-ops with a progressive spirit of flourishing localities is an effective way of obscuring the complex histories of a wide variety of community owned institutions and the work they have done in community and economic development across the country for over a hundred years. Rather, these institutions represent a range of business models that, like investor-owned corporations, span from incredibly community-centered, distributive of wealth, and/or politically progressive to the most institutionally closed, politically corrupt, and profit-consolidating extractive firms. It is critical to separate out the expected advantages of economic democracy and consider how they interact, instead of assuming that each (or all) naturally follows the other.

Williams ends his article with a discussion about writing and oppositional practice. Acknowledging that art is an effective way that the superstructure informs the base in classical Marxist conceptions of society, and noting that many have consequently seen writing as an effective way of being oppositional, Williams cautions that truly emergent art is difficult and rare: “Yet most writing, in any period, including our own, is a form of contribution to the effective dominant culture.”

New economy scholars claim not to be “utopians,” but they are not quite willing to be revolutionaries, either. Yet it is unclear whether a peaceful implementation of new ideas is enough to achieve the world they want. Neither am I trying to be a revolutionary by critiquing the “new economy.” (I am not that kind of Marxist.) Yet, I have learned (among other ways, as a history of energy scholar) that this kind of transformational work requires in the least a sustained political fight, and the willingness of populist movements to commit to a confrontational politics of wealth redistribution.

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64 Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 13.
A More Critical Approach

Not only is there no contradiction between co-ops and capitalism, in practice, there is not even much, if any, contradiction between co-ops and recent neoliberal capitalist trends. Co-ops do not exist in a vacuum. Because “fourth sector” institutions still have to operate within the constraints of a broader market economy and a regulatory structure that favors specific market relationships, these community-focused businesses find themselves in a fundamental struggle juggling often-incompatible bottom lines. As DeFilippis writes, “collectives that exist within the capitalist political economy (which is all of them) cannot simply will away the market’s imperatives.”

The problem is that, while many co-ops throughout history have formed as critiques of some part (or all of) the industrial capitalist social structure, they walk a fine line. Because most co-ops rely on the market for their continued existence and cannot entirely divorce themselves from its logic, it is difficult for co-ops to be explicitly political about creating a different kind of economy – to be oppositional, if you will – even should they want to. As Curl writes, co-ops and collectives of every era have struggled to define themselves on the spectrum between “‘pure and simple’ cooperatives and a radical social movement.” Such organizations attempt to operate, as DeFilippis succinctly describes it, “in both the realm of the market and the real of agents for social change,” which is “not a position they can occupy for very long.”

While a burgeoning literature on corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability is optimistically of the mindset that community-focused management innovations can increase a company’s economic competitiveness, in practice, it is rarely the case that market pressures exactly align with community pressures. Unfortunately, historical experience shows that the more established a co-op becomes, the more likely it is to resolve this tenuous “balancing act” in favor of market efficiency over community

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65 DeFilippis, *Unmaking Goliath*, 146.
66 Curl, *For All the People*, 6.
67 DeFilippis, *Unmaking Goliath*, 145.
benefits. The typical American is surrounded by alternative institutions to private capitalism, it is true but, at odds with the optimism of those who see this proliferation as revolutionary, many of the co-ops that endure past the crisis that led to their foundings eventually settle into bureaucratic, economic efficiency-oriented businesses with some nice origin stories about community engagement and democratic control.

In his exploration of the possibilities for more local control in America at the turn of the twenty-first century, DeFilippis argued that “these groups do not benefit from research that overstates their successes or their potential. The last thing these groups need is for outsiders to set them up to fail by creating sets of expectations that are not realistic and can never be met.” A decade later, even in the wake of the United Nation’s International Year of Cooperatives in 2012, his critique that the literature on such organizations is overly optimistic and based on organizational desires more so than careful research and hypothesis testing is still valid. As such, “the conflicts, contradictions, and limitations” of community ownership continue to be “overlooked or downplayed.”

Following DeFilippis’ call, if we approach community ownership less normatively as an alternative organizational form worth study, we can learn a lot from co-ops about institutional linkages, public-private partnerships, community development, and democracy. In reality, co-ops - and, likewise, the average for-profit corporation - are ideal types in a much messier economic, organizational, and regulatory ecosystem. Hybrid institutions are more common than not, relying on some combination of business development, public-private partnerships, government subsidies, foundation funding, etc. While institutional form matters, ultimately what we should ask is what are the broader structural relationships specific institutions make possible? But the literature on co-ops too frequently sees institutional persistence as success, without asking what else such institutions have in fact produced.

Interestingly, some studies have found that shared-ownership businesses outperform traditional businesses, and more participatory ones even more so. There are

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69 See, for example: Cooper, “From New Deal to Bad Deal?”; DeFilippis, Unmaking Goliath.
70 As Alperovitz, Restakis, and others point out.
71 DeFilippis, Unmaking Goliath, p. 141.
two different ways the literature on co-ops interprets this finding: On the one hand, worker-owners are more interested in the sustainability of their particular business and so, it is argued, they have more of an incentive to make decisions that are good for the business than does a (frequently remote) corporation solely interested in making a profit. From a more subversive critical theory perspective, however, DeFilippis suggests that cooperative ownership is a way of placating the workers and giving them incentives to stay in the system (thus, from a Marxian perspective, postponing uprising and revolt). This is “not dissimilar from homeownership’s political effects,” DeFilippis muses, evoking the infamous adage of post-WWII era developer William Levitt: “No man who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do.”

There is a noticeable difference between how many co-ops talk and how they work. The ICA’s Seven Cooperative Principles are a staple of cooperative websites and infuse their rhetoric, when in many cases they run more-or-less like any other business. Writing about the TVA in the 1950s, Philip Selznick argued that when organizations are formed with specific ideological goals, those ideologies can obscure the nature of the actual work carried out by the organizations. Selznick notes:

> Once procedures are specified, then these procedures tend to become the receptacle of the positive emotional values provided by the general principle, even if what is put into practice is a theoretically unsatisfactory rendering of the original moral imperative.

In many modern co-ops, the language is confusing: as they highlight the virtues of member-ownership in one breath, they talk about serving their “customers” in the next. For any institution that practices “economic democracy,” therefore, it is crucial to ask: What kind of economics? What kind of democracy? And what do the two produce together?

Arguably, it is not just co-ops that need more study, but this oscillatory awareness of them, and the fact that they are infrequently as political as advocates portend. To me, this demand is encapsulated by cooperative scholar John Restakis’s justification for studying

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co-ops: "the evidence of a new, more humane economic and social order is there to see," he wrote in 2010, "for those who are willing to look." If we have to look, however, is what we will find worth the search? Or will we mostly identify alternative business models working within a larger political economy without resolving enduring systemic relationships of exploitation and inequality? To me, these visions are in conflict – either institutions of economic democracy are capable of challenging and transforming neoliberal global capitalism on a structural scale into a "more humane economic and social order," which will produce visible change, or they are not and will always be marginal without an actual economic revolution. Studying efforts where co-ops have attempted to reshape economic structural conditions are thus needed, in order to understand possibilities for economic transformation through economic democracy, as well as what and how much needs to change for our economic relations to match our social values.

An electric co-op employee once told me that in her experience co-op members get more excited about "the cooperative difference" when the economy is bad – then, she reflected, they see the power of organizing; otherwise, they are too focused on individual purchasing power. If we are to meet the call for more enduring change that puts "a permanent end to the periodic crises generated by capitalism" and "secure[s] greater income and wealth equality," we need institutions such as cooperatives to do more than provide interesting local color when the economy is strong and a small safety net when it is weak.

The existing research on co-ops ultimately leads me to the question: what is the point of alternatives if they never lead to the oppositional? Recently, sociologist and urban "growth machine" theorist John Logan cautioned, in response to lively enthusiasm for a proposed new sustainable economic paradigm that reconciled growth and sustainability goals, that researchers must be careful to judge theories by their consequences, not their hype. In particular, he suggests that the place to start is by looking for changes in the most negative consequences of the previous paradigm.

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75 Restakis, Humanizing the Economy, 3 (emphasis added).
76 John Logan, email communication, 25 June 2013, in an email thread on the Community and Urban Sociology Section of the American Sociological Association mailing list (Comurb_r21@email.rutgers.edu), regarding a discussion on "growth coalition theory" in The Metropolitan Revolution: How Cities and Metros Are Fixing Our Broken Politics and Fragile Economy, Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley (2013); email thread June 24-26.
If there is a trend of transformative community ownership bubbling just under the surface of mainstream awareness in the American economy, what effects might we expect to see, and have these materialized? If they are not in fact causing these effects, then what did they actually build? What are the social and material structures that these alternatives encouraged and/or made possible?

A Specific History of American Capitalism

My approach in this dissertation is to study electric cooperatives as capitalist enterprises that have promoted specific economic structures over time. In doing so, I bring cooperative history into the growing pedagogical framework of the history of capitalism that argues that there are many capitalisms, by showing capitalism as practiced under cooperative utilities, as well as using a history of energy/infrastructure perspective that ties the history of capitalism to environmental history. Through this, I explore how electricity infrastructure co-constructed economies and markets, and in doing so reshaped landscapes.

This research started with questions about landscape and alternatives to capitalism. Critical approaches to planning encourage a method of reading the landscape as a social text, particularly, within the last thirty years, as an increasingly horrific text about neoliberal economic globalization. As the lit crit style planning approach of reading landscape has moved increasingly into political economy, it has converged with a radical-

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77 From foundational urban sociology and political theory to modern critical studies, scholars have argued that different economic paradigms have clear physical manifestations in spatial development patterns and land use, which not only reinforce the logic by which these economic paradigms operate but also constrain future action. For example, early sociologists and political economists argued that private property, the division of labor, and industrialization were responsible for the spatial and social relations dividing "town" and "country," defining cities in particular as explicitly "market settlements," whose organizational forms depended on individual cities' functions in broader economic networks (Marx, from Capital and The German Ideology, as summarized by Merrifield (2002); Weber 1958). The specific analyses of nineteenth and twentieth century industrial cities as examples of geographic conformance to market relations were later reinterpreted as moments in an ongoing process of coordinated spatial and economic reorganizations of labor and industry (Tilly 1988). More recent scholarship has explored how specific cities reorganize spatially in response to changing industrial/economic patterns (Warner 1974), as well as how cities that experience major growth during particular eras retain spatial logics consistent with that era (Beauregard and Haila 2000, Scott 2001). More critical work has also extended Marx's ideas of creative destruction – i.e. that capitalism is "constantly engaged in a process of change" to create new markets and outlets for capital (Capital [1867]) – to explain how massive urban redevelopment projects, suburban sprawl, and institutionalized forms of spatial segregation facilitate distinct kinds of economic activity (Davis 1999, 2006; Harvey 2005, 2008; Hayden 2004; Soja 1989; Zukin 1996, 2009).

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critical side of economic geography theory and with a literature in environmental history that reads broad environmental change as a rationalization of nature (not to be confused with natural processes acting as expected) in order to bring the natural world into the industrial production apparatus and, by extension, the market.

While many economists have recently expressed concern about the effects of neoliberal capitalism as being not just an economic paradigm but also an exclusionary political theory of social relations – that is, “an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs,” and while the above scholars all worry in their own ways about the colonization of authentic human landscapes by the market, they would also tell you that other kinds of spaces continue to exist in parallel, offering opportunities for creativity and contestation.

There are reasons to suggest that the electric co-op network would have promoted a different development logic that is legible – in the critical planning sense of reading the landscape – across the country. First, by bringing electricity to non-electrified communities, rural co-ops made new opportunities for development possible in places ignored by private electric companies – in other words, they inscribed new possibilities onto (according to the market) unprofitable and/or stagnant landscapes. Electricity has since come to be a service essential to basic societal operations in the U.S.; electric co-ops therefore offer an example of economic development reliant on democratic management (i.e. steered by votes, not dollars) and not-only-financial resources in an industry that affects the general population widely and determines where and how things can be built. Second, electricity generation and distribution decisions are intimately tied to local environmental outcomes. Third, as the original electric co-op network has existed since the 1930s, it offers a rich case study in

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how a political economic model from an earlier era has evolved in response to external changes – that is, co-op “landscapes” should show friction.

However, I found early in my research that REA-style electric co-ops could not be viewed as simply democratic institutions, nor could the landscapes they created be read as a democratic resource management approach that challenged more laissez-faire market practices. In fact, as I will explain further in Chapter 3, REA co-ops were an explicitly economic project that contributed to intensified national economic growth.

In particular, electric co-ops provided a fix for a crisis of capitalism – and, of relevance to the recent recession, one that was compounded by a simultaneous environmental crisis. Barely months after the stock market started its long plummet in 1929, leading to the Great Depression, widespread droughts and dust storms ravaged rural America. Within a couple of years, farming communities across the country were in dire straits, presenting the national government with an environmental crisis, which came to be known as the Dust Bowl, equal to if not worse than the financial crises precipitated by the Depression.81

Widespread rural poverty was already perceived as a challenge for national economic growth; concerned that the nation’s farms were on average well below the “American standard of living,” and were thus a major contributor to problems of national underconsumption during the Depression, policymakers had already been looking for ways to increase the demand for industrial goods in rural farming communities.82 With the added devastation of the Dust Bowl, some worried that the nation itself was in jeopardy.

Rural electrification promised to be a solution for both rural underconsumption and farmland survival. Unlike the private power companies, who were still loath to move into rural areas, the FDR administration believed that rural electrification could be profitable, and increasingly so as electricity encouraged efficiency on the farm.83 Extending power to

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82 Phillips, This Land, This Nation, 3.
83 REA Consultant Judson King argued retrospectively that private companies had ignored rural America not because it was unprofitable but because the margins were not high enough to be worth it: “for the past twenty years there have been millions of farmers living in compact areas whom the private utilities might have served at, say, a 6 per cent profit on an honest investment,” he wrote in 1938. “But they were not interested in 6 per cent. These are the farmers who will be served under the present act. They can afford to pay and will pay.” Judson King, “The REA – A New Deal Venture in Human Welfare,” 1938, Gifford Pinchot collection, Box No. 682, Library of Congress.
such potential consumers would make farms more efficient, produce a massive demand for
new appliances and farm equipment that would put people back to work, and encourage
the development of rural industries. At the same time, rural electrification could also
safeguard intensified agricultural practices through efficient irrigation and water
management. The REA, Gifford Pinchot later wrote, was thus a crucial part of the
conservation movement, as important to sustainable farmland management as it was an
economic fix for the shortsightedness of the private power sector. 84

As an economic program aimed at national growth, rural electrification was
abundantly successful. 85 “Virtually every dollar loaned out was repaid,” Nye writes
retrospectively, “while the program raised the value of property and increased appliance
sales by as much as 20 percent a year in the middle of the Depression.” 86 In other words, in
our last combined environmental and economic crisis of existential proportions, the
lessons we learned were to shop more, and the landscape of rural America shaped itself in
service of that goal.

The landscapes that the REA created were consequently not landscapes of local
democracy that preserved the American agricultural idyll. Instead, the landscapes these
coops helped to produce was closer to what David Harvey calls Keynesian “demand-side
urbanization” marked by “low-density sprawl, distinctive spaces of consumption...and
strange significations of life-style and social status etched into the landscape of unrelieved
consumerism.” 87 As a New Deal program, the REA’s economic logic was above all to build
customer power to encourage market movement and pull the national economy out of its
post-Depression, post-Dust Bowl torpor. In doing so, it had the side effect of extending
market relations – and capitalist social relations – into rural communities that were still
operating in the 1930s in a mixed economy, with many activities focused on subsistence
rather than exchange value, and many social relations guided by generalized reciprocity
and custom. While I do not mean to paint a rosy picture out of the hardships of life on pre-
electrified farms, this was a movement from, in Steven Hahn’s phrase, a period where “the

84 Gifford Pinchot, Conservation of Human Resources, Radio address during World War II, Gifford Pinchot
Collection, Box 627, Library of Congress.
85 Its environmental impact vis-à-vis the Dust Bowl and farmland conservation was less obvious and is a
subject for a much longer discussion.
86 Nye, Electrifying America, 321.
87 Harvey, The Urbanization of Capital, 60-61, 210-211.
market served their interests rather than dominated their lives.”\textsuperscript{88} The effects of being pulled into a market economy were not as simple as relieving drudgery and promoting connectedness.

Historians studying a wide range of New Deal programs have critiqued its underlying logic of consumerism in general for being rife with contradictions between quality of life and economic growth, leading to the next generation’s crises of uneven urban development, environmental degradation, and political representation.\textsuperscript{89} For rural America, these scholars show, the overwhelming impact of these consumer-oriented policies over the long term was arguably to bring rural communities into the urban process, in terms of economics and culture. This was not a new process; as historians such as William Cronon have eloquently illustrated, the American countryside has been an integral part of a global cosmopolitan economy for centuries, despite the American tendency to venerate rural life as somehow differently authentic and more morally-centered than the city.\textsuperscript{90} David Harvey’s recent advocacy for the “Right to the City” addresses this; in a call for “greater democratic control over the production and utilization of...surplus [capital]” in the design and development of human settlement, Harvey defines urbanization as a physical manifestation of capitalist relations that increasingly is coming to define the entire human landscape, not just cities. The “urban process,” Harvey notes, can be seen throughout suburbia and in the countryside in “phenomena ranging from agribusiness to second homes and rural tourism.”\textsuperscript{91} It is my contention that the REA had a fundamental hand in shaping this process, and a fight for the “right to the countryside” that realizes the democratic potential of cooperative business models with regards to energy policy and economic development must start with its institutional and cultural legacy.

\textsuperscript{90} Cronon, Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).
\textsuperscript{91} David Harvey, “The Right to the City,” New Left Review 53 (September-October), 2008: 23-40.
Research Questions

The ultimate goal of this research is to explore how community ownership can be political, especially when – as is the case with electric cooperatives – there arises a policy nexus such as energy that makes these institutions potential leaders for economic and social transformations. In the following chapters, I ask:

- What can we learn from 80 years of community-owned energy about the potential and limits of economic democracy in America?

- What are the confluences and contradictions between infrastructure design, community ownership, and the potential for local democracy in electric co-ops?

More specifically, I ask a set of historical questions about the REA’s visions of what electric cooperatives should be, how they enforced these visions across the country, and what was the ultimate impact of the resulting institutional cultures on the shape of rural America, including:

- How did the REA use federal loans for rural electrification as a way to discipline the rural American landscape for the purposes of national economic growth? How did rural electrification consequently contribute to building a coordinated infrastructure for a transforming capitalist economy?

- How did this agenda revalue land and create new spatially reinforced inequities in rural America?

- How were community co-ops re-imagined as local engines of economic growth in service of this new economy?

- How did that constrain the ability of these co-ops to function as community-oriented institutions for fulfilling local development goals through a democratic process?

I then turn to more recent events in electric co-ops to ask:

- What is the democratic legacy of electric co-ops in the United States?

- Do electric co-ops offer venues for local democracy around energy issues and economic development in the twenty-first century?

- How have different communities reimagined this infrastructural legacy from the 1930s to address modern problems through democracy? Are these
redemocratization movements creating new institutional structures that create more humane economies around energy? And what can they teach us about the possibilities for authentic local deliberation and socially responsible economics?

- Can a re-envisioning of electricity infrastructure contribute to building a high quality of place?

**Research Design**

**Combining Historical and Qualitative Research**

In this dissertation, I combine historical and qualitative research to explore the implementation and practice of economic democracy in electric co-ops in America over nearly eighty years. Through archival research and interviews, I explain how this country-wide network of electric co-ops was conceptually promising but insufficient in practice for strengthening economic democracy in rural America when they were founded in the mid-twentieth century. I then explore how redemocratization movements have gained traction within different co-op territories and, more broadly, how possibilities for community revision have been institutionalized and contested within electric co-ops.

While organized (for the most part) chronologically, this dissertation is presented as a coherent narrative of experimentation and change, as opposed to an introductory historical background chapter followed by a main focus of case study research. Rather, the historical work and the case studies conducted in this project were both necessary to answer my research questions, and I have approached them as being in ongoing dialogue with each other throughout. As I explain in more detail below, my historical inquiry is in the service of building a “usable past,” which promotes a deeper understanding of the confluence of circumstance, experimentation, and contestation that ultimately created present conditions and constraints, in order to demystify the status quo as contingent, not optimal.

In institutions such as electric co-ops, which not only have a long history, but also deep cultural values that rely on a particular understanding of that history, the past continues to be an important actor in the present. According to the common popular understandings of these co-ops’ institutional legacy, these organizations were built to
promote a “cooperative difference” in how businesses can interact with their communities and support local development. By conducting primary historical research on the specifics of design and implementation of the fundamental mechanisms credited with this difference, I am able to disentangle somewhat the actual institutional legacies of electric co-ops and the symbolic work that historical narrative continues to perform within these co-ops. In the service of understanding recent movements for redemocratization, this critical and continual revisiting of the past is vital for understanding the possibility of future institutional innovation.

**Data Collection**

The data for this project comes from archival research, interviews and participant observation, and recent co-op publications and media coverage:

**Archival Research**

A surprising methodological discovery I made during this research was that archival research can be incredibly fun. Like being part of a detective story, archival research involves tracing clues between agencies and individuals, following a narrative line through many years and between disparate physical locations.

Archives can be anywhere, not just in designated buildings with librarians and finding guides. Some of the most fruitful “archives” I worked with in this research were the records cabinets at individual electric co-ops, which yielded an (often dusty) treasure trove of photos from decades of annual meetings, binders of board meeting minutes and financial reports, random collections of newspaper clippings from co-op activists and community historians, old co-op newsletters and educational materials, and correspondence.

I relied extensively on the following collections:

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration:
Record Group 221, Rural Electrification Administration, particularly the following records:
- Project Case Files
- Application and Loan Division Records
- Finance Division Office Files
- Utilization Division Records
- Information Services Division Records
• Area Offices and Staff Divisions Field Activities Reports

Library of Congress:
• Thomas G. Corcoran Collection
• Mercer Green Johnston Papers
• Judson King Papers
• Gifford Pinchot Papers
• WPA Life Histories Collection

National Rural Electric Cooperative Association Library:
• Complete collection of *Rural Electrification News*
• NRECA reports and publications
• Individual co-op newsletters and publications

Co-op Archives:
• Washington Electric Cooperative, East Montpelier, Vermont
• Holy Cross Energy Cooperative, Glenwood Springs, Colorado
• Orcas Power and Light Cooperative, Eastsound, Washington
• Parkland Water and Light Company, Tacoma, Washington

**Interviews and Participant Observation**

Between 2010 and 2012, I conducted interviews with co-op members, board members, and/or staff of ten rural electric cooperatives, the NRECA, the USDA Rural Utilities Service, and newer energy cooperative movements unaffiliated with the REA. Preliminary interviews helped me pick three case studies, in which I conducted more extensive interviews and engaged in participant observation.

Participant observation included attending annual meetings, board meetings, and co-op workshops. I also presented on the history of the REA and democracy in electric co-ops at a KFTC New Power leadership training event in Lexington, KY, in April 2012. Simply sitting in the co-ops’ headquarters while I was doing archival research resulted in a number of helpful conversations and allowed me to get to know the co-ops a little bit as workplaces. Finally, because electric co-op advocates are an incredibly welcoming, thoughtful community, I had the great fortune to stay at the houses of several co-op members while traveling for my fieldwork, which resulted in long philosophical conversations late into the night about co-ops, environmental change, and civic engagement in America.
Publications and Media

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention the massive amounts of public advocacy that occurs in the current electric co-op network. KFTC and the NRECA both have active multi-author blogs covering a wide range of topics on energy policy (usually, from the opposite political perspective), the co-ops all publish newsletters, and some of the more active co-ops have garnered a wealth of recent media attention.

Methodology

While the data used in this study were collected through reasonably traditional historical and qualitative methods, my methodology design requires some discussion. My research question changed very quickly due to discrepancies in the public face of co-ops and their actual practices – a turn of events that should not be surprising given the history of research on institutions of economic democracy or other kinds of democratic resource management.92

Because my initial questions about alternative landscapes of democratic control of energy resources came to an abrupt halt in the face of the systemic dearth of democratic participation in the electric co-op network, my research changed from more of an objective question about influences on development to a political question about democracy as a community resource and its uneasy relationship with economic development. My research question was normative to begin with, in that it sought to understand alternatives to free-market capitalism as a way of organizing society (spatially as well as socially), but with the realization that my chosen case study had been more-or-less co-opted by economic interests from day one (in many ways quite explicitly at the national level, as I will show in Chapter 2), my research aims shifted towards understanding this history of co-optation and possibilities for communities to take back control of institutions nominally built for them.

This aim impacted both my historical focus and my choice of case studies. Initially hoping to do a more comparative study that traced cooperative influences on development, I switched to focusing historically on the question of why cooperative models were not

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more prominent forces in local development, despite their ubiquity and national connectedness, while my case studies are unabashedly selecting on a dependent variable: the existence of civic engagement movements around redemocratizing electric co-ops and reintroducing non-economic community goals into these co-ops’ missions.

I have consequently come to see this project as heavily influenced by the tradition of participatory action research. PAR is a methodology that can mean a variety of things, from a member of a group participating in and then studying an intervention as it unfolds to a broader political orientation towards research as an emancipatory endeavor. PAR in this tradition is interested in producing “critical knowledge aimed at social transformation” through “problematiz[ing] those taken-for granted aspects of organizational life.”

“Unlike traditional social science research that frowns on intervention in any way in the research setting,” Herr and Anderson write, “action research demands some form of intervention,” even if that intervention is simply “the investigation of ideology and power within [an] organization and society,” an approach they define as emancipatory research. This style of research particularly encourages self-reflection of one’s role in research and in society. Moreover, as one’s role as a researcher can change depending on the context, throughout the study, or even just be amorphous, they further suggest: “our obligation as researchers is to interrogate our multiple positionalities in relationship to the question under study.”

Of course, their description of “traditional” research here is an ideal type that has been a subject of hot contestation for several decades now. Studying anthropology at the University of Chicago in the early 2000s, my early training as a social scientist was heavily steeped in constructivism and critical theory; my understanding of what it means to do critical cultural research is consequently very much in the ideological tradition that I cannot help but influence my subjects and that the act of doing research, even (especially?) for the most objective of researchers, is implicated deeply in politics and power relations.

95 This approach was influenced by theorists such as Arjun Appadurai, James Clifford, James Fernandez, Kim Fortun, Donna Haraway, Michel Rolph-Trouillot, Michael Taussig, and Hayden White.
It is an interesting question to ask whether I am an insider or outsider in the electric co-op communities I studied. There are many ways in which I am an insider: I grew up in electric co-op territory, and I learned about Holy Cross Energy because of a visit to family members who are co-op members. I am also a member of a broader community of Americans currently interested in local democracy and community-based change. There are many ways to argue that my agenda is deeply aligned with those of many of my research subjects – not on all matters, certainly, but on the connecting thread of valuing community engagement and local empowerment against technocracy and placeless global capitalism. Certainly, this research was personal to me in that it allowed me to ask deep questions about parts of the societal structures I am swept up in and shaped by every day.

There is also a thread of radical planning / critical social science research that views all research as a form of action research. In a debate with David Harvey, Donna Haraway once mused on academic writing: “I think we ought to be doing a lot more propaganda work, in all sorts of forms, and I think that looking at our academic work as a kind of performance art is not a bad idea.”\textsuperscript{96} Especially in a planning department, the act of research is inherently normative, always framed by stories we tell ourselves about the possibility for a better world, and therefore, in a very literal way, propaganda of the sort Haraway recommends.

As strange as it is to say that historical research can be “participatory,” there are currently several quite radical/critical/social change-oriented strands of historical inquiry that firmly align with the PAR’s “emancipatory emphasis.” One thing I have come to discover, in the process of doing interdisciplinary research and trying to figure out what my field is within planning, is that “histories of [something]” are analytical frameworks – they’re a way of being theoretical. The growing field of the history of capitalism, for example, is a radical-critical kind of economic history that takes as its foundational assumption not just that different kinds of capitalism exist but that these capitalisms are hybrid and fluid things. As a pedagogical tool, the history of capitalism thus pursues a “usable past,” that is, historical inquiry that promotes action, or at least greater understanding, towards economic quandaries of the present. Environmental history,

similarly, starts from a radical place – that there is no way to separate human and natural activities, and that ideologies that claim this separation ultimately cause problems of social inequity and environmental degradation. Infrastructure studies, which I discussed briefly below, are one of the more interesting recent places in scholarship where these two radical “histories of” frameworks converge. All of these histories tend towards narratives that the world we live in is one that has been created and that action in the present must start by grappling with these inherited ideologies, environments, and relationships.

An Infrastructure Approach

The lens of “infrastructure” is an explicit choice that positions my work within a growing critical literature that questions the inevitability of design of systems basic to the functioning of complex societies.

Recent studies of infrastructure have sought to combine political ecology’s critical approach to human-nature dichotomies with a Science, Technology, and Society (STS)/History of Science focus on the construction of modernity and technocracy. In the last decade or so, these studies have converged on a method developed by Bowker and Star, which they call “infrastructural inversion.” A simple idea in theory, but rich in practice because of the obfuscatory nature of infrastructural systems as social relations, 

infrastructural inversion is simply a method of repositioning the social and political factors behind infrastructure design to be at the forefront of studies of the system. Bowker and Star introduce infrastructural inversion as “a struggle against the tendency of infrastructure to disappear.... It means learning to look closely at technologies and arrangements that, by design and by habit, tend to fade into the woodwork (sometimes literally!).”


98 Bowker and Star, Sorting Things Out, 34.
Repositioning infrastructure as contested and contingent outcomes of social and political processes, rather than simply a technical system of physical components, illuminates these sociotechnical systems not just as infrastructure but as contributing to structure in the sociological sense - what anthropologist of the Panama Canal watershed Ashley Carse recently referred to as the “world-ordering arrangements embedded in the systems that many of us take for granted.”\(^9\) That is, infrastructure systems facilitate certain ways of being in society at the expense of others, create their own distributional logics, and change the rules of the game for gaining and holding power or privilege. Star thus calls on infrastructure scholars to read infrastructural systems as a kind of “master narrative,” in that they often operate with “a single voice that does not problematize diversity” and “speaks unconsciously from the presumed center of things.” Edwards says essentially the same thing from a more political perspective, arguing that infrastructures “act like laws” and that to “live within the multiple, interlocking infrastructures of modern societies is to know one’s place.”\(^10\)

The above perspectives take, essentially, a historical institutionalist approach to infrastructure. By reframing infrastructural systems as “part of human organization, and as problematic as any other,” these recent studies of infrastructure highlight the path dependencies inherent in infrastructural design.\(^10\) What this means is that infrastructure does not coalesce in particular forms because it is somehow universally optimal, but rather because it is path-constrained based on earlier decisions about technology, management, scope, etc. This applies not just to material technology and the built environment, but to standards and classifications – the social innovations that allow infrastructural systems to run smoothly. For example, what counts as a “rural” line or whether electricity is billed as a service or as an accumulation of kilowatt-hours are both as much part of the infrastructure as are the poles and wires that deliver power. Equally important to the researcher, Bowker and Star suggest, are the “spaces between” classifications, what is left non-standardized.\(^10\)

To get at such understandings, infrastructure scholars have begun to develop their own system of classifications to question previous ones. Edwards, for example, encourages

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looking at infrastructures “simultaneously from a variety of scales of force, time, and social organization.” Bowker and Star suggest that infrastructural systems have a topology with “texture and depth.” Carse asks us to look for the places where infrastructure becomes “visible” – a way of asking how infrastructure does different kinds of work on those affected depending on the geographical, institutional, and socioeconomic position of the subject.103

It is worth mentioning here that the linear narrative of technological evolution has been questioned in studies of technology and environmental history for much longer than there has been a sense of “infrastructure studies”: for example, Thomas Hughes proposes in his canonical history of electrification the application of the concept of “reverse salients” – an idea he takes from military histories of studying mistakes and detours that hold up progress – to understandings of infrastructural development; while Donald Worster shows how technological and social decisions can result in “infrastructure traps” – essentially, infrastructure that, once in place, creates the necessity for increasingly more infrastructural investment to sustain the original system, such that it becomes a “straightjacket that prevent[s] a genuine choice among alternative futures.”104

An infrastructure focus does not imply the need to take a side on the structure versus agency debate. Infrastructure is not fully structure; it is merely a reorganization of resources through which political and societal structure can be contested and redefined, and the scaffolding upon which future (creative, agentic, oppositional) acts can play out. William Cronon perhaps explains this most clearly in Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West, in which he explains the power of railroads to determine the financial and symbolic success of cities as a new kind of natural order, or second nature. Cronon’s second nature can be understood as the societal reorganization of natural materials in ways that change people’s perceptions of local resources and constrain or facilitate further actions in new ways. “Despite the subtly differing logic that lay behind” undeveloped nature and the second nature of the railroad network, Cronon writes, “the geography of second nature was in its own way as compelling as the geography of first nature, so [city] boosters and others

103 Carse, “Nature as Infrastructure,” 543.
often forgot the distinction between them. Both seemed quite ‘natural.’”

Railroads changed notions of distance and neighbor, the same way waterways had previously done “naturally” for thousands of years. Suddenly, places connected to major cities by rail lines seemed to have a natural advantage over places still limited to road transport. Crucially, these railroads were built where and how they were because of political will and economic interests; in other words, infrastructure generally serves the interest of (societal) power and reinforces it.

Running electrical lines and building new power generation facilities changed the “natural” advantage of rural places in the U.S. in as profound ways as the railroads did a half-century before. Towns that previously conducted business by the hours of the sun and the advantages of the different seasons suddenly had artificial light, refrigeration, and worldly information at their fingertips. Rural electricity was a major step in the broader transportation, information, and product distribution revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that broke down many of the distinctions between urban and rural life in the rapidly growing United States. This process created advantages for many, but also destroyed possibilities for others. Tracing the new resources and constraints made possible by rural electrification from an infrastructure perspective illuminates both the gains and losses that its particular implementation brought for rural American communities.

Social structure also has an infrastructure—a set of norms and expectations that guide social action. Arguably, democracy is a building block of social infrastructure. As new power lines make possible new technological paradigms, a network of cooperatives constructs a second nature of local governance as well. The underlying relationships these institutional norms make possible, the new flows they create to channel resources, and the ways they facilitate communication also reshapes the world into a new (human and social) nature.

The main “infrastructural inversion” in this research thus unearths the politics and ideological visions that created REA-style rural electrification through cooperatives, and explores the institutional and material legacies of these decisions.

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Critical Theory and Practice

So this is all just to say that my project is in the service of change. My tendency in scholarship – a common one given the subject matters and tools of a critical planning scholar – has been to figure out how things are inherently broken, to take the world as we know it apart for the purpose of identifying latent power relationships and structural inequalities. Even preeminent scholars such as David Harvey throw up their hands when it comes to fixing the problems of neoliberal social relations, calling for the next generation of scholars to figure things out.106 Perhaps I am trying to answer that call, and, thus, for my dissertation, I wanted to be more constructive in my research.

Of course, research on the other side has its own pitfall – that of assuming that the “positive” (as opposed to “critical”) subject under study is an answer to everything, or even that it is an answer to the specific problem compelling the study. In this case, for example, I could easily point to how electric co-ops have invested in renewable energy, managed national loans for (non-electricity-related) community development projects, built employee housing in high-rent areas, provided members with political and scientific educational opportunities, and so on... without looking at the complexities and uncertainties of all of these social initiatives within the larger co-op network.

Much of the literature on co-ops and economic democracy is like this. As I explained earlier, the hook of such studies is that there are already great things currently happening in the world of co-ops, ESOPs, land-trusts, etc. and that these are the beginnings of a transformation – a compelling thought, to be sure. Unfortunately, this claim can come across as a bit anodyne – it implies that through smarter, more reflective business practices, a peaceful reformation can occur, in direct contrast to the experiences of most social movements in most places, where struggle has been and continues to be necessary.

The challenge is to research the implementation of ideas without the need to come up with a definitive message (of either “this is why the world is terrible” or “I have found the solution!”), but to honestly assess organizational innovation as a social experiment with potential positive, negative, and neutral/mixed consequences. Herr and Anderson note that

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part of doing critical research is the realization that “problem posing rather than merely problem solving” is a valid and necessary goal.\textsuperscript{107} To Brulle, this method of seeking change by raising questions is the ultimate value of critical theory, and the justification for doing critical research. Arguing that critical theory is a way of “bringing the processes that create and maintain social institutions into our collective vision, so that the ‘objective and natural’ form of those social institutions ceases to exist,” Brulle proposes:

Critical theory thus defines a particular type of research program that can unify theory and practice. The focus of the research is on the concerns and questions of a group in society. The goals of the research are to form a cogent model of the social order that can stimulate the particular social group’s self-reflective capacity and to facilitate public, democratic deliberation over what actions should be taken.\textsuperscript{108}

Along similar lines, Harvey argues that academics are thus “in a critical position to deepen the ongoing debate on how to change the course of human development.”\textsuperscript{109} To engage in this kind of academic inquiry, I follow Cooper and Mele’s theoretical positioning within a “middle ground between political economy and cultural approaches in urban studies,” which focuses on the “interactions between structural processes and everyday practices at specific times in particular places.”\textsuperscript{110}

Data Analysis

To manage and interpret the data produced by such inductive research, I used the methodological framework of “process tracing.” Process tracing is a qualitative research methodology for addressing comparative historical research questions of a political or sociological nature, which focuses on defining the causal mechanisms at play in individual cases and linking them in an uninterrupted sequence of causal and/or interacting events that leads to particular outcomes.\textsuperscript{111} It is particularly helpful in establishing rigor and

\textsuperscript{107} Herr and Andersen, \textit{The Action Research Dissertation}, 27.
\textsuperscript{109} David Harvey, \textit{The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism} (Oxford University Press, 2010), 241
comparability in research that is non-controlled – i.e. where it is impossible to establish complete comparisons for all but one independent variable. Rather than simply measuring the effect of the presence of an independent variable in a controlled setting, process tracing encourages the researcher to follow a sequential (but not necessarily linear) path started by the independent variable, which may include interaction effects with other independent variables at various points in a causal sequence. Thus, it is possible to trace the effect of an array of existing independent variables in different cases at the same time, or as in my case, where the object of interest is the range of experience, to focus more on the different paths interacting variables can produce. Process tracing is often used when it is impossible not to select on the dependent variable (for example, in studies interested in how similar outcomes were produced in different contexts), but can also be used to trace the influence of one factor – e.g. the existence of cooperative utilities – in different contexts. From an historiographical perspective, process tracing also allows the researcher to incorporate “feedback loops in social phenomena,” the idea being that observed changes in the dependent variable can later (chronologically-speaking) impact the originally defined independent variables, which will then consequently differently influence the dependent variable.112

Chapter Summary

The aim of this dissertation is to take community ownership seriously as a subject for critical study, rather than a panacea for neoliberal global capitalism.113 As such, I focus on the practice of democracy as the organizing managerial logic of such institutions of “economic democracy.” My study of co-op democracy is threefold: first, I explore current theoretical discourse on the practice of democracy in America and the expected benefits of different models of democracy; second, I revisit the origins of rural electric co-ops in the 1930s to understand historically how co-op democracy was conceived, implemented, and

Peter A. Hall, “Aligning Ontology and Methodology in Comparative Politics,” in J. Mahoney and D. Rueschemeyer (eds), Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 373-404.

113 In doing so, I am answering a call from DeFilippis (2004), Cooper (2008), and others, who argue that idealistic views of co-ops are in fact damaging to the practice of actual co-ops, whose operational constraints are much messier and constrained than existing co-op theory presumes.
maintained across America in these community-owned institutions; and, finally, I discuss my research on three case studies of electric cooperatives which have had recent movements, led by co-op members, for revitalizing community participation in co-op decision-making. In exploring the role of democracy in electric co-ops over nearly 80 years, my dissertation identifies a set of conditions necessary for local control to lead to transformative environmental and development outcomes.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Background – Economic Democracy at the Nexus of American Democracy and Capitalism

In Chapter 2, I examine in greater depth current thought on the practice of democracy in America, and the potential for democracy to be the basis for economic decision-making in institutions such as co-ops. In doing so, I consider a long-standing debate about the fundamental compatibility of capitalism and democracy as organizing principles of American life. I also explore the relationship between democracy and environmental stewardship in theory and practice.

Chapter 3: A Landscape of Indebtedness: American National Development Ideologies and Rural Electrification in the 1930s

In this chapter, I explain how REA funding contributed to the creation of a national network of community-owned cooperatives, but constrained possibilities for the practice of local democracy in these co-ops. Working with archival data from the REA, the NRECA, and individual co-ops, I particularly focus on the role of debt in rural electrification. Tracing the ways in which the REA used national loans to co-ops to dictate the terms by which rural electrification was implemented, the chapter explores how co-ops were incentivized to value a narrow form of member participation focused on volunteer labor and consumerism, but excluding possibilities for democratic deliberation about the role of electrification in local development. In revisiting the historical origins of electric co-ops as a national economic project, the chapter further hypothesizes their role in defining the American rural landscape in the mid-twentieth century.

While the REA's solution for rural electrification brought electricity to many communities unlikely to get it otherwise, electrification via REA funding came with a
number of caveats. The REA required projects to be self-liquidating: no grants were given for rural electrification (although the REA did supply free business advice and materials for expansion of sales), and the loan approval process included an assessment of communities’ potential for agricultural and economic development. Communities applying for REA loans thus had to prove not just that they needed electricity, but that they were good investments. Those who qualified for loans (and not all did) subsequently discovered that meeting REA debt obligations required a program of steady business growth that encouraged co-ops to promote a culture of consumerism amongst their members. Early cooperatives quickly learned to aggressively market the all-electric home and farm, and the federal government further aided in promoting electricity consumption by offering personal loans for families to wire their homes and purchase electric appliances. In other words, rural electrification encouraged a new electric lifestyle defined by double indebtedness to the government: community indebtedness in the form of loans to the cooperatives, and personal indebtedness undertaken by families for new electric equipment to help build their cooperatives’ electric load and pay back their community debt to the REA.

This mode of electrification through debt financing is worth further examination, especially because it was not the only model for addressing the unequal distribution of electricity. Other fights against the for-profit power industry – from the Public Power movement in the Pacific Northwest to Gifford Pinchot’s comprehensive Giant Power plan for government oversight of power in Pennsylvania – would have also distributed electricity comprehensively and cheaply to rural America, without the debt burden. These plans offered a wide variety of public ownership options, from completely socialized power

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15 Giant Power was a plan for, essentially, a public-private partnership to run a heavily regulated monopoly-based power system in Pennsylvania, which based its operations on large generating plants to be built at coal mines, to reduce the shipping costs of coal and also to take advantage of economies of scale to combine energy generation with byproduct recovery operations. The power generated at the mines would be distributed extensively and cheaply by government mandate to rural and urban areas, as well as to similarly regulated electric rail transportation networks. Giant Power was defeated in the Pennsylvania legislature in 1926, but it is credited for influencing national power policy in the 1930s. For a discussion of the history of Giant Power, see Jean Christie, “Giant Power: A Progressive Proposal of the Nineteen-Twenties,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 4, 1972: 480-507. More details about the Giant Power model can be found in the Gifford Pinchot collection, Library of Congress.
to government ownership of just the generating plants or distribution lines. Some degree of public power made sense in the policy environment of the 1930s; at the time, electricity was one of a set of services targeted as necessary for modern living but lacking in rural areas, including road maintenance, telephone lines, fire response, and schools. Many of these services were ultimately funded by taxes or grants. So why, one might ask, should the federal government have promoted electricity as a mostly private enterprise that had to be completely solvent?

The answer lies in the economic goals of the REA and the political environment in which its program of rural electrification was designed. In this chapter, I discuss how rural electrification came to be of national interest largely for its potential to stimulate industrial activity in rural America and create a vast new consumer base for electrical products, both of which would help revitalize the Depression-era economy. I further explain how the electric cooperative model arose as an institutional solution to contentious politics in the 1930s over whether power should be a for-profit or public enterprise. Focusing on community-owned co-ops as their main institutional model allowed the REA to skirt this debate politically, while still keeping a hand in the specific implementation of rural electrification systems through the structure of their loan agreements. In other words, co-ops allowed the REA to maintain some of the advantages of public power, without inviting public criticism about government waste.

Given the powerful symbolism and general public commitment to democracy in America, it nonetheless may seem strange to the reader that democratic engagement by electric cooperative members is so low. Despite the REA’s market focus, there is nothing inherently contradictory about consumerism and democracy. Similarly, there is nothing inherently contradictory about debt and democracy. The use of debt by a governing body can be socially creative (e.g., arguably, the stimulus act) as much as it can be socially regressive (e.g., arguably, IMF austerity policies).

I show, however, that the REA’s narrow definition of economic growth propagated an institutional model that limited co-ops’ abilities to function as local democracies. This growth orientation also had unintended consequences for the evolution of the American

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116 See, for example, David Graeber, Debt: The First 5,000 Years (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2011), 2-4.
countryside, further creating structural disincentives to participation. In an effort to restore the vitality of rural America, the REA’s focus on consumerism and industrial efficiency ironically led to the emptying out of the countryside, the consolidation of farms, and the proliferation of a medium-density residential pattern that, in partnership with other New Deal programs such as the FHA and HOLC, arguably contributed to the beginnings of exurban sprawl. Importantly, this historical legacy does not preclude co-ops from evolving into more participatory organizations, but if electric co-ops are to become inclusive venues for community development, I argue that it is necessary to first understand what they were initially designed to accomplish and how they need to change.

Chapter 4: Reclaiming Democracy in Vermont, Colorado, and Kentucky

Building out of the argument in Chapter 3 that co-ops were non-participatory by design, this chapter looks at three case studies of recent co-op member movements to redemocratize their cooperatives. In these three cases, redemocratization happened in quite different ways and for different reasons; viewing this spectrum thus allows for a deep discussion about the potentials of local democracy in resource management and economic development. Practically, this chapter is interested in the various ways co-ops can be used as a venue for civic engagement and repoliticization of issues such as local resource use and economic development goals. Theoretically, the chapter explores how local communities can reorient rational-bureaucratic market-focused business models away from abstract universal economic values to tangible local ones.

My case studies follow three different models of community engagement:

In my first case study, starting in 1974 in East Montpelier, Vermont, an ad hoc coalition of members of the Washington Electric Co-op formed the Committee for an Effective Co-op (COFEC). COFEC’s mission was to challenge existing co-op practices and longtime board members whose interests they no longer felt represented the co-op. While the beginning of COFEC’s existence was marked by contentious politics, over the next couple of decades, they took control of the co-op board of directors and reoriented the co-op towards an environmental agenda, including building their own landfill gas-to-energy power plant and investing in local wind power projects.
In my second case study in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, Aspen Ski Company’s sustainability director took an interest in climate change mitigation, spearheading a campaign to reduce the carbon footprint of the Holy Cross Energy Cooperative, of which the world-famous ski resort is a member, and ultimately encouraging rapid turnover on the co-op board over the course of a decade. Under this new leadership, Holy Cross Energy shifted towards a renewable energy and energy efficiency agenda and started experimenting with funding social programs such as on-bill financing of energy efficiency home improvements (loans to consumers paid off by the efficiency savings on their monthly electricity bill). This case study considers how place-based businesses can contribute to civic engagement, as well as the localization of climate change issues through Western Colorado’s dependence on its ski industry.

Finally, in Kentucky, a local community development organization, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), has been organizing electric co-op members in Eastern Kentucky to run for their co-op boards. KFTC’s “New Power” campaign is a massive initiative targeting sixteen distribution co-ops that make up the membership of a generation and transmission (G&T) cooperative, which provides all of the power sold to co-op members in Eastern Kentucky, mostly through coal-fired power plants. This ongoing fight has drawn co-op members together from all over the state to talk about Kentucky’s energy policies and the community impacts of different kinds of energy investments, as well as the potential for more local participatory democracy.

While these movements all resulted in lasting impacts for their communities, I ultimately question their lasting democratic legacy. In this spirit, I conclude the chapter with a longer discussion on reading the history of participation trends in electric co-ops. In this discussion, I examine simple quantitative measures of co-op participation as well as reflections on participation from interviews and archives to understand the role of participation in co-ops over time. I end with new hypotheses about the contributions of electric co-ops to local democracy in practice.

Chapter 5: Conclusion: Oppositional Energy and Civil Economics

Finally, in my concluding chapter, I revisit the potential of energy as political empowerment. Calling for oppositional energy in addition to alternative energy as a way of
envisioning more equitable energy futures, I discuss how energy infrastructure continues to be deeply linked to economic ideology, as well as how new institutional approaches to energy innovation could contribute to more community-focused economic practices. I end by calling for a more “civil economics” to be the basis for development. In doing so, I call on institutions of economic democracy such as electric cooperatives to act on their political potential.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Background – Economic Democracy at the Nexus of American Democracy and Capitalism

Democratic Possibilities and Constraints

There are two arguments for why we should care about levels and norms of democratic practice in co-ops. The first, building on a wealth of quite pragmatic literature about social capital, civic capacity, community coalitions, etc., is that civic participation of the kind that a vibrant co-op democracy would foster is good for communities – allows them to get more done, to make better places (ecologically, economically, and socially). The second reason, however, which is a little less obvious, but possibly more crucial for the subject of environmental stewardship and the possibility of systemic change in general, is that the exercise of certain forms of democracy in America right now can be seen almost as a radical practice.

Political scientist Frank M. Bryan writes that America has had a “lovers’ quarrel with democracy” and that the underpinning of the American republic – “a citizenry acquainted with democracy” – needs repair. Studies show that trends in democratic participation, even the most mundane as voting in elections, are low; opportunities for people to think, deliberate, and create publicly are even fewer and farther between. While democracy scholars note that civic engagement tends to be cyclical and caution against interpreting downward participation trends as irrecoverable loss, the structure of twenty-first century

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life from commuting time to television watching habits have been blamed for encouraging
general disengagement among the American public from civic life.\textsuperscript{119}

Many argue that our current economic environment is incompatible with sustaining
meaningful communities or participation. For example, Stephen A. Marglin asserts that,
derunder capitalist logic, the only community of importance is the nation – Adam Smith, he
notes wryly, was not interested in explaining the wealth of towns.\textsuperscript{120} Without common
livelihood concerns (e.g., a common forest or fishery, or an interwoven network of local
businesses supporting a regional industry) to motivate local interest in the success of
places, the scales of community that retain functional importance in a neoliberal economy
impoverish opportunities for local governance. Communities of significance become
contracted to the individual family (\textit{amoral familism}\textsuperscript{121}) and expanded to the near
meaninglessness of the nation as a whole (and the resultant problems inherent in
nationalism). This de-emphasis on the middle scale – the community, town, or region –
seriously challenges the potency of communities as sites of action. The “inability of people
acting at the local level to exert control over the basic structures that govern their lives” in
the current global political economy, DeFilippis writes, “raises vital questions for the
future of even the notion of a democratic society in the United States.”\textsuperscript{122} Dolores Hayden,
similarly, reads the inscription of mobile capital production into the expanding American
landscape of sprawl – a politically decentered form of land use that privileges the pursuit of
individual desires – leading her to call for a “sustained political and economic critique” of
American development logic.\textsuperscript{123} In a political economy and built environment increasingly
hostile to sustaining coherent communities, public social interaction becomes governed by

\textsuperscript{119} See, for example: Putnam, \textit{Bowling Alone}, 213, 229-238.
\textsuperscript{120} Stephen A. Marglin, \textit{The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community}
\textsuperscript{121} Robert D. Putnam, \textit{Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton
University Press, 1993).
\textsuperscript{122} DeFilippis, \textit{Unmaking Goliath}, 6.
\textsuperscript{123} Hayden, Dolores, \textit{Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000} (New York: Vintage Press,
2004).
“moral minimalism,” the “morals” of which are often based on maintaining property values and privacy more so than on building public goods.

These questions of the market impact on civic life go straight to the heart of enduring controversies about the rights and responsibilities of a democratic society. While some posit that there is an unavoidable tradeoff between community and individual freedoms, the latter of which the market nominally provides, others define real freedom as exercising the ability to participate more fully in local decision-making and, crucially, accepting the responsibility to participate. Gerald Frug argues that an important “aspect of liberty” is “public freedom.” To Frug, this freedom means equitable access to “local institutions [that] provide a mechanism through which people [can] engage in, and take pleasure from, the process of working with strangers on common problems.” Along similar lines, David Held argues that democracy as a system of governance is explicitly aimed at working within the competing narratives of a diverse society, and that belief in the democratic process is the overarching value, or authority, that can “link and mediate among competing prescriptive concerns.” A functional democracy, by Held’s definition, encourages citizens to determine “the conditions of their own lives,” while ensuring that the exercise of individualistic tendencies does not “negate the rights of others.” Held’s vision of democratic rights and responsibilities would ultimately mean a redefinition of freedoms: for example, Held argues, the rights to unchecked material accumulation give some citizens freedoms at the expense of others, while the rights to pursue talents do not. He also makes a compelling case that maintaining personal freedom requires political awareness and control of the agenda. Though the ideas of a thriving public sphere autonomous to the market and requiring some measure of individual political responsibility probably sound draconian and stifling to some people, such visions offer the possible for a more flexible, equitable, and adaptable process of

establishing civic authority, without subjecting people to one moral code or requiring mindless loyalty.127

This literature indicates a need to create opportunities for imagining structural differences. In a discussion about why there is not more local democratic engagement in America, there are many “realistic” reasons for why it’s impractical to participate. Bryan and Morris P. Fiorina, among others, cite the realities of the modern workday as reasons Americans are not as participatory as scholars of democracy would like them to be. Because the fundamental characteristics of American society supposedly creates an environment unfavorable to civic engagement, studies of participatory processes consequently offer expected caveats about the limits one can expect from “real” town meetings or community businesses. In the current context, such analyses conclude, participation becomes something either solely ideological or something done when the cost/benefit scale tips in the individual’s favor – which is why a common critique of participatory processes is that without full participation, they become taken over by interest groups who are often explicitly not good for society as a whole.128

However, others view such “realities” as byproducts of intentional political projects and call for more structural critique of the social conditions that disincentivize participation. Frug, for example, argues that “accommodation to bureaucracy” is another way in which issues that should be public decisions end up creeping out of the hands – and attention span – of the public.129 Or, as historian Richard White describes such matters:

Planning is an exercise of power, and in a modern state much real power is suffused with boredom. The agents of planning are usually boring; the planning process is boring; the implementation of plans is always boring. In a democracy boredom works for bureaucracies and corporations as smell works for a skunk. It keeps danger way. Power does not have to be exercised behind the scenes. It can be open. The audience is asleep. The modern world is forged amidst our inattention.130

129 Frug, City Making, 23
130 White, The Organic Machine, 64.
To those who, still focused on the “realities” of modern life, would argue that it is overly optimistic to expect ordinary people to engage in the practice of local decision-making under more favorable conditions, Frug writes:

These anti-democratic sentiments...are rarely based on empirical evidence or...personal experience.... Rather than reflecting an insight into ‘human nature,’ as is often claimed, these sentiments are an expression of anti-democratic prejudice. This form of prejudice shares many of the ingredients classically associated with other kinds of prejudice: the objects of the prejudice are often depicted as lazy, ignorant, and appropriately kept in their place.131

Structurally speaking, then, the “realities” that constrain participation can be re-envisioned not as starting conditions for community planning, but as outcomes of a process that is open to revision. Moreover, as Sampson argues, economic and societal structure by default creates communities, whether or not they explicitly self-identify and organize as such, defined by quality of life disparities.132 Identifying this combination of shared inequities and deterrence from local decision-making invites a critique of broader structural conditions, as well as the fostering of a richer imaginative dialogue about societal forms more supportive of community self-determination.

It is worth highlighting here that democratic participation can mean two functionally different things in practice, depending on what structural conditions one accepts as given and/or unchangeable: either it can mean majority rule – which, as is often the case in America right now, privileges a culture of participation driven by interest groups – or it can mean self-determination – the active and creative working out of interests by fully engaged communities.133 Many see the only way to get from the former vision to the latter as an economic project; specifically, interest group captured representative democracy is often critiqued as the inevitable outcome of an inequitable economic system.134 In a modern reading of Tocqueville’s interest in equality versus liberty, for example, preeminent democracy theorist Robert A. Dahl writes that “an assumption

131 Frug, City Making, 23.
common in political theory since the classical Greek era” is that “a rough equality in the
distribution of resources...facilitates a rough equality in the distribution of power, or more
specifically, in control over the government (or governments) of the state.” Whereas “an
equality of resources seemed altogether possible, perhaps even inevitable,” in the early
days of the United States, when it was possible to imagine the mostly agrarian country as
one moving towards politically engaged yeoman farmers, Dahl writes, those visions of
democracy fit badly into the “reality of the new economic order in which economic
enterprises [have] generated inequalities among citizens: in wealth, income, social
standing, education, knowledge, occupational prestige and authority, and many other
resources.” Przeworski sees this tension between economic power and democracy as
fundamental to all capitalist democracies. “The combination of democracy and capitalism
constitutes a compromise,” he explains: “those who do not own instruments of production
consent to the institution of the private ownership of capital stock while those who own
productive instruments consent to political institutions that permit other groups to
effectively press their claims to the allocation of resources and the distribution of capital.”
Przeworski goes on to point out that Marx thought this compromise was unsustainable – a
“spasmodic, exceptional state of things...impossible as the normal form of society.”
Democratic capitalism, Marx argued, would ultimately lead either to “social emancipation”
– as the proletariat would use their political power to vote in more equitable forms of
production and property relations – or to “political restoration – as the capitalist class
would use their economic power to reclaim the political sphere.”

These perspectives thus illuminate that there are a number of outstanding debates
about the relationship between democracy and capitalism. In the following sections, I
explore this relationship in more detail, starting by exploring recent thought on the impact
of this relationship on environmental health – a debate with serious implications for the
exercise of local democracy in electric cooperatives. I then move to a discussion about local
democracy in practice, and end with contemplations about how local democracy can offer a

136 Karl Marx, quoted in Adam Przeworski, Capitalism and Social Democracy (Cambridge University Press,
1986), 207. The implication, of course, is that the latter has in fact occurred.
potentially oppositional social ideology with implications for environmental and community health.

**The Environment, Capitalism, and Democracy**

In recent political ecology literature and other political economy-oriented environmental perspectives, there is a general consensus that both the environment and local self-determination are victims of increased coordination between free-market capitalism and the technocratic regulatory apparatuses formed primarily to safeguard the health of markets. While a critique of the simultaneous exploitation of nature and people is nearly as old as capitalism itself, over the last few years, this correlation has been proffered as an actionable hypothesis: that is, if environmental degradation is correlated with loss of local control over development, then methods for increased local control should improve local environmental conditions and ultimately help alleviate threatening global environmental trends. Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw, for example, call for a form of “emancipatory” environmental practice through “political projects that are radically democratic in terms of the organization of the processes through which the environments that we (humans and non-humans) inhabit become produced.” Gorz sees the defense of nature as really being about the “defense of a lifeworld” – a term developed at length by Jürgen Habermas, referring to the milieu in which individuals orient themselves – which is a definition of nature that resolves the human-nature dichotomy, refusing to see society as anything other

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137 See, for example: Brulle, *Agency, Democracy, and Nature*; Gould, Pellow, and Schnaiberg, *The Treadmill of Production*; Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw (eds), *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism* (New York: Routledge, 2006). This stems from how value and growth are created under capitalism. In a capitalist system, value comes from the exchangeability of goods or services for a third, fungible commodity – the money commodity. In Marx's classical explanation, this impartial money commodity separates the thing that is being traded on the market from all of the conditions that went into its production: this is the root of Marxian *alienation*. Both workers and natural resources are not in and of themselves valuable on the market, so they become external to the market, except as mediated by a production apparatus that can use them as inputs to produce goods with exchange value. Growth occurs when these inputs can be made more efficient such that the exchange value of the produced good creates profit, or capital accumulation, which can in theory then be reinvested into production. But this process of efficiency-seeking ultimately means that both workers and material resources become worth less than they once were (Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1). As long as workers and environmental resources continue to be available, the conditions from which they are drawn are irrelevant. The common thread is that economic development for the goal of profit (rather than for resource efficiency or social benefit) will continue to exploit environmental and social resources until it is no longer valuable to do so, regardless of the potential environmental or social benefits technological innovation may promise.

than part of nature. Brulle calls for “social change that would perform three tasks: institutionalize ecological rationality, establish an ecological ethic, and develop individual capacities to participate in a democratic and sustainable society.”

According to Brulle, many of the original environmental movements were steeped in this social political agenda, in which people argued for a healthier lifeworld, not just better quality natural resources. Critiquing the professionalization of environmental advocacy, Brulle calls for this spirit to be reclaimed in the environmental movement: “What is needed,” he writes, “is the development of creative ways to expand members’ participation in environmental organizations while preserving the organizations’ technical and scientific expertise.” He then provides some suggestions, including more critical approaches to foundation funding, more and better information available to the public, and more government sponsored options for community participation. The “new economy” theorists likewise see the connection between local knowledge, democratic control, and environmental sustainability. “Were I writing the book today,” Alperovitz reflects in the preface to the second edition of America Beyond Capitalism, “I would develop more fully the sections that concern ecological sustainability in general and climate change in particular” as crucial aspects of economic democracy. James Speth, additionally, proposes an environmentalism based around a political economy of local deliberative democracy and a new kind of corporation built around wealth distribution not just to workers (e.g., in a worker-owned cooperative) but also to “all resource providers,” including future generations, government, and the surrounding community.

Unfortunately, those writing about the relationship between local democracy and environmental stewardship too often stop at ideal visions of democracy – generally, a Habermasian-influenced vision of deliberative democracy – and too infrequently ask how

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139 Gorz, Ecologica, 50.
141 Ibid., 280.
142 Alperovitz, America Beyond Capitalism, xxvi.
143 Speth, The Bridge at the End of the World, 181.
144 See, for example: Brulle, Agency, Democracy, and Nature, 47 (the “relations between human beings” that need to be improved are “communicative ethics”) and Matthew Klingle, Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 6 (Klingle calls for the right to determine one’s lifeworld as part of his “ethic of place” that “links the necessity for social justice to the importance of protecting the environment”).
these ideals can work in practice. Often, the call for more democracy is the conclusion at the end of critique of environment-society relations: the “so what now?” section of critical social analyses about damaging capitalist relations. But these calls are ultimately meaningless without a more pragmatic understanding of power and inclusion. In fact, this trend towards concluding with utopian visions of textbook democracy is itself a troubling sign, that the radical thinkers of the day are critical but not proactive, that imagining real democracy in connection to the economy and nature is too difficult.

Local Democracy in Practice

What should be the next step after calling for more local democracy? For those who have looked at deliberative processes in practice, what structurally needs to be in place for local democracy to work – that is, for society to be built through the active working out of local self-determination by “ordinary citizens”?  

Several bodies of scholarship approach this more directly. The first, staying with the environmental theme, is the side of environmental justice (EJ) and environmental negotiations literature that goes beyond distributive justice. In an article titled, “The Justice of Environmental Justice,” David Schlosberg argues for a conception of justice beyond distributive justice that “focuses more generally on the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression, particularly of those who represent ‘difference.’” Part of this is the idea of silenced or repressed communities “coming to voice” and “speaking for ourselves” as integral parts of EJ. Paraphrasing Iris Marion Young, Kristin Shrader-Frechette identifies the need also for participative justice: “the justice of decision-making power and procedures.” EJ has long called for a definition of justice that includes “the right to self-determination of all people” and “and the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decisionmaking.” More recent work on environmental negotiations also

145 DeFilippis, Unmaking Goliath.
discusses the importance of community self-determination, including the rights of citizens to collectively design crucial parts of the policy-making process.148

A field of research deeply grounded in community activism over specific environmental injustices, these authors build their theories of deliberation out of case studies of actual deliberation. As such, their discussions of deliberation also cover crucial implementation issues such as coalition building, stakeholder funding, development of expertise and data collection, legal reforms, and the non-static nature of communities of deliberation in many cases (basically, anything with a definition of public less rigid than a town meeting). Because of the nature of its subject matter, however, EJ scholarship still unfortunately tends to focus on reactive measures.149 Even Schlosberg’s definition of environmental justice as being three-pronged (distribution, recognition, and participation) starts from an assumption of harm. In some ways, EJ scholarship consequently contributes to a culture of regulation more so than to a culture of prevention; by necessity, the field of EJ explores possibilities for community empowerment in a context of entrenched power interests. Admittedly, entrenched power interests pretty much form the context for deliberative movements everywhere. But it is also important to understand the possibilities, even if they are rarely possible, for a more foundational kind of participation.

Beyond participative justice – that is, winning “a place at the table” in negotiations and regulatory decisions150 – is being able to define the culture, to be the convener of the table, a kind of deliberative process aimed at more foundational local self-determination, not as a coalition-building process to contest power interests but rather as a basic building block for society. A somewhat disparate literature on case studies of the practice of democracy at “local” scales (towns, neighborhoods, businesses), not necessarily environmentally focused, but interested in the role of democracy in building and/or safeguarding common goods and civic capacity, offers lessons for this kind of democracy. While these scholars recognize that small-scale democracy must still grapple with the

148 See, for example, Baxamusa, “Empowering Communities Through Deliberation the Model of Community Benefits Agreements.”
149 Shrader-Frechette includes the troubling assessment that, while better forms of governance and opportunities for democracy are needed in these cases: “But correcting democratic procedures and structures is a cumbersome task that is not likely to be completely successful, in part because it requires constant attention and reworking” (27-8).
150 Schlosberg, “The Justice of Environmental Justice.”
constraints and impacts of large-scale political economic processes, they also appreciate that there is sometimes more room for experimentation and innovation in the processes of governance at the local level.\textsuperscript{151} In Frank M. Bryan’s words: “Tiny places that govern themselves are laboratories for the science of democracy.”\textsuperscript{152} These studies examine the processes that allow the practice of local democracy to be a tool for “problem solving” and “reform,” encouraging a culture of “voice before exit.”\textsuperscript{153} In other words, they explore the possibilities of democracy as a cultural norm of how things get done.

The idea is to make democracy work for a local institution so that it is, as Xavier de Souza Briggs writes (and in direct contrast to the way institutions focused on a democratic ethic often work in practice according to Selznick), “functional vis-à-vis its purpose, not just popular vis-à-vis its ethic.” This involves more than creating venues for deliberation, but also ensuring that the processes of deliberation have accountability and impact. It is instructive how democracy scholars write about the labor involved in participating in local problem solving and governance, in comparison with critical theory-oriented political ecologists’ calls for deliberative democracy. Bryan, who has spent over thirty years studying Vermont town meetings, says unapologetically that town meeting democracy is work. Briggs cautions that effective collective action is not always “purely consensual or conflict free or even consistently ’collaborative,’” requiring in addition to structures for ideal deliberation, intentional “space and rules for ‘having a good fight.’” Local democracy is often messy, experimental, and contingent upon both the skill of leaders and the internal tolerance of communities. Scholars of democracy call for more recognition of this, even while noting that such practices are potential tools for addressing intractable challenges—i.e., hard problems can be solved through hard work. Noting the intimacy of labor in the service of such problems, Bryan calls the practice of local democracy “complicated and dutiful.”\textsuperscript{154}

These scholars recognize as well that deliberative democracy does not always mean “good” democracy. While acknowledging that democracy is not foolproof, and can easily be

\textsuperscript{151} Briggs, Democracy as Problem Solving.
\textsuperscript{152} Bryan, Real Democracy, xii. While Bryan is looking at legitimately tiny places, more medium sized places, including cities and regions, can also offer similar lessons for democracy. The key ethic is that the scale still allows for (at least some) face-to-face deliberation.
\textsuperscript{153} Fung, Empowered Participation, 10.
\textsuperscript{154} Briggs, Democracy as Problem Solving, 42, 195; Bryan, Real Democracy, 283, 288.
corrupted and co-opted, these studies offer practical mechanisms for implementing effective and inclusive processes of local deliberation. Briefly, these accountability mechanisms include such formal design characteristics as addressing the realities of unequal power and resources within communities of deliberation, the need to foster ethics of tolerance and coordinate action, specific relationships between communities and external experts, meaningful feedback mechanisms to power structures, openness for nonstandard problems, and an understanding that “grassroots” is not an uniform category.155

More specific to co-ops, researchers have observed that some regulatory oversight and institutional linkages need to be intentionally fostered in order to empower institutions of economic democratic to be socially transformative. For example, Greg MacLeod identifies programmatic design choices that were crucial to the sustainability of the Mondragon region as a co-op economy, including: a cooperative bank that understood co-ops to have a different financial cycle and support that cycle institutionally; fixed wage ratios for the region (i.e., a sense of distributive justice built into the business model); a high degree of interdependence between businesses with similar operating philosophies (in this case, cooperatives); and routine auditing – in other words, constant checks on as well as a scaffolding of continual support for the sustained alignment of ideology and practice.156 DeFilippis, similarly, attributes the success of worker co-ops in his case studies to favorable structural factors, including local banks with community-focused business practices, sympathetic media attention, and the productive role of crisis in facilitating local organizing.157

Finally, on a more structural level, urban studies scholars concerned about place-making in a context of diversity have settled on democratic practice as a normative approach to constructing a healthy urban public (and ways of being in public). Leonie Sandercock, for example, highlights the importance of “micro-publics” formed in banal everyday settings, but “where dialogue and prosaic negotiations are compulsory.” This

156 Greg MacLeod, From Mondragon to America: Experiments in Community Economic Development (Sydney, Nova Scotia: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1997).
157 DeFilippis, Unmaking Goliath, 84-85.
includes such places as “the workplace, schools, colleges, youth centres, sports clubs, community centres, [and] neighbourhood houses” – anywhere “people from different cultural backgrounds are thrown together in new settings which disrupt familiar patterns and create the possibility of initiating new attachments.”158 Gerald Frug, similarly, worries along similar lines that cities are organized (legally) “in a way that provides fewer and fewer people the experience of collective decision making.” He argues that real freedom involves “active participation in public decision making.” He specifically points to city services as a way to design opportunities for more public interaction and a sense of interdependence among diverse publics.159

Different Democracies, Different Capitalisms, Various Combinations

In espousing the idea of “economic democracy,” it is thus important to understand what kind of democracy is being evoked. There are many different “models” of democracy, all of which interact with the market in different ways.160 Though it has long been an unsolved question of whether authentic democracy can exist in the context of a capitalist market,161 this question also depends on what kind of democracy one is interested in and whether one is interested in it as an end unto itself or as a means for other goals. Specific models of democracy correspond with specific models of economic activity, and, under ideal circumstances, there are symbiotic relationships between them. Historically, especially, the two are deeply linked; the democratic nation-state, many have argued, is deeply implicated in the spread of markets and the protection of national economic growth.162

There are more fundamental ways they are related, as well, especially in the American context. Democracy theory links with capitalist theory in the shared focus on the power of the individual, on the importance of individual freedom creating the highest form of coordinated action. Because of the focus on individual choice in a laissez-faire market, it has long been argued that capitalism is completely consistent with the aims of democracy –

159 Frug, *City Making*, 21, 175, 220.
161 Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*.
162 Foley, *Adam’s Fallacy*, 216.
that is, the empowerment of individual preferences and the rule of the will of the people through, theoretically, consumer choice.163

The idea of voting with your dollar has inherent limitations, however. A mathematician who recently patiently listened to me expound at length about the inequities of late capitalism compared it to the classic game-theoretic model of the "stable marriage problem." In this model, the goal is to pair members of two groups with each other, and the challenge is to find a solution in which no two members would prefer each other to their original partners. In one solution to this problem, group A (mathematicians, it seems, like to refer to this as the women) is approached by members of group B (e.g., men), who propose a match. Group A members consequently reject or provisionally accept proposals until all Group B members have found a match. While at first it seems that group A has all the power, in reality, they only have the ability to choose between options that are preselected and presented to them, while group B gets to construct their own realities by choosing among all options who to approach in the first place (even if they don't end up with their first choice). Consumers in the market are analogous to group A: though it seems that consumers have an infinite variety of choices and can reward or punish companies through their spending power, in reality it is the producers that ultimately have the ability to determine what choices are available and thus to shape the set of possible consumer realities. In fact, this solution, which is called the "traditional marriage algorithm," provably results in group A (e.g., consumers) having the worst possible outcome for them, given the set of stable outcomes, while for group B (e.g., corporations/producers), the solution is the best.

Representative democracy is also a stable marriage problem, in which voters are confronted with preselected options. The combination has come to be the standard way Americans interact with the structure of their social worlds: building a material and political world out of constrained choices determined by others with more power. Facing a world in which political elites are heaving influenced by economic elites, and the choices presented to the public are constrained, the question of capitalism versus democracy seems to be heavily tilted towards the dominance of capitalism.

163 Ibid., 3.
However, representative democracy is not the only form of democracy, nor is consumer choice the only option for people to engage with production decisions in a capitalist economy. The contrasting model offered by participatory democracy is that everyone involved has the opportunity (nominally, under ideal circumstances) to at least contest predetermined categories of options and, at best, to propose meaningful alternate visions of reality. Additionally, and with relevance to co-ops, many argue that there is nothing inherent in market relations that demands a certain kind of property rights; it is, rather, the combination of the market with particular social relations and regulations that determines what and how things are commodified. As John Kay points out, many problems attributed to “the market” are in fact more accurately a problem of private bureaucratization and the lack of appropriate regulation on businesses that have moved away from creating wealth to merely extracting wealth. In a healthier regulatory environment (provided either by the state or a strong civil society), markets can in fact be powerful tools for “the diffusion of political and economic power.”

In contrast to a consumer-oriented representative democracy, a model of economic democracy built on deliberation, debate, and collaboration about shared resources and in service of local goals thus has the potential to produce different market relations. This includes relations between people, between people and the environment, and between people and their work. In challenging standard notions of consumption and production in twenty-first century America, the potential of more opportunities for deliberative democracy to organize economic life has profound implications for also reorganizing the meaning of people’s daily routines and the logic by which they build individual lives and communities. But the role of the consumer or voter – the “ordinary citizen” – in such processes requires revision from the more accepted cultural role most Americans are taught. This contrast goes back to the discussion of democracy as rights or democracy as responsibilities and the interplay of the two in constraining others: if more democratic institutions make it possible for the basis of life in a locality to be determined by community deliberation, and not individual choice among preselected options, then cultural norms – including cultural support structures as well as civic education – must also

shift to privilege local decision-making as not just an option for those with time, but a necessary part of a life well-lived, akin to the responsibilities to one's family or property that tend to be described as "labors of love." In other words, a practice of democracy capable of critiquing inequitable and disempowering capitalist trends needs to un-alienate "ordinary citizens" from processes of local governance.

**Labor Revisited**

According to geographer Neil Smith, labor is the critical point of nature-society relations, including – under capitalist relations – the process of alienation of people and nature.\(^\text{165}\) If we as workers are alienated always from the fruits of our labor, then labor is never in the service of the individual and becomes something to minimize and regulate, as a social act. What is labor, however, when it is reconnected to the individual? Reimagining work not as the selling of one's labor on the market (exchange-value labor), but the application of labor in service of personal values (use-value labor), reconnects it to many of the ideals of democracy. As Bryan writes, hard work as in the kind one exerts in a town meeting is not necessarily something to avoid, but something that is *in service of a shared life.*\(^\text{166}\)

For one thing, getting back to the local democracy-environmental quality hypothesis, environmental historian Richard White argues, work is our "fundamental way of knowing nature." Referencing Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, the deep tacit knowledge of the world one inhabits, developed through long physical relationships with a particular nature and set of practices, White argues that "our work – all our work – inevitably embeds us in nature." He calls for even office workers whose daily routine is both physically and conceptually distant from the harnessing and harvesting of natural resources to recognize this embeddedness. "Work, then, is where we should begin," White writes.\(^\text{167}\)

In a society reconnected to labor and nature, André Gorz asks: what should be the nature and purpose of work? How should environment-human relationships be defined

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\(^{165}\) Smith, *Uneven Development*, 52-65.


and lived? Gorz proposes an “eco-social politics” to realign societal demand for labor time with actual material needs, in order to create a new kind of economy that values the concept of an authentic lifeworld as a right, rather than a luxury commodity. To Gorz, the concept of a lifeworld is the basic capacity of individuals and communities to “see, understand and control the outcomes of their acts... to endow what they are doing with meaning or to understand the sense of what they are working towards.” He contrasts this to the way most people are forced to live and work in a capitalist society as “worker-consumers” and “clients” of capital: every action is mediated through the market, including the wages they receive for producing goods they do not consume and the commodities produced by someone else that they in turn must buy to live. Consequently, the amount, duration, and intensity of work undertaken are determined by corporate goals for profit rather than individual or community goals for meeting needs. Therefore, there is no way for individuals or communities to self-regulate to match effort spent on production to personal consumption, and neither individual production nor consumption is connected to a person’s sense of environmental or community impact.

This de-coupling of production from consumption activities is one of the most damaging ways capitalism allows corporations to exercise power over workers, Gorz argues, because he sees “disposable time” (backed by strong societal norms of security for all) as “the true measure of wealth.” He does not define “disposable time” as leisure per se; rather, he critiques the pervasiveness of the market into areas of human activity he believes are better fulfilled through other social relationships, or simply through self-provision. Achieving this alternate economy, to Gorz, lies in communities reclaiming the ability to establish “norm[s] of sufficiency.”

Gorz’s eco-social politics gets close to the enduring Jeffersonian vision of a country of gentlemen farmers, whose economic and subsistence needs allow them ample time to be educated in and contribute to politics. The politically-engaged yeoman or worker-owner crops up repeatedly throughout economic thought, including in the writings of Marx and Keynes. Establishing conditions of general equality and sufficiency, both believed, would

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168 Gorz, Ecologica, 58-59. Gorz imagines a society based on worker self-management and a democratic association of producers, in which work would again link production and consumption in a direct relationship of balancing needs and desires with available labor power.
lead less to “an increase in material consumption” than to investments in “leisure and self-development, ushering in...a world in which a person could be a farmer or fisherman in the morning and a poet or scientist in the afternoon.” The combination of physical and mental labor connecting “ordinary citizens” to both the land and each other has long appealed in economic philosophy as the antithesis to the alienated industrial worker. It is arguably the lack of opportunities for this kind of deeply personal un-alienated labor that creates the current image of ordinary citizens uninterested in civic engagement, in the way Frug and Held contest is a form of prejudice.

Tracy B. Strong, reassessing Nietzsche, argues that “one’s own voice is the voice of genius” and that everyone has the ability to cultivate that potential, though most people in the end do not. This ability to find one’s voice is, to Strong, not just personal but also deeply civic: it is predicated on the “actuality that, for one to have one’s own voice, others must have a voice also.” Finding one’s voice somewhat paradoxically also means being able to distance oneself from oneself in an aesthetic and critical process; Strong writes of the experience of listening to music as a way of learning complexity and empathy, but ends with this fundamental and personal acknowledgement of unknowability in the world as “perhaps a good basis for democratic culture.”

Why cannot most people achieve voice? Strong suggests that modern society intentionally suppresses opportunities for becoming sufficiently critical to do so. Weaving through the works of Kant and Arendt, Strong constructs a definition of private versus public, including the possibility of a public maturity capable of critiquing societal structure, which challenges current possibilities for deliberative practice in a democratic culture. One acts as a “private” person, he writes, not when one acts for oneself, but when one is speaking with the voice of an established role in society, in which case one is not free. By contrast, the act of public speech is to act as a human being; this means, more than freedom to be true to oneself, also the ability to think “in the place of everyone else.” Like Nietzsche, Strong summarizes, Kant also sees coming to voice as a simultaneous process in which the individual comes to “acknowledge the limits of human comprehension, and, in doing so, one finds that one is tied to those with whom one shares a world.” Again, however, this

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process requires thoughtfulness and dedication, including deliberate action to overcome
the tendency of modern society to contain individuals in private roles. If one cannot
achieve this publicness, if people only come together in public as private individuals, as
representatives of their position (e.g., “So what do you do?”), Strong suggests, we will be
unable to create community, and the possibilities for democracy will suffer.170

In Defense of Boring Hard Work in Community Cooperatives

When I first started doing this research, my enthusiasm for co-ops tended to overtake
conversations, often leading in non-academic contexts to the damning questions: Why
would anyone want to be involved in an electrical utility? Who has time for that? These
are two separate questions, both of which can be answered, in theory, by revisiting the
ideals of economic democracy. The first – the “why?” question – has to do with the personal
gains of public participation; the second – “who has time?” – is a more structure question
that explores the meaningfulness of the parts of modern American life that take up time,
and at what and whose expense.

In the previous sections, I explored briefly some reasons for why civic participation is
good for individuals and society and why it is nonetheless lacking in the current political
economy of twenty-first century America. Given these constraints, current calls for
renewed civic engagement tend to be modest. Archon Fung, for example, argues for an
updated ideal of democratic participation that “respects the contemporary constraints and
complex realities that prohibit a person from engaging all of the public problems that merit
attention,” ultimately appealing to the American public to “consider at times stepping away
from purely private pursuits to participate in public problem-solving around urgent issues
of common concern.”171

The idea of cooperatives and other institutions of economic democracy, however, is
that they are capable of transforming “purely private pursuits” into pursuits that ideally
complicate the boundaries between private and public life. Of course, in practice, the
structural issues suppressing civic engagement can be oppressive even in areas with

171 Archon Fung, Empowered Participation, 30.
thrusting cooperatives. But, more so than voluntary associations or public interest groups, institutions of economic democracy should have the potential to transform local economies to alleviate some of these structural problems – perhaps not for everyone, but ideally for enough of the community to support a thriving civic sphere. By showing in practice a virtuous cycle between participation in community institutions and economic transformation that corrects some of the constraints of economic necessity for “ordinary citizens,” co-ops should be able to offer a kind of civic education that makes public action personal and desirable. The ultimate ideal is that work in the service of such community organizations should be demonstrably not simply an additional burden on these communities, but an investment that allows them to create better environments and economies that make all of their labor more meaningful.

I see the fact that most electric co-ops have not managed to do so less as a “reality” of modern life and more as a suppression of co-op ideals that demands explanation; thus, the important question is why co-ops do not provide more of this kind of civic contestation and practical education about the potential of community action? The research discussed in the following chapters explores this question in two ways: first, I ask why electric co-ops have not historically encouraged this idea of democratic practice as a local resource and civic responsibility; and, second, I examine ways in which some electric co-ops have recently taken strides towards a more deliberative model of governance that encourages their communities to engage in real policy and agenda work.
Chapter 3: A Landscape of Indebtedness: American National Development Ideologies and Rural Electrification in the 1930s

This chapter is a first step in addressing the puzzle of why electric co-ops are so prevalent, yet neither the co-ops themselves nor conceptual issues about electricity ownership have been prominent in recent energy and economic policy discourse. To do so, I revisit the formative period of these co-ops, examining historically what kind of resource management they were designed to promote and how this vision was implemented in practice. In particular, I focus on the role that federal loans played in shaping the institutional culture of these cooperatives.

Neither Public nor Private Power: Electric Cooperatives as Political Compromise

In the wake of the Great Depression, there was a general sense in the air that economic freedoms had been abused and innovation in the name of profit threatened to destroy the very fabric of American life. Going into the 1936 campaign season as the incumbent candidate after several of the toughest economic years in American history, President Franklin D. Roosevelt cautioned that technological progress under an unregulated economy created conditions for unacceptable social inequalities. “The age of machinery, of railroads; of steam and electricity; the telegraph and the radio; mass production, mass distribution—all of these combined to bring forward a new civilization and with it a new problem for those who sought to remain free,” he cautioned the audience at the Democratic Convention in his acceptance speech for re-nomination for the presidency, taking some time to construct a powerful metaphor of economic imperialism:

For out of this modern civilization economic royalists carved new dynasties. New kingdoms were built upon concentration of control over material things. Through new uses of corporations, banks and securities, new machinery of industry and agriculture, of labor and capital—all undreamed of by the [founding] fathers—the whole structure of modern life was impressed into this royal service. ...Throughout the Nation, opportunity was limited by monopoly. Individual initiative was crushed in the cogs of a great machine. The field open for free business was more and more
restricted. Private enterprise, indeed, became too private. It became privileged enterprise, not free enterprise.\textsuperscript{172}

This, the FDR administration knew, was nowhere more evident than in the power industry. Over ninety percent of the power sold in the U.S. at the time was in the hands of private companies, many of which had joined together in conglomerates that were driving prices up and service quality down.\textsuperscript{173} In the decade leading up to the stock market crash in 1929, the power industry had become a powerful financial industry as well, with large corporate players like the Insull Group and the Electric Bond and Share Company holding controlling interests in power generation and transmission all across the country, in, as critics described it, "an almost impenetrable maze of corporate structures."\textsuperscript{174} When Senator George Norris of Nebraska, a determined opponent of the growing influence of the "holding company octopus," brought charts of "only a very few" of these massive interconnected electric company networks to testify in front of the Senate in 1935 on the need for regulation in the power industry, his charts showed hundreds of companies connected, sometimes in multiple ways. "I have been unable to find a single instance where a holding company in the second degree is of any benefit to society," Norris commented on these charts. "On the contrary, it is always a great danger, and affords a strong temptation for dishonest men, or men moved only by the desire to create great wealth for themselves, to perpetrate a great injustice upon the people of the country."\textsuperscript{175}


\textsuperscript{173} Morris L. Cooke, "The Future of Electric Power," \textit{The New Republic} 16 December 1936, Office Files of H. S. Person, Box 3, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.

\textsuperscript{174} This was accomplished through the "pyramiding" of company ownership, in which one company bought a controlling share of voting stock in another company, which in turn owned a controlling share of a third company, and so on. Adding to this confusion was that many of these companies had ceased to be (or never properly were) operating companies, but were rather holding companies, which provided some management and engineering services, but mostly engaged in the business of maximizing profits for shareholders. In correspondence with Gifford Pinchot on October 21, 1930, Harry Slattery describes a number of holding companies as follows: American Gas and Electric Co. - "forty to sixty cents of ever dollar taken in by the American Gas and Electric Operating Companies is profit available for interest or dividends"; the Scranton Electric Company - "Domestic rates that remain high, arbitrary boosting of capital on the books, and high financing and unusual bookkeeping characterized the Scranton Electric Company, as its history has been portrayed by the Federal Trade Commission"; The Lehigh Power Securities Corporation "refuses to let even Government see its books." Gifford Pinchot collection, Box 682, Library of Congress.

\textsuperscript{175} Norris's charts are essentially illegible in print in the \textit{Congressional Record}. Norris comments about this during his testimony: "If I should illustrate by a chart similar to these all the intricacies of the holding company system and should cover the system completely from bottom to top, it would require a chart which
Power ownership and the controlling interests of private power companies in government featured prominently in political campaigns in the early 1930s, and tickets that promoted utility regulation, public power, or control of power interests' influence in government won victories across the country. Policymakers critical of private power argued that the effect of the holding companies on electrical service was "antisocial," encouraging higher than necessary rates and artificially restricting a wider application of electricity. If the profit-hungry power industry could be restrained and rates reduced, it was argued in policy circles, electricity promised a revolution in industrial and commercial development, including - in an appeal to the anti-urban sentiments of the time - a decentralization of industry and people.

There were many competing theories about what to do with the power industry. Despite widespread acknowledgment of the inefficiencies of power hungry holding companies, many worried that switching to public power would also be fiscally irresponsible; concerned about recent government expenditures on the Tennessee Valley Authority's public hydroelectric system, they argued that public power might produce lower electricity rates but would certainly produce higher taxes. Some believed regulation was the answer, and, in 1935, Congress passed the Public Utility Holding Company Act, requiring large holding companies to submit to financial oversight and providing legal limits to their ownership of subsidiary operating companies. FDR, among others in the regulation camp, believed that private utilities had a responsibility to the public that set it apart from other industries. "I do not hold with those who advocate government ownership or government operation of all utilities," he asserted in a campaign speech in 1936, "But we must remember always that electricity is the people's business."

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176 Harry Slattery lists and explains campaigns in New York, Oregon, Connecticut, Wisconsin, Montana, Nebraska, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Ohio with an anti-private power focus, in correspondence with Gifford Pinchot, 7 May 1931, Gifford Pinchot Collection, Box 682, Library of Congress.

177 Cooke, "The Future of Electric Power;" Harlow S. Person, Rural Electrification Paper for the World Power Conference, 27 April 1936, Office Files of H. S. Person, Box No. 3, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.

When undertaken by private enterprise it is undertaken as a matter of grace and not of right. The relation of a private utility company to the community is one of stewardship. Where the private utility fails in its stewardship, then it forfeits also its right to serve."¹⁸⁰ Others, like Norris, were wholly committed to public power, arguing that private companies would simply learn to “regulate the regulators.”¹⁸¹ Debates about the merits of public versus private power would ultimately last for decades, taking shape in different ways across the country.

Droughts, Floods, and Farmland

While policymakers had been concerned about the lack of rural electricity for many years, the main push at first was to dismantle the power giants, with problems of utility extension somewhat on a back burner.¹⁸² The 1930s, however, brought rural electrification into prominence as a matter of national security, thanks to its perceived role in scientific land management and economic development in the wake of the Dust Bowl. Testifying before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry in 1936, longtime rural electrification advocate and the first REA Administrator Morris L. Cooke argued that due to its climate, soil, and rainfall, "America is not a permanent country... and we have never hastened to a possible doom any faster than we are doing today and probably no other nation has ever moved toward its doom at so rapid a pace," adding that, “unless we learn to hold these waters and build up that water table we have 'Desert on the March.'”¹⁸³ Cooke was referring to an influential book written by conservationist Paul B. Sears, who had interpreted the Dust Bowl as a symptom of overly ambitious empire building and connected American agriculture within a long world history of failed civilizations. A few months later, FDR wrote to Cooke asking him to lead a study on the Great Plains for developing a national management plan. “We should face the fact that the climatic

¹⁸¹ Norris, “Civilization’s Greatest Enemy - The Holding Company Octopus.”
¹⁸² In fact, the fundamental utility of electricity on the farm was debated for many years, with some arguing that there was no place for it or it could never be made economical. Clark C. Spence, “Early Uses of Electricity in American Agriculture,” Technology and Culture 3(2), 1962: 142–160.
¹⁸³ Testimony of Mr. Morris L. Cooke before the United States Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 24 March 1936, 3, Office Files of H. S. Person, Box No. 3, Rural Electrification Administration, KC National Archives.
conditions make special safeguards absolutely necessary," FDR agreed. "At any rate circumstances make it obvious that relief activities are not sufficient and that a competent study and recommendations are desirable."

Water was as much a villain as wind in the soil conservation saga of the Dust Bowl; on the heels of a drought, parched land that was no longer capable of holding and retaining rainwater was in danger of being washed away. Such poorly managed farmland also condemned its downstream neighbors to muddy floods, and it clogged dams, rendering them useless. The challenge, REA economist E. Johnston Coil wrote poetically, was "making 'running waters walk'" so that they would not carry off arable topsoil, silt up dams, and flood unprepared waterways, but would instead be absorbed into the ground and held by an extensive network of "little waters." Electricity could help with that, by making regular irrigation a routine part of agriculture, even during "normal" periods of rainfall. "'A rain this week will make the crop,' is a frequent farm saying," Coil added. "Even in so-called wet years, an optimum distribution of precipitation seldom occurs. For a midwestern farmer to have his oats 'drown' in the spring and his corn 'fire' in August is not an unknown experience. Supplementary irrigation can reduce these climatic risks and produce beneficial results in all years." To Coil, electric irrigation was part of a "natural" system:

The economy of nature is a self-liquidating and self-perpetuating economy. The functioning of each part, whether animal, plant, water or soil, contributes to the functioning of the whole and the unity of the many. Each element in nature's program of balance supports other elements and, in turn, is supported by them. The essential soundness of a conservation program involving erosion-control and rural electrification rests on the natural reciprocity, the eternal mutual dependency, that exists between resources and power. They create and maintain each other. In this relationship between resources and power we have seen how it is necessary to conserve water in order to conserve the soil, how it is necessary to utilize the water in order to utilize the soil, and how electric power enables this utilization to occur. Other relationships exist, however, which bring the entire process into balance. The water can be used to make the power. And the more power used, the cheaper it becomes to make the power, to use the water, to grow the crops.

By maintaining topsoil and controlling flooding, electrification was a technological solution to "Deserts on the March," stemming the historically inevitable decline of American

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104 Correspondence between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Morris L. Cooke, 17 September 1936, Office Files of H. S. Person, Box No. 1, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
105 E. Johnston Coil, "Rural Electrification Contribution to Conservation," 1936; "Back to Swamps," Office Files of H. S. Person, Box No. 3, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
agricultural virility.186 American farms – at least, the ones still in possession of fertile
topsoil by the mid-1930s – needed electricity for their survival, and the nation needed its
farmland for its survival.

A Reluctant Move towards Cooperatives

With the formation of the Rural Electrification Administration, the federal
government ultimately developed a way to address major economic and environmental
issues, while at the same time experimenting with new institutional requirements that
would combine the efficiency of private power with the social aims of public power. But for
the REA to achieve its complex set of economic, environmental, and institutional goals,
farms needed more than access to electricity; they also needed it to be cheap enough to
cause a sea change in farming techniques and consumer behavior. “We want electricity to
be used freely,” Cooke told the nation in a radio address on the National Farm and Home
Hour in 1935, “not quite so freely as air, of course, but almost as freely as tap water.” He
went on to explain, “customers on the new rural lines [should] buy at the start as much
equipment as they can use effectively. This is like buying a complete automobile, instead of
buying a wheel now, a windshield next week, and a carburetor for Christmas.”187 Low rates
and plentiful usage were at the center of REA logic: If rates were low enough, Cooke and
others argued, electrification could encourage abundant usage of both irrigation and
electric appliances for the home and farm, safeguarding farmland for intensified agriculture
and jumpstarting the rural economy through consumerism. “In many ways the farmer is
the best customer in the purchase and use of electric current,” Senator Norris wrote in
1935. “The farmer needs all the facilities which the city dweller needs, but in addition
thereto he needs as many facilities for which the city dweller has no use. The farmer, for
instance, needs electric current to grind feed, to pump water, and to perform many other
services about the farm which have no application to the consumer of electricity who
dwells in the city.”188 If rates were not low enough, however, electricity would simply

187 Radio Address Delivered by Morris L. Cooke on the National Farm and Home Hour, 30 August 1935, Morris
L. Cooke Correspondence, Box No. 1, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National
Archives.
188 Rural Electrification News 1(2), 1935, NRECA Library.
continue to reproduce the same social inequalities and farmers would only be able to sparingly apply the potentially game-changing capabilities electricity could provide in their work.

The REA knew that low-interest loans were therefore only part of the solution. REA loans could reduce the immediate cost of construction and distribution, but the REA believed that unless line extensions came with checks on profit and efficient management, the benefits would be lost. The REA’s strict criteria for rate pricing would ultimately turn the agency away from the for-profit sector and towards rural cooperatives.

The idea of rural electric cooperatives may have first come from the American Farm Bureau Federation. After failing to develop an affordable plan for private rural electrification through collaboration with the National Electric Light Association (NELA), in 1934 the Farm Bureau recommended that the government support the development of cooperative light and power associations, through low-interest loans supplied by the Farm Credit Association. Many communities had in fact already done so on their own. Parkland Light and Water Cooperative in Washington, for example, had been purchasing and distributing power from the private company that served nearby Tacoma since 1914. Original members had paid $144 each to build distribution lines, pitched in to “dig ditches, erect poles, and string wires,” and volunteered their homes and businesses as office space. Without REA loans, they had managed to raise the necessary funds to bring service to forty-one members at a minimum fee of 50¢ per month at rates of 5¢ per kilowatt-hour.

Commendable though such efforts were, the costs in many of the existing cooperatives were too high for the REA. They fervently believed that electricity would not

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119 Digest of Studies on Cooperative Societies, Mercer Green Johnston Papers, Library of Congress.

be used effectively unless it was provided cheaply; existing co-ops may have made it possible for farm communities to get radios and light bulbs, but they did not show the growth and utilization the REA believed was necessary for the sustainability of the countryside. Moreover, there were few co-ops in existence and a big country to electrify. The REA wanted to get electrification rolling as quickly as possible, and a persuasive faction argued that it would take a lot of time to organize new cooperative businesses and get them operational. Despite the Rural Electrification Act explicitly giving preference to public and non-profit power associations, the REA initiated negotiations with the private power sector for their first rural electrification projects.\footnote{In the first issue of the REA's publication, the \textit{Rural Electrification News}, Morris L. Cooke highlighted this preference: "The Congressional intent in this matter is so clear," he wrote, "that irrespective of the allotments made to private companies adequate funds will be kept in reserve to meet any demands from public sources." \textit{Rural Electrification News 1(1), 1935}, NRECA Library.}

Congress had been split into factions on REA legislation over who should own rural power and who would get the job done most efficiently. After a protracted debate about public versus private power, the Rural Electrification Act of 1935 ultimately allowed for loan applications from private, public, or cooperative organizations, providing that private companies met certain criteria, including area coverage "without 'cream skimming'" the more profitable areas, reasonable rates that encouraged consumption, and guaranteed sale to distribution cooperatives. The power industry at first showed willingness to work with the REA, and it seemed that much of the federal electrification loan allocations would thus go to private companies. Cooke rejected the first proposal from a commission of private utilities, however, on the grounds that it was too expensive and the utilities would not give fixed rates for rural customers. He asked for revised proposals with explicit written guarantees that the private companies would meet REA criteria. In the words of REA consultant Judson King, however, the "power executives dillydallied for five months, and then said, No."\footnote{King, "The REA – A New Deal Venture in Human Welfare," 5-6.} Ironically, because so much time and effort had been spent trying to negotiate with the private power companies over rates and coverage, in the first year of operation, the REA failed to allocate over 86% of the $100,000,000 it had been given by the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act.\footnote{They failed to use all of their funding in 1936, as well. Detailed finances are discussed in: "Questions Intended to Bring Out Clearly Important Information Necessary to the Understanding of the First Annual..."}
The REA consequently reoriented itself back to the Rural Electrification Act’s original interest in serving mainly cooperatives. Co-ops had many things to recommend them to the REA. They were economical by nature and easier to manage than relationships with private companies. Unlike private companies, they were willing to volunteer their own time and resources to keep costs down.\textsuperscript{195} In 1936, Coil wrote:

> If power is to be sold in markets now undeveloped, both the absolute costs of distribution need to be reduced and utilization increased. Although each of these economies acting alone will reduce the kilowatt-hour cost, together they make an irresistible combination. The Rural Electrification Administration, therefore, is interested in the form of organization which will promote economy in distribution and abundant usage. It believes the consumer cooperative to be that medium.\textsuperscript{196}

However, the REA wanted a certain type of co-op: “To defeat REA staffers skeptical of cooperative,” Keillor reflects, “[the Head of the REA Development Section] Boyd Fisher kept at arm’s length cooperatives perceived as radical, unreliable, or controversial. He preferred safe, cautious, reliable ones.”\textsuperscript{197} It was crucial to the REA’s mission that co-ops were not public power. “REA is no Santa Claus,” an early REA pamphlet made clear: “the farmers are discovering that...these debts must be paid and they must get busy and do their part. ...REA is being managed as efficiently as a well-run private corporation.”\textsuperscript{198} The cooperative model thus resolved the power debate: as a private non-profit institution relying on federal loans, they posed little financial burden to the country and taxpayers, while promoting government ideals of economic growth. From a purely pragmatic standpoint, power ownership was still a volatile subject – by some accounts, a paralyzing one – and being able to avoid the question helped the REA politically.\textsuperscript{199} At root, the REA intended the co-ops to serve as a “yardstick” to shame the huge power conglomerates into lowering their rates

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\textsuperscript{196} E. Johnston Coil to Morris L. Cooke, Memorandum: Rural Electric Cooperatives and the Private Power Industry, 6 May 1936, Office Files of H.S. Person, Box No. 3, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.

\textsuperscript{197} Keillor, \textit{Cooperative Commonwealth,} 325.

\textsuperscript{198} King, “The REA – A New Deal Venture in Human Welfare,” 6.

\textsuperscript{199} “Questions Intended to Bring Out Clearly Important Information Necessary to the Understanding of the First Annual Report of the Rural Electrification Administration to Congress Covering the Period from May 11, 1935, to December 31, 1936.” Mercer Green Johnston Papers, Library of Congress. The author calls the REA a “house divided” between private and public power supporters.
and improving service in other areas, rather than to be a replacement for them, the way public power threatened to do.200

As few electric co-ops existed prior to the REA, it was also an opportunity for the REA to promote its own institutional vision for electricity distribution. Over the next few years, the REA sent field representatives out to rural areas to explain the cooperative business model. They then worked closely with interested communities to help them structure business and electrification plans. This educational outreach was effective and comprehensive, producing in a few years a proliferation of electric cooperatives around the country. Under the tutelage of the REA, many of these new co-ops relied on administrative and management guidelines distributed by the REA Informational Services Division and used REA promotional material to communicate with their memberships. Regular visits by REA auditors further streamlined co-op operations nationally. This oversight allowed the REA to ensure that their goals for rates remained at the center of co-op policy, but, as I will show in the next sections, it ultimately undermined the ability of co-ops to act as independent institutions.

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Rural electrification had widespread benefits, the REA argued: it would help conserve arable land, increase the efficiency of farming, and offer new conveniences for the farm family, all of which promised to increase the consumer power of rural America and contribute to national economic growth.201

“For the Lowest Cost to the Greatest Number”202 versus Electricity for All

Even as REA literature touted that “cooperative consumers’ are a new force for American democracy,”203 co-ops found themselves caught up in a whirlwind of requirements that impacted not just their business operations but also local lifestyles. In implementation, the fiscal constraints of REA loans and rates requirements came to dominate the “march of rural electrification,”204 highlighting conflicts in the REA’s social ideology and pressing communities into conforming to its vision for economic

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202 Rural Electrification News 3(11), 1938, NRECA Library.
203 “The Electrified Farm of Tomorrow,” July 1939, Information Services Division, 1937-53, Box No. 5, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
204 The Rural Electrification News had a regular section called “The March of Rural Electrification,” which highlighted projects in progress around the country.
development. Despite the REA’s insistence that electricity was a right for everyone, rural electrification ended up proceeding somewhat unevenly around the country. Where it did occur, it brought with it expectations of consumerism and economic efficiency; where it did not occur, it heightened inequalities. Thus, the relationship between the REA and its co-op applicants in practice is worth more detailed attention.

Figure 3.2: Status of REA Financed Projects as of December 31, 1936, NRECA Library. Reliable co-ops with the right density and organizational capacity to submit a successful application were starting to build lines by 1936.205

Farmers must have been a bit bemused by the REA agenda. On the one hand, they would have seen REA field agents working hard to drum up excitement about their electrification program and the advantages of the co-op model. But when communities started applying, they found the application process to be long and the criteria strict. An application to the REA required detailed surveys of the proposed electrification area, maps,

205 Rural Electrification News 2(6), January 1937, NRECA Library.
membership forms, and signed easements for electrical lines to cross members’ property. In addition to the legwork, the REA encouraged co-ops to hire an attorney and a “pre-allocation engineer” to liaise with the appropriate REA departments in preparing the application.206 In Riverton, Wyoming, the Midvale Power and Light Association held a dance to raise money for the expenses.207

Figure 3.3: A Co-op Enthusiast Talks to his Neighbor about the REA, c. late 1930s, National Archives. The first task in applying for an REA loan was to collect membership forms from at least 150 members (at a density of 3 member per mile) and to get easements signed.208

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206 These employees were further encouraged to work in coordination with various REA divisions. General Info on Loans and Finance Division in the REA, Office Files of H.S. Person, Box No. 1, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
207 Minutes of the Meeting of the Midvale Light & Power Association, 10 October 1938, Project Case Files Concerning Loans to REA Borrowers, 1938-1939, Box No. 7, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
208 Rural Electrification Administration photo archives, National Archives.
The onerous application process unsurprisingly caused frustration in communities around the country, and the REA was subject to a lot of criticism about delays and false promises, as well as satire. In Missouri, for example, a paper published the following poem:

Mary had an old gas lamp
That didn’t make much light.
She had to clean it up each day
To brighten up the night.

As years went by, her eyes grew dim
“Till she was almost blind.
Then came the REA co-op
And right away she signed.

There are several verses about her wiring her home in expectations of power and a series of delays. Then:

Still cleans her lamp and wipes her specs,
And waits from day to day.
She begs and moans and pleads and groans,
For power thru REA.

She’s now on High – she had to die –
She couldn’t live for Aye.
My! – what a sight! – She’s seen the light,
But not from REA.²⁰⁹

As in the poem, co-ops could spend months collecting survey data and interviewing potential members only to be told that their project was unfeasible. This could occur for several reasons:

First, the co-op could be too small or lack sufficient density. Size was probably the most common reason a co-op application was denied. A feasible project application "should consist of at least fifty and preferably one hundred miles of line, serving not less than three customers per mile," C. O. Falkenwald of the REA Examining Division explained to a potential co-op in Fremont County, Wyoming, whose application he was declining (though he commended the “persistent efforts of the people of your County to develop a practical REA project,” noting that their file had been open for three years without success).²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Mr. and Mrs. A. C. Dennis, Springfield Missouri, 6/30/40, REA Photostat Press Summary, Gifford Pinchot Collection, Box 719, Library of Congress.
²¹⁰ Correspondence between C. O. Falkenwald and E. W. Beckman, regarding Wyoming 3 Fremont, 27 August 1938, Project Case Files Concerning Loans to REA Borrowers, 1938-1939, Box No. 7, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
1939, John Carmody, the successor to Morris Cooke as head of the REA, explained to Representative Francis Case of South Dakota that the state as a whole was unlikely to ever have sufficient density for a self-liquidating project: “South Dakota has not been very active in rural electrification principally because the agricultural features are not as adaptable as in other parts of the country. The farms are large and homes far apart,” Carmody wrote, and it was “even more difficult in the western sections of the state.” In many cases, the REA recommended that a prospective co-op keep reaching out to members or combine with another nearby co-op and reapply, but sometimes they determined that the proposed area was simply unfeasible for electrification.

If a co-op was too small or too spread out, the REA argued, it would not be able to sustain an operating budget and its loan payments without raising rates above REA-approved levels. These small or dispersed communities may have gained benefits from electric lights and the few low-current appliances they could have afforded to use with high rates, but high-cost electricity could not bring to these farmers the benefits the REA felt could be achieved in more developed communities. At $800-$1000 to extend one mile of line, Cooke wrote, “some sections of the country could not [be] served economically under any conditions.” And perhaps they should not be, the REA rationale continued – if a place could not sustain a growing economy and needed public subsidies for modern infrastructure, it would just be a perpetual drain on the national economy.

A second reason co-op applications were denied, therefore, was if their proposed area did not show potential for productive farming or industrial development. Growing up with the national land conservation programs spurred by the Dust Bowl, REA doctrine was that “land has its proper use.” The REA wanted evidence that a community applying for loans had economic development potential appropriate for the region. The flipside of rural electrification improving the productivity of fertile agricultural areas, the REA believed,

**References:**

211 Correspondence between John Carmody and Representative Francis Case, regarding South Dakota cooperatives, 2 March 1939, General and Project Correspondence 1936-1940, Box No. 7, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.

212 Correspondence between Senator George Norris and Morris L. Cooke, *Rural Electrification News* 1(3). They discussed other options for financing, but these options did not occur in practice.


was that electrification proposals for “areas which have been determined as submarginal for agricultural purposes” should be denied. “Where poor lands should be retired from farming because the physical resources cannot support a progressive and permanent agriculture,” the REA contended, “there exists no economic or social justification for electric power.”

Co-ops subsequently learned to emphasize their growth potential in applications. For example, the Fremont County co-op application expressed enthusiasm about new and prospective businesses in the area: “A cooperative creamery is under construction to serve this area and expects to start operations early in May,” the co-op wrote to the REA, “and we have prospects of a sugar factory in 1939.” A Washington co-op stipulated in their application: “This is all good land under federal irrigation. No rocks or trees, except shade trees.”

Additionally, REA field appraisers conducted their own investigations. The Great Plains Committee, in its efforts to protect fertile agricultural lands, had established a system of “rural zoning,” which determined optimal land use and restricted activity in certain places “so that families will not be able to move into places where they will be a liability rather than an asset.” Like the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) more famously did for urban America, Great Plains land-use specialists created maps of rural America in terms of investment potential. Some of the land zoned as unviable for agriculture was purchased by the government, and some families were able to relocate, but others simply missed out on future services, including electrification aid. This practice of mapping carried into the REA, resulting in a kind of rural red lining that denied electricity to “submarginal” farms. Paralleling Jane Jacobs’ critique of the HOLC maps, REA maps became a self-fulfilling prophecy. As in the city, it was the families who were struggling the most who would lose out from these maps: farmers who had ended up on difficult farmland or in places too remote from established transportation networks, or where travel became treacherous during the winter. These “mislocated farm families,” as the REA

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216 Correspondence between E. W. Beckman and John Carmody, regarding Fremont, Wyoming, 12 March 1938, Project Case Files Concerning Loans to REA Borrowers, 1938-1939, Box No. 7, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
217 Franklin, “We, the People”; Coil, “National Land-Use Policy and Rural Electrification.”
218 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 214.
referred to them, not only missed the quality-of-life benefits of electricity, but they also fell behind economically, as their newly-electrified neighbors reaped the efficiencies of electric farming and became culturally reoriented towards commercial and industrial activities to meet REA load-building demands.219

Figure 3.4: Land Fit for Agriculture in Montana, c. 1937, National Archives. Maps such as this one were used in federal land management policies aimed at protecting agricultural lands after the Dust Bowl.220

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Figure 3.5: Land Fit for Agriculture in Maine, 1936, National Archives. An REA map of a proposed electrification project area in Maine shows areas marked as "submarginal" for farming, which were not recommended for electrification aid.  

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221 Scoville, "Agricultural Conditions in a Proposed Electrification Project Area in Aroostock and Penobscot County, Maine."
The REA’s focus on profitably continued to have insidious effects within co-ops who received federal funding, as well. Despite the stated commitment to area coverage, economic viability concerns gave co-op boards the discretion to add individual members or not as they saw fit for the health of the co-op. In particular, the question of tenant farmers warranted a fair amount of discussion during the first few years of REA operations, and the rhetoric is illustrative: “I do not believe that REA should permit any discrimination against sharecroppers and tenant farmers on projects financed with Federal funds,” Udo Rall, the head of the REA Cooperative Education Section, wrote to Falkenwald in 1938. “The only fair criterion is that of the economic effect on the project itself. If a tenant can pay the membership fee, can arrange for the wiring of his property (with his own funds, or by qualifying for an REA wiring loan, or by having the owner pay for the wiring), and can give reasonable assurance that he will be able to pay the monthly minimum charges for consumption of energy, I should consider him eligible for membership.” Even into the late 1940s, field notes included observations such as this one, from REA field appraiser Max U.S. Colbert in Virginia: “A considerable number of farm tenants’ or farm laborers’ houses will not be wired because of the poverty of the occupant and because the owner considers the building worth too little to justify the cost of wiring; and in some cases because he is not interested in the tenant’s having the convenience of electric service.” Area coverage thus meant electricity in areas the REA deemed viable, for all who could pay for it.

Colbert’s field notes highlight racial discrimination, as well, made possible by the discretion co-ops were given to extend electricity selectively under the guise of efficient management and economic solvency. In an Appendix Colbert cautioned should not be shared with the co-op’s management, he reported that “certain directors do not wish attention given to progress of negro farm members, and are not interested in whatever facts of the sort might be discovered. When negro farmers near existing lines are connected, while there may be a white farmer substantially farther from an existing line those directors feel the white farmer should be connected first, ignoring all other considerations including those of co-op economics.” He supported this observation with

222 Correspondence between Udo Rall and C. O. Falkenwald, 19 May 1938, Information Services Division, Office Files of Udo Rall Box 4, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives (emphasis added).
223 Max U. S. Colbert, Field Report, PG County (1949), NARA
statistics from a random sample of farms indicating that the majority of electrified farms were white, while 85% of "potential farm consumers" were non-white.224 While the standard REA field assessment form did not have a category for racial statistics, one can imagine that Colbert was not the only field appraiser to notice trends of non-economic discrimination in electric co-op service distribution decisions.

Figure 3.6: Submarginal Living in Penobscot County, Maine, 1936, National Archives. Included in the same economic feasibility study as the map in Figure 4. It was recommended that agriculture on such land be discouraged, as well as the extension of electricity. The field appraiser worries about the "excessive public service costs" of maintaining roads and infrastructure to such areas and suggests they should not be inhabited year-round.225

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224 Colbert, Field Report, PG County (Appendix)
225 Scoville, "Agricultural Conditions in a Proposed Electrification Project Area in Aroostock and Penobscot County, Maine."
Figure 3.7: Tenant Customers, 1938, Library of Congress. The back of this photo contains the message: Tenant Customer, Woodruff Ark. Does this look like $2.50 per month? Far from being a program of electricity for all, the REA model of electrification required a minimum level of guaranteed income. Presumably, this potential co-op member did not qualify for a line extension.226

Beyond strictly economic viability measures, the REA evaluated co-op funding applications by social metrics, as well. In addition to sufficient membership, the REA further required proof that members would show commitment to cooperative ideals before they would allocate funds to a co-op. Mainly, this referred to members’ willingness to grant easements for electrical lines without payment. “The construction of your cooperative’s line has been held up,” the REA chided the Clay County Electric Cooperative Corporation of Arkansas in a letter dated June 13, 1939, using this as an opportunity to expound on their philosophy about cooperative electricity:

A few individuals are blocking progress. They are refusing to grant right-of-way through their farms. REA can’t pay for right-of-way, neither can an REA-financed cooperative. We believe that the right to build facilities for non-profit community service is only a small thing to ask as a contribution of the individual toward community progress. ...Progress depends on your getting right-of-way grants from your neighbors who are blocking the way. It is up to you to show them their obligation to your cooperative and to your community.

226 Photo from Woodruff Arkansas co-op economic appraisal, 1938, Mercer Johnston Papers, Box 72, Library of Congress.
The letter goes on to note that the Clay County co-op was planning an extension to another 375 families, which would likely be denied if they continued to have problems with easements.\textsuperscript{227}

Figure 3.8: Electricity for All When Neighbors Cooperate, c. 1940, National Archives. Early REA propaganda focused on cooperation, but the implication was one of economic efficiency more so than cooperative spirit. Lack of cooperation within a co-op caused expensive delays and drove up rates, the REA argued.\textsuperscript{228}

At first glance, such interactions seem to imply that the REA took cooperative education seriously. An alternate interpretation, however, is that the REA was committed enough to their principles about what costs should and should not go into electricity rates that they were willing to deny service to hundreds of families to prove a point about economics. Another way this played out was in negotiations between distribution co-ops and private generation and transmission (G&T) companies, which leads to a fourth reason

\textsuperscript{227} "To Members of the Clay County Electric Cooperative Corporation," REA Progress Bulletin, 13 June 1939, Information Services Division, Box No. 9, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.

\textsuperscript{228} Rural Electrification Administration photo archives, National Archives.
applications were commonly rejected: if the co-op was unable to buy wholesale power inexpensively enough to meet REA distribution rate criteria. In order to supply low cost power to members, electric co-ops required a cheap source of wholesale power. In many cases, however, the closest supplier was a private utility, often the same private utility that had been dragging its heels about extending lines into the proposed co-op area. The same inherent conflict that had killed negotiations between the power industry and the REA in its first year played out in small struggles around the country between REA distribution co-ops and the private power generators: the REA wanted power to be as cheap as humanly possible, the private power companies wanted to maximize profit, and the middle ground was often unacceptable to both parties. Ultimately, the REA would fund the construction of a large number of co-op controlled generating plants, and much of co-op service area today is supplied by these cooperative G&Ts.229

One result of the REA treating local rate negotiations as proxy battles for a larger war, however, was that many nascent co-ops were denied loans for a situation beyond their control. Co-op organizers found this understandable frustrating. In Camano Island, Washington, for example, a newly formed co-op wrote to its congressman out of desperation, asking him to please intervene with the REA, who had rejected the wholesale rate quoted by the Puget Sound Power and Light Company. The co-op had appealed the rate to the company, as well as to the state Supervisor of Public Utilities, the president of the co-op explained in his letter, but had not been successful in negotiating a lower rate. “I was informed [by the REA] that unless the wholesale rate would approximate one cent per KWH, there was little likelihood that our application would be approved,” he wrote, with the plea, “I really don’t know what may be done, but we are using every possible means to the end, hence this letter to you.”230 Eventually, South Camano gave up on the REA and joined a concurrent fight for public power that had been gaining strength in the Pacific Northwest, ultimately helping create the Snohomish Public Utility District. Snohomish

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229 NRECA, Annual Meeting Fact Sheet.
230 Correspondence between Representative Monrad Wallgren and James I Moore Jr., 27 November 1935, General Correspondence, Box No. 7, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
electrical service would not come online until 1949, however, fifteen years after their rate negotiations with the REA.231

Overall, the REA’s loan criteria limited its ability to reach underserved farms, and delayed the full extension of electricity throughout rural America. Dozens of potential projects were "closed" until further notice in the REA files because they were "not presenting immediate possibilities for further development."232 Some initially rejected co-op cases managed to improve their “viability” and re-apply or join with another co-op effort nearby; the rest are now served by a mix of for-profit and public utilities. But, as on Camano Island, these communities had to wait, while their more economically promising neighbors reaped the efficiencies of being on the grid.233

In borderline cases, the REA would accept promises of volunteered materials and labor in line building as a measure of economic viability, and many co-ops took advantage of this cost-saving measure to qualify for loans. In addition to construction, administrative functions frequently depended on existing community resources in early co-ops: meetings and office services took place in members’ homes and general managers served without pay. In other words, co-ops contributed to keeping rates low through community subsidies, which reduced the business overhead needed for labor, office space, and salaries. At the point where community subsidies are necessary to keep a business solvent, one wonders if this is fundamentally different from tax-funded public power, as well as how to compare a company reliant on both financial and social capital to the for-profit companies with which they were competing. In any case, the off-the-books subsidies built into the co-op social structure allowed the REA to claim them as financial successes that worked because of local

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231 Interestingly, the Snohomish PUD history on their website extols the public power movement as – like the REA – a fight against holding companies to make electricity available for everyone, not just urban America - but it makes no mention whatsoever of the REA. “Public Power in Snohomish County,” http://www.snopud.com/AboutUs/history/pubpower.ashx?p=1349.
232 Correspondence between N. L. Harfield and Walter L. Wolff, 23 November 1936, General Correspondence, 1936-1940, Box No. 7, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
233 They were sometimes lenient, if things balanced out: an application from Plaquemines, Louisiana - many members of which were only accessible by boat due to lack of roads - received this assessment: “the usual inducement to be conservative in the use of electricity is lacking because of the low electric rate charged by the U.S. Department of Engineers. Second, almost constant usage of radios is likely because of the isolated living imposed upon [those] residing in that area.” Feasibility Assessment of the Plaquemines Electric Cooperative Association, 1951, Applications and Loan Division, Box No. 40, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
democracy, while skating neatly over the issue there is more to democratic practice than volunteer labor.\textsuperscript{234}

Figure 3.9: Members Pitch in to Build Lines, late 1930s, National Archives. Volunteer labor kept costs down and helped co-ops meet REA rate requirements.\textsuperscript{235}

**Democratic Ownership is Not Democratic Control**

Once a co-op was approved, the REA continued to have a heavy hand in co-op operations. “Cooperatives don’t just happen,” the *Rural Electrification News* warned co-op members. “They are not presidential handouts and are not foolproof, they require efficient

\textsuperscript{234} REA literature first begins to talk about the practice of democracy in co-ops as something other than “members working together,” [or as they chastise co-ops at one point, “members WORKING together,” “Cooperatives in the Making,” *Rural Electrification News* 1(9), 1936, 16], around World War II, in contrast to fascism. *Rural Electrification News*, NRECA Library.

\textsuperscript{235} Rural Electrification Administration photo archives, National Archives.
management.”

To ensure this, the REA set specific guidelines for co-ops’ use of loan money. “Your members have a big job ahead of them, in the construction and operation of rural electric lines spread over a considerable area and serving a large number of people,” the REA wrote to the Cherokee County Electric Cooperative Association in Texas, letting them know their loan had been approved. The letter then went on to spell out specific allocations of the loan funds from the REA, down to details of employee salaries, office supplies, and savings for unexpected expenses. “It is necessary that the money which has been made available to you be budgeted and used effectively,” the letter instructs, adding that “several divisions of REA” need to approve their expenses, not just as their lender but as the more experienced party in rural electrification. “As you know,” the REA reminded the co-op, “[our] experience now covers more than eighty million dollars worth of project construction.”

REA micromanagement started early. In a 1935 radio address on the Home and Farm Hour, Cooke called for potential co-ops to contact them as soon as possible: “We want you to write us about possible cooperative projects without waiting until you can present a completely detailed application,” he encouraged. “Our organization has been deliberately planned in such a way that it can be helpful to you in legal and engineering matters.” Assuming the co-op’s application was successful, REA oversight then continued throughout the co-op’s life. Ed Grange, the former General Manager of Holy Cross Energy in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, reminisces that they had to fire their first bookkeeper after two REA auditors showed up at a board meeting in 1941 and demanded a more sophisticated system of accounting than the co-op had been employing. In some cases, the REA exercised veto power over employment and salary decisions to the point that co-ops felt they were constrained from hiring the best person for the job or that their local knowledge had no place in the REA blueprint for rural electrification.

236 “Cooperatives in the Making,” 15.
237 Correspondence between John Carmody and the Cherokee County Electric Cooperative Association, General and Project Correspondence, 1936-1940, Box No. 45, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
238 Ed Grange, “Holy Cross Electric: In the Beginning, the First 30 Years,” Chapter 4 (unpublished).
When co-ops did not follow REA guidelines to the letter, they were scolded for it. "We want to recall to your mind the letter which Mr. Carmody wrote you last October," the REA wrote to the Farmers Electric Cooperative in Arkansas in 1939. "In it he reminded you that the funds from the public purse had been lent your cooperative; he told you why these funds should not be wasted, and what you could do to show the people of Arkansas and the Nation that you meant business. He asked you to get your homes wired and use electricity. Your response has not been as good as we expected." The co-op in question had been lagging in building their average load, and the REA advised it to get to work on adding new members and "by conversation and especially by example encourage all members, old and new, to make a more liberal use of electric power." Other co-ops received letters of concern over easements, employee salaries, contract fees, and other "non-cooperative" behavior that threatened the economy of the company.

![Figure 3.10: "You're slipping?", 1938, National Archives.](image)

The REA encouraged a model of high usage and low rates to keep co-ops running, and it scolded co-ops who failed to promote adequate consumption.240

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240 Utilization Progress Report Memorandum from G. D. Munger, January 1938, Utilization Division Correspondence re: More Effective Uses of Elec. Energy by Members of Co-ops, 1938-1940, Kentucky, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
The main intervention of the REA in co-op management, however, was its insistence on keeping rates as low as possible. Recall that low rates were the lynchpin of successful rural electrification, according to the REA, which saw getting the rates right as setting a "yardstick" for the rest of the power industry and wanted to prove that electricity could be supplied "for the lowest cost to the greatest number."241 This was REA dogma, and the agency expected co-ops to fall in line. In 1938, for example, a field agent in Wisconsin reported on his visit to a struggling co-op:

I asked to take a ride over some of the lines with Mr. Redman [the project superintendent] and when we got out into the open he began to tell his troubles. One of the first things he said was that he saw no other way for them to pull out of the hole than to raise their rates. This started me talking a little tough to him, and I told him that that sounded to me like he had quit on the job he was put there for – that we expected him to come through by getting customers on the line and build up the use of electricity to provide revenue, not to fall back on the old theory that they could pull themselves out of the hole by raising the rates. The worst thing that could happen to our REA program would be that one single project raised their rates.

The field agent's letter goes on to add that he suggested Mr. Redman organize "a series of 'waffle suppers'" at potential members homes with local appliance dealers, who he is sure "would be glad to furnish the waffle irons."242

One of the foundational principles on which the REA was built was the idea that the private power industry had been suppressing the power market, and national economic growth in general, by keeping prices high. There was plenty of demand for electricity, the REA believed, if one knew how to tap into it – it was simply a matter of always looking for new memberships and teaching members how to more fully apply the benefits of electricity on the home and farm. If they could just get rates low enough, Cooke and others argued, people would use electricity "abundantly," to the benefit of themselves, their co-op, and the nation.243 Recognizing that such abundant electricity usage required potentially prohibitive expenditures for wiring and appliances, the REA coordinated financing programs for individual families as well as community cooperatives. Rural families could take advantage

242 Correspondence between C. O. Falkenwald and G. A. Lewis, 9 May 1938, Project Case Files Concerning Loans to REA Borrowers, 1938-1939, Box No. 7, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
of wiring and plumbing loans directly through their REA cooperative, while the Electric Home and Farm Authority (EHFA) offered a financing program for appliances through participating retailers (see Table 3.1). Additionally, the REA worked with electric appliance suppliers to develop simpler, more affordable models.

Table 3.1: EHFA Payment Plan for Standard Appliances, c. 1935

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electric Appliance</th>
<th>Assumed Cash Selling Price</th>
<th>Minimum Down Payment</th>
<th>Unpaid Balance</th>
<th>Maximum term of contract (months)</th>
<th>Monthly Payment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refrigerator</td>
<td>$150.00</td>
<td>$8.00</td>
<td>$142.00</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>$4.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>$125.00</td>
<td>$7.00</td>
<td>$118.00</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>$3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water pump</td>
<td>$76.50</td>
<td>$4.50</td>
<td>$72.00</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>$2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing machine</td>
<td>$62.50</td>
<td>$3.50</td>
<td>$59.00</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>$2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refrigerator, range, and water pump</td>
<td>$351.50</td>
<td>$18.50</td>
<td>$333</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>$8.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rural electrification programs were never intended to be charity; they were intended to increase equity for those who had purchasing power. The right financing programs for wiring and appliances, it was argued, would encourage "the full use of electricity by families of moderate income." A combination of low rates and low-interest loans for "approved" appliances and wiring would launch a new technological era for struggling farmers, helping them to help themselves increase the productivity of their farms and encouraging them to participate in the broader economy. FDR explained this kind of debt-financing using the metaphor of a "trade agreement" between "the privileged majority of the American people and the underprivileged minority," arguing that federal programs that created "an increase in purchasing power of the forgotten and submerged

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244 Aid to Purchasers of Electrical Appliances Offered by Electric Home and Farm Authority, Thomas G. Corcoran collection, Electric Home and Farm Authority, 1935-38, Folder No. 1, Library of Congress.
246 Aid to Purchasers of Electrical Appliances Offered by Electric Home and Farm Authority, 3.
248 "Helping You to Help Yourself," Information Services REA News Releases, Bulletins, Reports, 1937-53, Box No. 5, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
part of our population [would] furnish an immense market for the products of the American factories and farms." \(^{249}\)

**Figure 3.11: Installing a New Electric Range, National Archives.** With EHFA financing, an electric range could cost as little as $3.77 per month, putting such amenities in reach of "families of moderate income." \(^{250}\)

Ultimately, however, increasing demand required concerted efforts of public education and culture change. Despite the wildly enthusiastic responses to electricity that tended to be publicized by the REA, \(^{251}\) electrification remained a major economic decision for many families at the edge of the targeted "moderate income" group. REA poet Robert W.

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\(^{250}\) Rural Electrification Administration photo archives, National Archives.

\(^{251}\) The most cited example probably being the Tennessee farmer who stood up at a meeting to wax poetic about his new electric service: "'Brothers and sisters: I want to tell you this. The greatest thing on earth is to have the love of God in your heart, and the next greatest thing is to have electricity in your house." Richard A. Pence, *The Next Greatest Thing* (National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, 1984).
Feragen recalls that people even viewed signing up for co-op service as a gamble; paying a $5 membership fee for service in a new cooperative, he writes, felt “like throwing away two pairs of new overalls, [a] bandana and a tobacco plug.” As great as electrical service could be, the all-electric home and farm was a steep proposition for many farmers, even with financing.

Costs varied by region, but a family of “moderate income” that wanted the all-electric lifestyle could expect to pay on the order of a $5 co-op membership fee upfront, plus at minimum $75 for wiring and plumbing work, plus $11.00 per month for a full set of electric appliances for a period of four years, plus a minimum monthly service charge of around $2.50, plus the standard KWH charge for any additional electricity consumption. At the time, according to USDA statistics, average farm cash incomes in the country were less than $1000 per year. In other words, wiring one’s home and farm was on the order of – for modest farms – a year’s total cash income, though it could be spread out through REA and EHFA financing over several years. Looking at some actual loans is instructive: in the Holy Cross Electric Co-op territory in Glenwood Springs, CO, wiring loans from the co-op ranged from $13-$114. If some farmers’ budgets required financing a $13 wiring expenditure through co-op loans, imagine one of those farmers spending over $400 for the standard set of household appliances!

Many farmers were not thrilled about the idea of debt financing in the first place. This was a period where cultural attitudes on debt were in a process of metamorphosis, from “a burden and a morally questionable activity” to a way to “create economic development and generate jobs, income, and wealth.” The attitude of “I don’t buy what I can’t plank the money down for right on the line” still prevailed among many farmers, and this fiscal conservatism shaped their assessment of proposed REA cooperative service. Ed Grange from Holy Cross Energy Co-op in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, recalls: “I

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254 USDA, Farm Income and Wealth Statistics.
256 Field, “Electricity for All,” 52.
remember someone coming to our ranch to talk to my father about signing up for this great new project and I so well remember my father stubbornly resisting, not convinced that the project would ever get built, and worried about who was going to pay the borrowed money back if not enough money was available from the operation of the cooperative."  

Potential co-op members expressed further concern about who would be liable for damages if lines were downed by weather or if they hurt someone. Besides, there were other ways to get modern appliances without the expense of wiring one’s house. Surveys of residents likely to sign up for co-op service often found carbide lights and gas-powered appliances or small electric generators already powering mechanical equipment in the homes the REA claimed needed saving from darkness and drudgery. The history of electrification tends to forget that people were creative and resourceful even without highline power. People wanted electricity, to be sure, but not everyone wanted debt.  

Contrary to the REA’s projections, electricity consumption increased slowly and sporadically in a number of co-op territories. An appliance survey conducted several years into REA co-op service found high uses of a few things – radios, electric irons, and washing machines were widely popular – but inconsistent adoption of everything else. Speaking to REA employees in 1939, Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace mused: “So far, I have been rather amazed at how little rural electricity is used. Of course, it is used for lights. The housewives no longer have to clean the lamps. It is used for radio and that is fine. Then you sort of have to let your voice fall...”  

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259 Correspondence between C O Falkenwald and Walter L Wolff, 4 October 1938, General and Project Correspondence, 1936-1940, Box No. 7, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.  
If the REA were truly to be a "yardstick" that proved electricity could flow like water and be as cheap as air, then it needed not just to discipline co-ops but also to educate co-op members individually about the benefits of electrical appliances and the economies of scale that would reduce electricity costs if every member committed to using more of it. The REA's Information Services Division developed guides for members, pamphlets about wiring, plumbing, and appliances, informational videos, and displays for co-op offices or meetings, explaining in colorful and varied ways how wiring and appliance expenditures would pay for themselves in time savings and efficiency. The REA also sent "field utilization specialists" around the country to help co-ops increase their loads; these utilization specialists taught proper wiring and appliance usage, designed demonstration all-electric homes and farms, threw kitchen parties (such as the waffle supper), and

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261 Rural Electrification News 5(5), 1940, NRECA Library.
262 REA brochures explain how electric lights encourage hens to lay more eggs, running water reduces labor, refrigeration cools milk faster, preventing spoilage, an electric motor works longer and faster than a farm hand, and so on. REA News Releases, Bulletins, Reports, 1937-53, Box No. 5, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
organized other creative load-building programs such as "lamp campaigns," which put lamps in people's homes on a trial basis. 263 An REA Electric Farm Equipment Show toured the country for several years. 264

In short, the implementation of REA-style rural electrification through local cooperatives required a concerted effort on the part of the REA in disciplining both co-ops and co-op members. Other than the quickly acquired and ubiquitous lights, radios, and irons, it becomes difficult to separate quality of life improvements from learned cultural preferences for the all-electric lifestyle through intensive REA advertising. It is particularly interesting to consider that the first uses of electricity were social in nature – lights for reading after dark, radio for news and entertainment from town, washing machines and irons for presentable attire – while the more subsistence-focused appliances – electric stoves, refrigerators, farm equipment – took longer to become standard farmstead purchases. They may have simply been more expensive, but they also may not have seemed immediately needed. In the absence of REA education and financing, the rural electric home and farm may have ending up looking a little different, for better or worse.

As Historian David Nye reminds us, "whatever the many gains of electrification, it entailed losses as well." 265 Obviously, electrical technologies improved lives, in some cases immeasurably, but a new lifestyle built around industrial development and consumerism would nonetheless bring both wanted and unwanted changes to the countryside for rural communities.

263 Victoria Harris, for example, was a "field utilization specialist" working for the REA in Kentucky. In a letter back to the REA, she outlines two of her main tasks as a field agent: first, she had been making home calls to educate women on the "economical use of the electric range" and help them "improve their cooking methods." In addition to home calls, "field utilization specialists" held electric kitchen demonstrations at county fairs and co-op meetings and disseminated a wide variety of publications on how electricity can make household chores more efficient and pleasant. The second task Miss Harris discusses in this letter is a series of meetings for a new REA project to share REA best practices for wiring and lighting. While REA wiring guides importantly taught electrical safety, these "best practices" also promoted a full wiring treatment for the house and farm, with switches and outlets in every room in convenient locations. In other words, they encouraged farm families to set themselves up for a fully electric lifestyle at initial wiring. This was probably efficient and cost-effective in the long-run, but it was not necessarily the way electrification would have been conducted otherwise, and it obviously facilitated electricity consumption. Correspondence between Victoria Harris and Clara O. Nale, 29 November 1940, Correspondence with State Org., 1940-42, Iowa – Maryland, Box No. 4, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.

264 REA Farm Equipment Show (to members of the Lyon County Electric Coop Assn) KCNA

265 Nye, Electrifying America, 334.
Figure 3.12: An REA Electric Kitchen Cooking Demonstration, c. 1940, National Archives. Such events were held by REA field utilization specialists to teach farm families about the "economical use" of electric appliances in the home.266

266 Rural Electrification Administration photo archives, National Archives; Correspondence between Victoria Harris and Clara O. Nale.
When we first joined our electrical cooperative, I worried about the money it would cost us. As Ed says, we've worried less. All along, I've tried to hang out with the poultry, and usually we've sold a little something at the end of the month from what I made from our chickens. I didn't want to get behind, so Ed put some lights in the laying houses. I guess it makes the hens work harder, but honestly, I think these lights in our ten houses and the eggs we get more than pay for most of the electricity I use around the house. And the best of it is, figuring it this way, at practically no extra cost to us, I've got lights in my own house, a refrigerator, a washer, and all the hot and cold running water we want. Thirty years ago I wouldn't have dreamed we could have such comfort on the farm."

Figure 3.13: Electric Savings on the Farm, c. 1939, National Archives. REA propaganda like this pushed for an all-electric farm and home, emphasizing time and money savings.267

A Landscape of Indebtedness

A federal program of the magnitude of the REA would affect more than just the communities it funded; the “all electric lifestyle” contributed to changing trends in American industrial growth and residential patterns, as well. Earlier in the chapter, I explained that the REA’s loan program avoided contentious politics over whether power should be a private or public enterprise, and that co-ops in particular were a convenient compromise as a hybrid institution that was not (officially) a government institution but had more social checks built in than a for-profit corporation. But beyond that, the structure of debt financing was the key that allowed the REA to have a heavy hand in managing co-op operations and rates, using electric co-ops as an engine, not just for electricity distribution, but for the broader goal of building a wider consumer base across rural America. Like public power, co-op power was not-for-profit, but there were key differences. In assuming

267 REA pamphlet, Information Services, REA News Releases, Bulletins, Reports, 1937-53, Box No. 5, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
ownership and debt, co-ops also assumed a fair amount of business risk, not for individuals – the REA was careful to reassure farmers that the lines themselves would serve as collateral and “no one need mortgage his farm nor be liable for other consumers’ obligations”[268] – but to keep their hard-won electric service, co-ops had to be diligent about making electricity provision profitable. Because the REA had strict guidelines governing rate increases, they had to do so, moreover, almost solely through encouraging increased electricity consumption, above and beyond lightbulbs and radios. Given the importance of the REA’s debt-financing on the spread of rural electrification, it is useful to spend more time examining how co-op debt became such a powerful factor in shaping electric co-ops, and how it worked to discipline the rural landscape.

Anthropologist David Graeber reflects that the modern world revolves around debt – consumer financing, national deficit spending, etc. – but that philosophies about the social relationships created by debt throughout human history have been full of “moral confusion.” (For example: who has the right to hold debt and make others indebted? What does debt mean in different circumstances? What are our debts to each other and to society?) In particular, Graeber ties strategic uses of debt to the project of nation building. Debt, when it can be separated from implicating the lender in moral ambiguity, he argues, defines who dictates cultural norms.[269] Brett Christophers similarly observes that credit defetishizes money, temporarily, because debt is “circular” – i.e., the lent money ultimately has to return to its original owner; thus, credit and debt reveal the social relationships monetary exchange usually obscures, granting them social leverage beyond the average commodity in the marketplace.[270] Others have tied modern debt financing in a capitalist economy to religion, noting that there are complicated relationships in American culture between guilt and debt, faith and credit. Christopher Tomlins argues, for example, that capitalism creates an economic culture of “guilt without atonement” – an orientation that in a way naturalizes debt as a fundamental societal relationship, or, perhaps, is just another

[268] “The ABC of REA,” Morris L. Cooke correspondence, Box 1, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.
way of explaining consumer culture and legitimizing commodity fetishism.\textsuperscript{271} Such morally laden relationships of debt and social power complicate the story of rural electrification in America, encouraging questions about alternative models of technology dissemination and community self-determination.

What moral structure did debt-financing build in rural electrification? For one thing, the REA's focus on solvency through continual growth led to an orientation towards economic potential over social benefit. One can see the effects of this particularly in cases where economic potential trumped density requirements – usually for tourism, including second homes or commercial retreats in remote areas of "wilderness," or industrial activity.\textsuperscript{272} Such decision making fits into a classic narrative of "growth machine politics,"\textsuperscript{273} a theoretical framework for understanding place-competitiveness and speculative development in America that, while originally proposed to explain urban growth, has recently been usefully applied to rural areas. Just as in cities, Esparza and Carruthers observe, rural America has long been subject to the development influences of political and economic elites interested in creating and maintaining land values through symbolic means: "developers and speculators create a marketable product—rural living—that caters to the locational and environmental preferences of consumers of place," they explain, in which, unsurprisingly, "exurbanization leads to cycles of 'creative destruction,' where the creation of exurban environments destroys the very settings that were sought initially."\textsuperscript{274} This commodification of rural land is a dual process – it both commodifies the amenities of rural land (usually for its nature or heritage\textsuperscript{275}) but also brings rural land into the market as a potential site of industrial production.

While I am not trying to make the case that the REA is the sole cause of exurban sprawl or industrial farming, it is one piece in a larger puzzle of developing a particular

\textsuperscript{272} See, for example, the politics in Washington Electric Cooperative over spending $70,000 to extend a line to five vacation cabins in a remote area of Vermont in the 1970s, or Holy Cross Energy in Western Colorado supporting the construction of Vail Village and ski resort (Chapter 4).
economic paradigm both structurally and culturally. The interesting part that co-ops played in this broader story is that modern conceptions of co-ops would likely have expected them to be oppositional to it, to protect local communities from the sweeping trends of national economic interests, and yet, not only did they not do so, they were complicit partners in this project of growth. Operating within this growth orientation, non-tangible goods such as community engagement, volunteer labor, and even the practice of democracy were all pressed into service towards such rural growth machinations, with all of the associated injustices of the same processes in urban America. Perhaps the most obvious indicator of this is how many of the rural communities that were trying to preserve a rural agrarian lifestyle have since turned to tourism as their major industry; in the twenty-first century, a large fraction of co-op members around the country are second home owners and seasonal residents.

Moreover, while over the nearly eighty-year history of the REA co-op network, most co-ops have never been in default on loan payments, most have also never been debt-free.276 Here is what one co-op board president said about cooperative debt in the 1960s: "The question remains in some people's minds whether we will ever reach the point where we will not need to borrow money. The truthful answer is 'probably not' - not this cooperative nor any utility private, municipal, or cooperative. The reason why utilities must always borrow is a simple one. An economy never stands still any where, and it is a rule of life that more people, more industry and more uses for electricity are constantly being found. The means that a utility must constantly anticipate the future with the result that current expenditures are never quite equaled by current revenues." He went on to add: "During the past year your Co-operative has instituted a program to provide technical assistance and research aid for both farmers and industries on our line. This is not simply a 'do-gooder' type of project but we have done this, we hope, with enlightened self interest. Your Co-op has a stake in the business of every farmer member, every rural resident and

276 According to John R. Steelman, assistant to President Truman and acting chairman of the National Security Resources Board, as quoted in the New York Times in 1949, no REA co-op had defaulted on loans at the time of publication, REA Press Digest, 7 March 1949, Information Services REA News Releases, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives. More recent information about co-op debt, see: Cooper, "Electric Co-operatives: From New Deal to Bad Deal?"
every rural industry. As they grow and expand, so do we. If they wither on the line, we
die."277

Taking community ownership as legal but never financial, then, raises the questions: if an organization is in debt, what are the boundaries of its ownership? And what does the lender own? This may sound overly dramatic, but with electric co-ops, debt becomes relevant at the level of management philosophy and self-determination. Thinking about this in terms of collateral is instructive: if you take out a mortgage to buy a house, for example, the bank certainly does not own the rights to tell you how to live your life or what to do with the house; this is fine for the bank, because at the end of the day it retains the right to repossess your house if you stop paying your mortgage.278 By contrast, the collateral for electric co-ops was, technically, their electrical lines and generating equipment. However, the REA was in the middle of a fight about public versus private power; if a co-op defaulted and the REA took back their lines, the whole experiment was moot – co-op economic failure would simply prove that rural electricity needed to be publically subsidized to be financially feasible. Thus, it behooved the REA to make sure that the co-ops did not fail, and, consequently, it became invested in the day-to-day management of its cooperative borrowers.

I argued above that the REA was a massive national infrastructure project deeply embedded in a transforming capitalist economy. Infrastructure and economy are, of course, related concepts, and it is easy to conflate one with the other – economic relationships and resources as financial infrastructure, for example, or travel and communication networks as key building blocks of economic transactions. According to Pierre Bélanger, the term infrastructure first arose in the context of economic activity; early uses define it as “the set of systems, works and networks upon which an industrial economy is reliant – in other words, the underpinnings of modern societies and economies.”279 Infrastructure often has positive social externalities, but, in the service of economic activity, its aim is

277 Washington Electric Cooperative, “President’s Message to the Members,” Meeting minutes, 1963 Annual Meeting of the Members, WEC Archives.
278 Although broadening inquiry on the relationship of debt and control to societal norms has produced interesting musings about home ownership and self-determination, including mid-century developer William J. Levitt’s flippant comment, “No man who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do.” Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 231.
predominantly to facilitate material flows, often to connect rural areas more tightly to urban ones, for the purposes of production, consumption, and exchange.

Exploring rural electrification as an infrastructure project first necessitates attention to the materiality of electric power. Power lines are expensive and resource intensive; they require immense amounts of electrical wire and equipment, poles, and digging, as well as long stretches of dedicated right-of-way paths through the countryside. The combination of land, labor, materials, and local politics required to create a physical electrical grid makes it difficult to change the general mode of operation after it has been built, and locks a community into the particular resources and constraints of that initial choice until it becomes sufficiently cost-effective and politically expedient to replace it – a sociotechnological process that could take decades, especially if it first requires paying off debt.280 In this spirit, historian of electrification Thomas P. Hughes reads power systems as “cultural artifacts.”281 This is true about most infrastructure projects, not just electricity.282

Because of its immobility and longevity, and the often-dramatic advantages it brings, infrastructure projects can seemingly change the “natural advantages” of a region. In his canonical environmental history of Chicago, environmental historian William Cronon encourages us to see such technologies as the building blocks for a human geography as powerful as natural geography. Building off of Marxian ideas that the built environment both expresses and serves to reproduce the economic conditions of the society that inhabits it, Cronon calls this human geography “second nature.” As the infrastructure we build comes to seem as powerful an advantage or constraint for action, he explains, the two geographies become indistinguishable from each other as equally “natural” conditions, and it ultimately becomes impossible to separate “second nature” from “first” or prehuman nature. Or, in Cronon’s words:

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280 The REA worried about the influence of infrastructural development by for-profit companies on future electrification; their line-extension plans were maximaized for profit, they argued, and were not conducive to eventual area coverage. (Morris L. Cooke, “Plan or Muddle Through,” Rural Electrification News 1(9), 1936: 3-6, NRECA Library.)


A kind of ‘second nature’ designed by people and ‘improved’ towards human ends, gradually emerged atop the original landscape that nature – ‘first nature’ – had created as such an inconvenient jumble. Despite the subtly differing logic that lay behind each, the geography of second nature was in its own way as compelling as the geography of first nature, so boosters and others often forgot the distinction between them. Both seemed quite ‘natural.’

Cronon uses this concept particularly effectively in his discussion of railroads and their influence on the ascendency of Chicago as a nationally important center for trade and finance. More so than just creating another shipping channel, he shows, railroads effectively enlarged the ecosystem of Chicago and its hinterlands to include resources from the entire shippable region. They were also a force of centralization, allowing the products of Chicago’s markets and information about them to travel fast outward into the country, bringing more of the country into Chicago’s daily transactions and making personal travel less crucial. The railroad network came to be seen, Cronon demonstrates, as “natural” an organizer of social and business relations as the seasons had been before them – “a case study,” he argues, “in the ways capital can rearrange geography.”

One can easily draw parallels between Cronon’s railroads and rural electrification. Like railroads, electricity requires connected networks of physical infrastructure spanning, ultimately, thousands of miles. It is expensive to extend geographically, but then cheap (and, in fact, increasingly cost effective) to add load to existing infrastructure – to add another car full of goods to an established railway route, or to build a dairy processing plant near already electrified farms. What this means is that, like waterways in “first nature,” electrical lines tended to attract rapidly increasing density and economic activity, while places that missed out on electrification – because they could not prove their economic viability to the REA – shriveled and died. More symbolically, electricity, like

283 William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), xvii, 56. On Chicago’s railroads, Cronon explains: Because of competition from the water route via Lake Michigan (Chicago’s “first nature” natural advantage over other cities in the Midwest), the railroads to the East Coast from Chicago were “trunk” lines – “low-cost, high-volume competitive routes” – whereas west of Chicago, the railroads spread out in a “fan” of “high-cost, low-volume, and noncompetitive” routes that drew resources into Chicago from the countryside to be consolidated and shipped east. “Chicago thus grew to a metropolitan status less from being what the boosters called central than from being peripheral,” Cronon concludes. “Chicago became the link that bound the different worlds of east and west into a single system...It was where the West began,” and the city itself “served as the entrepôt – the place in between – connecting eastern markets with vast western resource regions” (90-91). His discussion of the effects of the railroad network extends to the regional ecosystem (181); on communication and travel (332-3); and on capital (296).
railroads, redefined the boundaries of civilization, increasing the informational connectedness of far-flung farms, and also redefining cultivated lands that did not get REA loans, shifting them from the path of development to a path back to wilderness.

What is key to remember in looking at such technologies as building a new geography is that the “human ends” encoded on the landscape by a powerful “second nature” are not a physical representation of the linear technological progress of a uniform culture; rather, they are the culmination of messy and contested political, economic, social, and cultural relationships. They are, to be more specific, the desired ends of the winners of these struggles. The fact that they come to be seen as “natural” in any way, even in a human-mediated way, obscures this history of multiple, competing visions of the future. When such visions fail to produce sustainable ends or have complicated side effects, it can thus be quite helpful to re-expose them, to go back and look at the process through which these landscapes were created, and what competing visions were silenced in their wake. If we want to create more sustainable economies, lifestyles, and landscapes, we need to grapple with this history. We need to understand why these landscapes were produced for what ends, and what about them is constraining us – physically and ideologically – from acting in different ways.

As in Cronon’s Chicago, the most prominent “human end” encoded by rural electrification was a capitalist reorganization of land and resources for the market. This was a transformation that changed not just the boundaries of wilderness and civilization in rural America, but the boundaries of use value and exchange value on the farms themselves, by bringing in mechanized labor that ran on (and thus required the accumulation of a sustainable supply of) money and by encouraging an intensification and rationalization of farm labor and rural industries.

A more political economic approach to infrastructure interprets it as the physical capture of capital in the built environment, a process David Harvey calls the secondary

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284 I do not mean to imply that rural America was not capitalist before electrification. In fact, Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis* is a history of (among many other things) how the American West was disciplined by and for the market to supply raw materials to the great trading centers of Chicago decades before rural electrification. My contention, rather, is that electrification was a transformation in the particular capitalism that governed economic activity in rural America.
By this reading, infrastructural projects function in a capitalist economy as a safety valve against crises of overaccumulation and underconsumption (e.g., the Great Depression); they are a form of redistribution of public goods that build the apparatus for future production. In a sense, infrastructural investment is a tool that helps capitalism evolve into a new historical and cultural moment.

One can view infrastructural investment as part of a set of institutions and social practices that temporarily stabilize capitalism. This tradition in political economy interprets capitalism as an historical object more so than a universal theory of exchange and highlights its contradictions, assuming that capitalism is an inherently unstable system in which successes require explanation more so than failures. Fordism, the label often applied to the American economic era built around New Deal goals of increasing employment and consumer power, has been highlighted as a period of particular stability of a capitalist economy held in check by political and social institutions. By reshaping the built environment in the image of cultural norms for growth and development, electrification arguably helped contribute to building a “stable accumulation regime.”

Finally, recent scholarship on infrastructure invites us to understand not just how technology reorganizes nature, but how ecologies themselves are constructed – that “first nature” can be the tools with which “second nature” is built. In other words, land and resource management is a kind of infrastructural project as well. Electrification in the U.S. was deeply tied to scientific land management in the interests of more sustainable and productive agriculture. Thus, it is instructive to read rural power lines as part of a larger geotechnical system, which included terraced fields, dams and irrigation, as the entire countryside was remodeled for efficient and economically sustainable farming. This agricultural infrastructure as a whole had profound effects on the economic trajectory of America.

By 1945, over a million rural homes, farms, and businesses had been electrified through REA loans and subsequently wired and stocked with all sorts of new appliances on

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finance plans. Electricity lines stretched into the countryside, marking the agricultural lands they crossed as part of a concerted project of national development, while farms passed over by the REA struggled on (or failed to do so) in their "submarginal" lifestyles. Money flowed into local retail, construction, and electrical businesses, and, from there, out into a dynamic growing economy.\footnote{Surveys indicate that for every dollar invested in rural power facilities the farmer invests an additional $4.50 in wiring, plumbing and electrical appliances.” The REA Rural Electrification Program, Mercer Green Johnston Papers, 1936-1942, Library of Congress.}

In more urban parts of the country, other New Deal programs had also been experimenting with consumer financing, residential density, and economic development. Thousands of families were enticed to move into new suburban neighborhoods, as developer subsidies created a construction boom and new long-term mortgage policies helped bring homeownership in reach of the urban set of “families of moderate income,” even as their counterparts in rural America were enjoying wiring and appliance financing programs. In Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States, urban historian Kenneth Jackson writes that the movement of people from cities to suburban developments started long before New Deal housing and mortgage policies. By the same light, the REA did not create the desire for electrification. However, it is important to recognize the difficulty of disentangling starting preferences from learned desires from available options. These programs may have organized around existing preferences, but they also streamlined the possibilities for realizing such material desires into specific forms of production and consumption that strongly reflected dominant political ideologies of the time.

In addition to consumer empowerment, strong anti-urban biases suffused both urban and rural policy. Jackson muses on the assumptions of bank appraisers responsible for creating the HOLC mortgage risk maps that they “accepted as given the proposition that the natural tendency of any area was to decline.” This assumption, Jackson observes, did not take into account that deterioration of the built environment was a \textit{factor} in rather than a \textit{symptom} of other social and economic hardships in aging inner city neighborhoods. Because of this, he writes, the HOLC maps have since become commonly associated with
red lining – the color-coded designation of inner city, predominantly minority neighborhoods as bad investment risks for mortgage lenders.289

While the urban solution to areas in decline was to encourage people to leave, somehow social potential and the built environment become disentangled in the countryside. From the land studies done in the Great Plains, the REA had learned that there was a difference between poor land and poor infrastructure, and that both were a threat to profitable farming. Just as government land purchases saved “marginal” land from being ravaged by human use, the REA believed, rural electrification would save good farmland from reverting to “wilderness.” One of the first Rural Electrification Newsletters distributed by the REA quoted George Putnam, the President of the New Hampshire Farm Bureau: “we have in New Hampshire a considerable number of good farms...occupied in many instances by elderly people or perhaps at present unoccupied.” Without electricity, he cautioned, “We may as well accept the fact that young, capable, progressive farm families will not be attracted to localities where the necessary conveniences...are not available.” G. L. Jackson of Macon, Georgia, made a similar plea for electrification: “Two families in my community have moved back to town on account of the inconveniences [of farm life],” he wrote to the REA in 1935, “and I’m sure this is happening all over the country. Electricity in my community would no doubt draw quite a number of home-owners.”290 The REA explicitly aimed to stem decline and revitalize struggling areas that had the potential to be profitable – to fight the inevitability of natural decline, if you will – through investing in the built environment.291

This raises an obvious question: Why work to save the struggling countryside but not the struggling inner city? Somehow, the countryside had become intimately linked to national survival, while the city brought moral hazard. “A strong rural life is the foundation of national prosperity,” Harlow S. Person argued in 1936 at the World Power Conference. City life, by contrast, was something to be avoided. At the height of REA activity, Gifford Pinchot mused:

289 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 217, 198.
290 Rural Electrification News 1(3), 1935, NRECA Library.
Even in normal times there has been a tendency for young men and women to leave the farm and seek their fortune in the crowded, busy metropolis. Many of these rural boys and girls have made great names for themselves in the world. Read the life stories of the leaders of America and you will be surprised to find how large a proportion of them stemmed from farm roots. But to a much larger body of persons - the vast numbers who cannot permanently adapt themselves to urban conditions - the city brings disillusionment and unhappiness. ...When rural America has ample electrical power at its fingertips, many of the city's temptations will disappear as if by magic.292

Rural areas could recreate the advantages of the city with a little help from the government, it seemed, while inner cities could not equally bring in the wholesomeness of the countryside. The "second nature" of struggling inner cities, in contrast to the struggling agricultural countryside, arguably was not as easily alterable through a symbiotic relationship with technology and did not hold as much promise of economic growth. In any case, it is worth pondering the mismatch of credit flowing into the countryside, with the corresponding disciplining of the rural economy towards a consumer lifestyle, while the inner city was concurrently being subjected to disinvestment.

Within all the rhetoric about the wholesome countryside, it is also important to remember the farms that failed to qualify for REA financing. The REA's criteria for community economic viability effectively set a minimum density cap on the countryside even as the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) was enticing people out of the densest parts of cities and encouraging a more sprawling urbanism. Rural zoning and the REA's focus on economic growth arguably had the same social effect as the FHA and the opposite geographic one. Geographically, the whole country was in a transitional process of redistribution, in which national programs rewarded concentration in a medium-density landscape of streamlined production and consumption. This occurred not just in suburbia at the expense of the city, but in the countryside as well, at the expense of many farmers and ranchers who ended up on the wrong land at the wrong time.

In a concerted rural to urban continuum, New Deal programs took a relatively undeveloped landscape that the market forces of the time had failed to recognize as profitable and transformed it in a different image. In Marxian terms, this is a case of expanding markets through uneven geographic development, the "spatial fix" that

postpones real or potential economic crises by shifting investment elsewhere, where there are fewer externalities - at least, ones that need to be dealt with on a short time horizon. Reading this process from the urban side, David Harvey describes the new geography as a Keynesian city of "demand-side urbanization" and he notes that it "produced a very different-looking" settlement pattern of "low-density sprawl, distinctive spaces of consumption...and strange significations of life-style and social status etched into the landscape of unrelieved consumerism."293

![Figure 3.14: The All-Electric Lifestyle, 1953, National Archives.](image)

You Enjoy Better Living--Easier Living When You LIVE ELECTRICALLY!

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293 Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital*, 60-61, 210-211.
294 *Arks and Sparks* 1(51), 1953, Application & Loan Division Records re: Economic Analysis of Proposed Electrification Areas, 1937-58, Box No. 41, Rural Electrification Administration, Record Group No. 221, National Archives.

132
There is ultimately a deep irony in rural electrification, because it created an efficiency that foretold the emptying of the countryside it had tried to preserve: over the next several decades, farms consolidated, grew large, and trended towards monoculture, thanks to electricity and machinery making farming more efficient and profitable, while farming families moved into exurban consumer-oriented residential communities that were neither farm nor city. Between 1930 and 1970, the percentage of the American workforce employed in agriculture dropped from 21.5% to 4%, even though the rural population was still around a quarter of the population.²⁹⁵

This was not the expected outcome of rural electrification. In 1936, FDR predicted in a speech:

*But now, in the electrical age, it is not too much to hope that electricity can become a potent force in restoring the order and well-being of our national life. Electricity is a flexible and mobile force. It can move out, coursing over transmission networks, to seek the worker at the forest, quarry and mine. As much as any other single force, electricity can help us to eliminate the sweatshop and the slum. It can help us to restore a balance of opportunity between city and country - between the factory and the farm.*²⁹⁶

Of course, the brand of electrification promoted in the 1930s did not eliminate the sweatshop and the slum – it *could not*, because, despite its social aims at modernizing the countryside, the REA never sought to provide universal service, nor was it intended to be a critique of industrial production.

Ironically, opponents of the REA called it “socialism” and predicted the “complete destruction of the entire private-utility industry.”²⁹⁷ But the REA was far from socialism; it quite explicitly encouraged market-based production and consumption as a path to progress. In fact, the battles against the free-market enthusiasts of the holding companies and private power companies can be read as a fight to make the market more efficient and free up capital to invest in areas where it could be more productive, such as farming communities and suburban development. Holding companies and private electricity

²⁹⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Speech on Electric Power, 6 October 1936, 2-3.
producers charging high rates did not just exploit people; they were bad for the national economy, because they took capital out of circulation.

Arguably, the REA helped lift the country out of the Depression by making more efficient markets. It did so, like any company must do during tough times, by carefully controlling profit for a while and being more disciplined about resource use. REA debt financing, in the long run, created in co-ops conditions similar to private company objectives – incentives to keep costs low and to maintain profits by expanding usage and winning new customers – much more so than an ethic of participatory democracy or service to the community. In order to do this, the REA had to teach rural communities to be better capitalists – how to run businesses for profit (to pay back debt); how to want commodities (because they helped the local economy); and how to improve the efficiency of existing production methods and look beyond subsistence lifestyles to rural industries. If Levittown was the Model-T of building suburbia, as Jackson glibly suggests,298 the REA electric cooperatives were the Model-T of power – no frills, mass produced organizations that aided in the realization of a new economic paradigm with tightly managed efficiency. In doing so, they helped standardize rural growth, limiting to some extent the viability of other models of development and, unfortunately, still leaving some people behind.

Conclusion: Electric Co-ops and Economic Democracy

In the preceding sections, I have shown how a combination of political critique of private utilities, new methods of scientific land management, and consumption-focused economic renewal coalesced into a program of rural electrification through REA debt financing. Because the REA saw rural electrification as shaping a new economy, and not just relieving rural drudgery, implementation was critical. Co-ops arose as an ideal solution: nominally independent institutions that could harness a wealth of local labor and resources in the service of community self-help, they were nonetheless beholden to REA operational requirements by the terms of their loans. The resultant relationship turned co-ops into conduits for the promotion of REA consumer education, agricultural rationalization, and a new kind of economic citizenship, all while minimizing the costs of extending electrical

298 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 236.
infrastructure. In doing so, they helped standardize rural America, connecting it more tightly to the national economy and redefining its geography around industrial growth.

In short, electric co-ops were New Deal institutions *par excellence*. They harnessed the minds, imaginations, and labor power of farmers and other rural residents to shape the country into a more efficient and productive economic machine. This is crucial to understand for co-op enthusiasts today, because the language in which we talk about co-ops is similar, but our definitions have changed slightly. It is important to understand what REA co-ops were and were not. They were not grassroots movements that relied on federal funding to become democratic institutions; they were companies in the business of selling commodities. They were the New Deal vision of economic democracy, which tended to conflate democracy with purchasing power.\(^{299}\) When we talk about economic democracy in the twenty-first century, it usually means some combination of local wealth generation, environmental justice, and political voice, not the ability to buy an electric pig brooder on a finance plan. Even as we recognize how our definitions have changed, however, it is important to understand why this would have been the case: in the 1930s, purchasing power meant less manual labor on the farm and more time to engage in politics, art, and education, a connection to the outside world through the radio and telephone, and access to the cultural advantages of the city. There was a real need for quality of life improvements in rural America, and the REA succeeded in bringing this to many rural areas. It is not electrification per se that needs revisiting, but the mode of delivery. In other words, consumer power can be read as a necessary but not sufficient criterion for the practice of democracy.

Just because electric co-ops were initially shaped by REA’s vision for rural America, however, does not preclude them from adopting different ethics or exploring new visions for building stronger communities through infrastructure development. As co-ops, they are still community owned and at least nominally democratically managed. Recently, a number of electric co-op members around the country have recognized the potential for their co-...

\(^{299}\) For example, a pamphlet titled *The Consumer in the New Deal* set forth the following philosophy: “It has been recognized that the ability of consumers to purchase goods and services in increasing quantities and of increasing utility is the end aim of any truly democratic government.” The pamphlet ended with a pledge that the Recovery Administration would “continue the promotion and encouragement of increased production and consumption for the continued improvement of consumers’ standard of living on a sound and lasting basis.” Thomas G. Corcoran collection, Library of Congress.
ops to be more participatory venues and have started initiatives to increase member engagement. Existing co-op boards have not been uniformly welcoming of sudden community interest, and members have learned the hard way that democratic change is slow and takes persistence, yet dialogue is starting.

Recent interest in co-ops stems largely from concerns about climate change, energy security, and renewable energy technologies. Energy policy is a major challenge of the early twenty-first century, with far-reaching consequences for social equity, economic development, and culture change, just as electricity provision was in the early twentieth century. Many current discussions about energy policy implicitly or explicitly challenge existing infrastructure, and what is proposed to take its place, as well as what would otherwise be preserved, are rife with ethical implications. Now, as then, technology alone will not make a more equitable, sustainable, or prosperous world; it is, rather, the institutional and economic frameworks in which they are applied that bring about the social promises of technological innovation, or prevent them from being realized. Learning from the unintended consequences of the REA model of rural electrification, it is important for those engaged in shaping their energy future to consider carefully what material and economic relationships they are creating to what end, what broader vision of society they are ultimately promoting, and if those are social structures they would want to live with in eighty years. Building on the extensive infrastructure the REA laid in the 1930s, electric co-op communities today could be important players in this process, shaping the next wave of energy infrastructure based on local goals that may or may not align with broader economic ones. In order to realize this potential, however, they need to finally break from the lingering influence of the REA’s insistence on low costs whatever the price, and focus instead on how different infrastructures can contribute to building a high quality of place.
Chapter 4: Reclaiming Democracy in Vermont, Colorado, and Kentucky

Introduction: A Challenge to the REA Legacy

The previous chapter explored how the REA’s vision of electric co-ops ultimately limited opportunities for the practice of local democracy. This chapter will explore how local movements to redemocratize electric cooperatives later reoriented some co-ops around more place-specific goals. These movements represent breaks from the past in their rethinking of the scope and aims of cooperative utilities vis-à-vis community development. In this chapter, I examine whether the community efforts discussed here challenge the consumption-focused REA co-op model, and if they have been capable of creating new structural conditions – meaning resources and possibilities – for their communities.

Theoretically, this chapter explores how local communities can recapture the political from the bureaucratic – to reorient community institutions away from abstract universal economic values to more tangible local ones. Following Weberian modes of theorizing, this dichotomy is necessarily one of ideal types: no institution is purely abstract or purely immune to abstraction. But the location of institutions on the wide spectrum in between determines their ability to perform in certain ways, to enable certain correlative practices. Contrasting with the historical model in which technocratic bureaucracy enforced from Washington silenced differences within co-op communities, this chapter questions whether more deliberative democracy illuminates them, and if co-op activism grounded in an ethic of local democracy can foster institutional divergence among co-ops, that align these institutions more effectively with local norms, constraints, and goals.

This chapter asks the following questions: Are these redemocratization movements creating new institutional structures that create more economic civicness, or are they recreating more of the same? How are these co-op structures substantively different from what the REA built in the 1930s? And what can they teach us about the possibilities for authentic local deliberation and socially responsible economics?
Case Studies Overview

The following case studies were chosen to explore the breadth of contexts in which democratic control is possible. Specifically, I chose cases with different institutional structures for movement building. In Vermont, a group of concerned members of Washington Electric Cooperative in East Montpelier organized an ad hoc advocacy group to contest the co-op; in Holy Cross Energy Cooperative in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, change has been driven by a local company, and supported by a growing cadre of renewable energy professionals; and, in the Eastern Kentucky Power Cooperative service area, community activism has been orchestrated by a professional community development non-profit organization, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, in concert with other local NGOs and national environmental groups such as the Sierra Club. Researching movements across this range of institutional organization not only indicates that local democracy can take many different forms, but it also explores the civic infrastructure needed in different political contexts to contest the status quo.

I will note here that there are more “famous” examples of electric co-ops around the country. When one talks to co-op advocates about democracy in electric co-ops, they tend to immediately mention Pedernales Electric Cooperative in Texas and Cobb Electric Membership Corporation in Georgia, both of which recently struggled through turbulent years of investigations and lawsuits and have now – so it is argued – been reclaimed by their members. Organizations gain public presence for a variety of reasons, and this is not the place to consider how democratic or not these exemplary co-ops really are; suffice it to say that, while these co-ops provide necessary narratives for the broader co-op movement, I believe there are more useful cases for helping to think about the potential contribution of co-ops to economic democracy and a transformative economy.

My three case studies, by contrast, occupy a middle ground of co-ops that have a history of being for the most part neither appalling nor engaged. They have simply been, in the phrasing popular within the Holy Cross Energy Cooperative in Colorado, “flying under

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300 While they have gotten a lot of publicity, Pedernales and Cobb were legal fights more so than fights for new models of inclusive governance. See, for example, a documentary on the Pedernales Electric Co-op member struggle: Green Dreams (AiM Productions, 2011), available online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KlJHRCxbrM.
the radar.” What’s important about this kind of organization is that it represents a possible
venue in which to teach members not just how to right specific injustices through litigation
– this as a culture we more or less know how to do – but how to use democratic processes
to promote structural changes at the local level and to maintain an inclusive governance
culture in more mundane times.

The following presentation of my case studies is organized chronologically, starting
with contestation and change within Washington Electric Co-op in Vermont in the 1970s,
through activism in Holy Cross Energy in Colorado over the last decade, to ongoing
struggles (as of 2013) in the Eastern Kentucky Power Cooperative service area. I do this for
several reasons. Starting with Vermont, the first case study is able to cover a co-op
redemocratization movement from start to finish as well as observe how a more member-
focused co-op ages. Though I did not intend for my case studies to be comparative, they
nonetheless suggest predictive hypotheses that inform each other: after studying Vermont,
one can see the seeds of certain trends in Colorado, and similarly apply both of those two
cases in analyzing the potential trajectory of recent activism in Kentucky. Since all three
involve contesting a shared national economic framework and the professional culture of
the NRECA, it should not be surprising to find these parallels.

Second, in large part due to differences in culture, but also due to the increased
sophistication of environmental activism and the new possibilities of digital media,
Vermont can be read as a simpler, more direct form of contestation. That is to say, the
battlegrounds in each case study are increasingly placeless and hybrid: in the Vermont
world of town meetings, the co-op annual meeting, special meetings, and the Vermont
Public Service Board served as the main sites of contestation; in corporate, cosmopolitan
Colorado ski country, the media, social networks, and public campaigning precipitated
change in a more diffuse movement; in still-rural coal-centric Kentucky, with far flung
farms and a distinct lack of public space, but more modern technology and a more
professional era of social movements, change has required coalition-building, legal appeals,
and creative new forms of engagement.

The chapter first looks at each case study independently, then ends with a more
theoretical analysis of lessons from and potentials for electric co-op redemocratization
movements. The next three sections explore the individual periods of contestation and
organizational culture change in the Vermont, Colorado, and Kentucky co-ops. Each section examines the main actors involved, the reception of the co-ops to increased member engagement, and resulting environmental and social impacts. The sections ground these discussions in the context of local culture, examining what role electric co-ops have played in their communities and what resources and constraints were available to members interested in change. In large part, I wrote these sections as examples for the dedicated co-op members and employees who took the time to talk to me about their efforts and invited me to participate in co-op events. Far from being standard practice, their work represents one end of the political spectrum within the large network of electric co-ops in the U.S. Co-op members and employees who consider themselves environmentalists, progressive, or who see the co-op as a community development mechanism often “feel alone” in the broader electric co-op professional community. Where these case studies go far into the particular details of small town politics, badly run meetings, media fights, and personal intimidations, this is to show that the search for leverage in the midst of power plays, intimidation, and microaggressions is part of the process of opening up a protective democracy; likewise stereotypical is the tendency for community activists to fall into idealized and philosophical rhetoric at the beginning of a campaign and have a long process of learning how to work towards these ideals in unexpected political and cultural contexts. I hope that these case studies will be helpful in some small way in dismantling that sense of isolation for these co-op activists and provide a starting point for collecting more stories of community-focused change.

After a more chronologically focused analysis of each movement, I switch gears to assess the role of environmental values in contributing (or not) to the practice of local democracy. I examine what kind of environmental values have led become institutionalized in these co-ops, paying specific attention in each section to the role of environmental preferences in changing co-op policy and examining how these periods of increased democracy have resulted in material changes in resource use. Readers more interested in the broader discussion on democracy and environmental change may want to skip over the details of redemocratization fights and head directly to these discussions at the end of each case study.
Case I: Washington Electric Co-op (East Montpelier, Vermont)

Building Momentum: The Committee for an Effective Co-op

Representative Cooper’s recent complaints about electric co-ops would have been right on the mark in East Montpelier, Vermont, in the 1970s. One of the original REA co-ops, founded in 1939, Washington Electric Cooperative (WEC) had been governed by many of the same board members for decades, had low member participation, was one of only a few co-ops in the country to be losing money (while making it difficult for members to request operational financial data), took a reactionary stance to member interest, and was accused of being in the pockets of a local power company and artificially raising rates. In the 1970s, however, Vermont was also a hotbed of social activism and organizational experimentation, which fostered a proliferation of co-ops in other areas of the economy. Inevitably, the two cultures clashed, resulting in a decade of tumult during which, as longtime General Manager Avram Patt euphemistically summarized later, the co-op became a forum for “the vigorous exercise of the democratic process.” By the mid-eighties, the co-op culture had shifted to be much more open to member involvement and more committed to local development, including environmentally oriented policies. As of 2013, their entire energy portfolio was renewable, including over half of their energy coming directly from a WEC-owned generation project, the Coventry landfill gas-to-energy plant.

Patt’s “democratic process” that occurred in 1970’s rural Vermont was a study in the grittier side of democracy, however: mud-slinging by small interest groups, elected officials strong-arming meeting procedures to silence opposing voices, cries of fraud and ballot recounts hyped by local media, and a general confusion about whose data to trust. In fact, the trigger of this period that, in longtime WEC board president Barry Bernstein’s words, “rocked our co-op” was a perceived failure of the co-op board to honor the democratic rights of co-op members.

In the early 1970s, a group of WEC members who had met through participation in a local food co-op — a mix of native Vermonters and urban transplants who had come to

301 From Chapter 1: Cooper’s critique that electric co-ops are becoming too geared towards making a profit, have limited profit-sharing with their members, and have been “exerting their political influence to exempt co-ops from [pollution and emissions] laws that apply to other utilities.” Cooper, “Electric Co-operatives: From New Deal to Bad Deal?”, 369.
Vermont to get away from city life – discovered that their electricity also came from a co-op and grew interested in its operations. Bernstein recalls that a core group of the food co-op “really believed in co-ops and the right to be open.” He himself was fascinated by the “synergism” that he saw in the food co-op movement between people with dramatically diverse backgrounds and beliefs, and he wanted to be more involved in the “spirit [that] happened in the cooperative movement.” Like Alperovitz and other twenty-first century new economy advocates, Bernstein’s community in 1970s Vermont saw the potential for co-ops to be a building block for a transformative economic ecosystem, not just a means for collective action around a single issue.

What the group discovered at the electric co-op, however, was a closed and suspicious board of directors. Bernstein remembers his first meeting with the WEC board: his food co-op group had written to WEC asking for information about the electric co-op’s finances and operations, and he offered to pick up the information. When Bernstein arrived at the co-op, however, he found the general manager, the president of the board, and two lawyers waiting for him in the small WEC office. Instead of giving him the requested records, they sat him down and interrogated him about why he wanted the information. “You’re a co-op,” he remembers thinking; when members ask for information, “you should provide it!” The board of directors were “good rural people,” Bernstein recollects, but they had “lost that history” of progressivism and community accountability. “All I was trying to do was be a part of it,” Bernstein recalls, but “they were just scared to death of change.”

After being rebuffed in their efforts to get involved through official channels, Bernstein’s group began to ask more critical questions about the co-op. Why wouldn’t they want to share information with members? What were they hiding? What was the board *doing*? Research on WEC’s recent activities revealed some troubling findings. They learned that the co-op was one of the few in the country to have lost money the previous year; that the co-op board had made some questionable financial decisions without consulting the membership – such as a $70,000 construction project to extend lines to five seasonal members and a donation to the Atomic Energy Commission; that their rate structure not only lacked clarity, but it privileged businesses and industrial farming over residential
members; and that the co-op was requesting permission from the Vermont Public Service Board (PSB) to implement a rate hike that would increase their revenues by $350,000.302

Concerned that members were unnecessarily bearing the cost of bad decisions by the WEC board and frustrated by the co-op’s stonewalling approach to member interest, in 1973, Bernstein’s ad hoc group of co-op advocates formally organized as the Committee for an Effective Co-op (COFEC). In a publication aimed at re-engaging co-op members, COFEC explained its mission as follows:

We were concerned about our management’s attitude toward member involvement in the co-op, and their lack of openness about the co-op’s financial condition. We decided to accept our responsibility as members to become informed, to discuss issues, to contribute and to participate. ...The sorry fact is, our co-op's management believes that electing trustees is all the member participation they need. Our concept of a co-op is broader:

- Co-ops are a necessary tool for consumers who want to keep costs down, and should be a strong voice for consumer interests.
- Management has a responsibility to educate members about co-ops; information should flow freely between members and management.
- Members should have a say in all important decisions.303

The next year, COFEC submitted a petition to the WEC board, signed by 18 co-op members, with a set of proposed by-law changes for discussion at the annual meeting. Their proposals aimed to limit the co-op board’s power and give more oversight to members by: making all co-op information readily accessible “for inspection by any member during business hours”; allowing members to contribute content to the co-op’s publication, Cooperative Currents; enabling members to more easily call special meetings; reducing the terms of board members from three to two years; limiting board members to serving two consecutive terms at a time; opening board meetings to interested members; and providing a “full and complete operating budget... to members for discussion and approval” at the annual meeting.304

COFEC also decided to run two members for the upcoming board elections at the co-op’s annual meeting. Candidate John Bloch, from Worcester, was a fifteen-year resident of

303 COFEC, “It’s Your Co-op – Your Choice,” Co-op Transformer, September 1974, WEC.
304 COFEC, “What the By-Law Changes Mean,” Co-op Transformer, October 1974, WEC; Petition by members for by-law changes to be proposed at the WEC Annual Meeting, submitted to Sailey Ennis, 29 August 1974, WEC.
Vermont and a former employee of WEC; familiar with co-ops since his childhood on a dairy farm, Bloch believed strongly in the business model and had helped start co-ops in a range of areas from credit unions to food co-ops to housing and transportation.305 “In this era of energy shortages,” Bloch appealed to members in his campaign literature, “all members must work together to keep their co-op strong and viable.”306 He worried that WEC “could very well go out of business unless they have an infusion of interest.”307

Robert Fischer, from Middlesex, also ran with the support of COFEC. A member of WEC for sixteen years, Fischer had previously worked for the National Council of Churches, organizing producer cooperatives around economic development projects. He had recently gotten involved in WEC policy over their request for a rate increase at the Public Service Board. Questioning the data used by the co-op in their calculations for the $350,000 revenue increase, Fischer eventually influenced the PSB to lower the approved amount by $100,000. As a board candidate, he was thus particularly concerned about co-op finances. "I cannot stress enough that the more questions you ask now, the more it comes out they cannot get their information together,” he told a reporter in September. A third co-op member, Marion Milne, from the town of Washington, also challenged the board in an independent campaign.308

The co-op board dismissed COFEC as a group of “dissidents,” claiming that COFEC’s “continual questions have disrupted the company’s normal operating procedures, costing consumers more money.” Thus began a battle of propaganda between COFEC and WEC. In the lead up to the election, WEC held a number of community meetings, and both the co-op and COFEC rallied their supporters to canvass the co-op territory.309 The co-op also sent out a “Special Notice to Members” detailing the different ways they could vote in the upcoming election, making clear that either member of a married couple with a joint co-op account could cast a ballot, and if neither was able to attend the meeting, they could

305 “35th Annual Meeting,” Cooperative Currents, 8 October 1974, WEC.
307 “COFEC Members Seek Trustee’s Seats,” Times-Argus 4 September 1974, WEC.
308 Marion Milne was seen as “lean[ing] in [COFEC’s] direction without actually being part of the group.” She would end up successfully running for the board again 30 years later in 2003 and has served ever since (as of 2013). “A Question of Power: Electric Co-Op Members Charge ‘Doubletalk.’”
309 Kathleen C. Burger and John F. Burger, “Informed Vote” and “Sour Grapes,” Letters to the editor of The Times-Argus, 16 October 1974, WEC.
designate a proxy member of their household to vote in their place. Additionally, they reminded co-op members that they could send proxy votes with any other member of the cooperative. The voting reminder mailing included an application for joint membership and a proxy ballot.310

COFEC, meanwhile, started printing their own newsletter after being rebuffed from contributing content to WEC’s monthly Cooperative Currents. Using the designation “owner-member” throughout to remind the readership of their personal investment in the co-op, COFEC’s Co-op Transformer highlighted that WEC’s financial health was well behind most of the electric co-ops in the U.S., expressing their concern that “the management has run the co-op as if it were a large, profit-oriented utility, using expensive public relations techniques and pursuing a questionable bigger-is-better growth policy.” The newsletter outlined COFEC’s findings about WEC former expenditures and current budget plans and gave detailed (if unapologetically biased) discussions of the proposed by-law changes. The Co-op Transformer also explained the concept of “economic democracy” in a general history of the cooperative business model, highlighting their concern that “co-ops in recent years have been beset by problems of apathetic memberships and ambitious, self-serving managements.”311

COFEC additionally secured the interest of several local papers, which sent journalists to cover the unexpectedly contested race and ran pro-COFEC editorials. While the established Times-Argus tried to be somewhat even-handed, some of the more progressive local journals threw their full weight behind COFEC. In September, The North Country Journal-Opinion ran a series of editorials with sensationalist titles, including “A Question of Power: Electric Co-op Members Charge ‘Doubletalk’” and “Something Stinks.” They published controversial quotes from the WEC pre-meeting community forums, including General Manager Sailey Ennis’s public statement that: ”Members should not have a right to vote on the budget.” They further argued that WEC members were facing “a time when cooperatives are growing in the direction of corporations,” and urged members to demand “the direct control to which they are entitled.” One editorial concluded with the rallying

311 COFEC, “It’s Your Co-op – Your Choice.” Co-op Transformer’s tagline explained the pun as follows: “transformer, n., (1) a device which is designed to provide electrical power that consumers can use. (2) a device which is designed to provide WEC consumer-owners with a co-op they can use.”
cry: "In an era when corporate interests are swallowing up the little guy, it's time to get out and fight for what is ours."312

In response, the Saturday before the annual meeting, WEC took out a full-page ad in the *Times-Argus*. "Washington Electric Cooperative operates in a highly skilled and technical industry," the ad headlined. "It prides itself on 35 years of progress, stability, dependability, and democratic representation." Addressing COFEC's accusations, the ad discussed why rates were high and implied that the issues driving electricity costs were too complex for the general membership to understand. "Participation by the membership has always been sought and encouraged," the ad stated, but then went on to explain the many regulatory constraints under which the co-op operates, including quoting verbatim a ruling by the Vermont Supreme Court that issues of social welfare were outside of the scope of an electric utility. For these reasons, the WEC ad proclaimed, "It can never be operated to favor a zealous few." A cheerful Willie Wiredhand at the bottom of the ad encouraged members to "Get Out and Vote" for the candidates that would "serve, protect, and represent all the members."313

312 "COFEC Members Seek Trustee's Seats."
The building tensions between WEC management and COFEC would come to a head at the 1974 annual meeting. This meeting was the first experience WEC would have with a membership that increasingly demanded deliberative democracy.

Deliberative democracy is not something a community can easily jump into, however. In his thirty-year study of Vermont town meetings, Frank M. Bryan calls the town meeting “on the job training.” In a cultural context of town meetings for as long as anyone can remember, this on the job training occurs mostly by example, a “gentler kind of tutelage,” Bryan writes, where generational knowledge is passed down through observation and

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practice, where one learns how to speak before one needs to, where ethics for tolerance and for tolerated discourse are strong and explicit, and if not shared, then at least expected.

Bryan’s summary of town meeting ethics is local knowledge in pure form:

How well do people at town meeting know Robert’s Rules? Not well. Do they get confused with their application? All the time. But the degree to which town meeting orders talk, applied procedure, sticks to its guns on issue of due process, and bends over backward to ensure that minority rights are observed is perhaps the biggest surprise that newcomers to town meeting experience. Many of them are put off by the tedium of it. They come to town meeting expecting communalism, and they get liberalism. They say it with their eyes: “Do we have to go through all this?” The answer is yes. People growing up in the town meeting tradition know how to conduct public meetings.315

Trying to start a deliberative process from scratch is an entirely different animal. Participants do not yet understand or even have similar assumptions about the rules of order (Robert’s or otherwise), or how to respectfully break them; there are not yet any shared customs to fall back on to reinforce a sense of community or to break the ice (or the tension), no sense of when a joke is appropriate or needed, no appreciation yet that deliberation takes time and that “real” democracy cannot exclude anyone just for having a dissenting opinion.316 The growing pains of deliberation-from-scratch would occupy WEC as an institution for the next ten years, giving it a high public profile, but at the cost of low internal trust.

“For Heaven’s Sakes, Keep Your Co-operative Operating Like a Cooperative Should”: The 1974 Annual Meeting

Tensions ran high as members assembled at the Barre Municipal Auditorium the morning of October 8, 1974. The registration line stretched out the door for hours, as the co-op struggled to manage a record-breaking meeting attendance that “jammed” the auditorium.317 At 10:43 a.m., with members still lined up outside, Board President John H. Larkin called the meeting to order and started moving through the agenda. With over a hundred members still waiting to register well into the meeting, COFEC member Charles Haas moved for a recess until registration was complete and all members could be seated. After some debate, the motion failed – in the words of Times-Argus journalist John Lesch,
"in a foreshadowing of things to come." Other accounts of the meeting also retrospectively interpreted the recess vote as a symbolic harbinger of COFEC's strategic disadvantage in the meeting. George Sterzinger, of the Central Vermont Community Action Council's People's Voice, narrated the events as follows:

From early in the morning of October 8, the day of the annual meeting, it was obvious that this meeting was different from most of those in the co-op's 35 year history. ...At 11:30 am, an hour after the official starting time, long lines still stretched outside the auditorium. The first motion from the floor was to recess until those people waiting could be seated. Debate went back and forth. Proponents pointed out the fairness of waiting for people delayed through no fault of their own. Opponents impatiently called for getting on with it. When this first motion was finally tested by a show of hands, the results revealed the split in the meeting that would practically doom every COFEC move for the rest of the afternoon. An energetic, card-waving majority voted to continue the meeting, to not wait for people outside, to have business as usual.

Descriptions of the meeting procedures from that point on paint a picture of forcibly constrained debate and some atypical practices. Voting opened before candidate debates wrapped up and remained open longer than usual. A former WEC general manager, Frank Sahlman, joined the ballot as a last-minute seventh candidate in "a strategic floor nomination." Debate on the proposed by-law changes heated up; at one point, the meeting moderator (a state senator who was not a co-op member) warned members that he would have anyone who could not refrain from personal attacks ejected from the meeting.

The suggestions to require the budget passed by the members and to impose term limits on the board of directors in particular drew blood, bringing the debate into the territory of basic co-op philosophy. A friend of the board, John Burger, argued: "If you people are interested in where your last penny is going, well, picture what would happen if 5,000 members appeared at the office and asked to see the books." He then suggested that members with financial concerns "first should question the management, then trustees and finally go to court for information." Another member agreed that opening the budget to the entire membership would mean "a lot of costly work" for the management. Others, in contrast, pointed out that budgets are routinely voted on at town meetings and school board meetings without onerous effort. Co-op member Robert O'Brien suggested that the only reason a co-op board would want this kind of privacy from community oversight is

318 Ibid.
319 George Sterzinger, "Dissidents' Become Strong Minority," People's Voice 3(10), 1974, WEC.
because “operat[ing] outside the spotlight, [they] find it easier to get what they want.”

On the subject of term limits, members debated the benefits of having members serve for decades at a time, as had many of the existing directors. Co-op member Kenneth Smith argued: “In four years you’re not going to learn a hell of a lot;” while member Alice Blachy argued back that “service on public boards was valuable experience for citizens and that nonprofessionals could contribute much to board function.” An opponent of the by-law change then referenced long-time REA advocate and U.S. Senator George Aiken, who regularly attended the co-op’s annual meetings: “If you’re thinking of turnover just for the sake of change, then we should have thrown George Aiken out years ago, and God help us if we had,” he said. To which another member responded: “I want to comment on President Nixon – God help us if he had served 38 years.” By lunchtime, when Senator Aiken rose to address the co-op as an invited speaker, he gently chastised the assembly: “For heaven’s sakes, keep your co-operative operating like a cooperative should.” In an attempt to diffuse the situation, the senator added that he was shortly to “return to Washington, D.C., where things are worse than in Washington County, Vermont.”

Struggling to keep the meeting under control, the co-op board repeatedly moved and seconded for the by-law changes to be put to a vote, requiring the moderator to prematurely end discussion mid-debate on several issues. “As voting progressed,” Sterzinger later wrote, “it became clear that more and more members with questions had not had sufficient time to talk over the proposed amendment. Management had supporters – people whose vote they could count on – and they did not want or need discussion. COFEC had not yet had a chance to win supporters; they had raised questions and interested people in finding out about how the co-op was being run. COFEC needed debate and discussion and the chance to convince.” This they failed to get to their satisfaction.

Jim Higgins from The Country Journal later wrote:

What we witnessed was an awesome display of incumbent power. All of the prerogatives of manipulation and suppression held by those in power were unleashed against the Committee for an Effective Coop at that meeting... the meeting became an exercise in crowd manipulation. ...My hope for our Cooperative and for the spirit that guided it through its early years, is that hundreds upon hundreds of members wake up. Wake up and attempt to understand and to judiciously

320 Lesch, “Challengers Defeated by Washington Electric Managers.”
participate in the operations of their Coop. Without that awakening...our Coop will continue on its path of becoming yet another alien corporation. Unresponsive because there is no one to respond to!  

COFEC candidate Robert Fisher later agreed that the meeting had been managed “fairly inequitably,” but added that he was not surprised. As any “challenge delegation” takes a while to gain footing, Fisher noted philosophically, “I don’t feel set back at all,” adding that COFEC was prepared to continue their “uphill fight.” Barry Bernstein likewise reflected about the meeting: “We were simply out strategized today.”

The ultimate vote count would be 739 members – 15% of the membership and at least twice the average historical turnout. COFEC lost on all counts, with Fisher 40 votes shy of being elected a board member. In the aftermath, the co-op attempted to further marginalize COFEC to the press. General Manager Ennis expressed his satisfaction with the large turnout at the meeting, interpreting it as a sign of member interest in the co-op without giving credit to COFEC’s work on raising awareness, and a follow-up editorial by co-op member John F. Burger lambasted COFEC’s response to the meeting as inequitable:

I detect the distinct odor of sour grapes emanating from the COFEC camp. We have been called ignorant, apathetic hicks, even practitioners of folk medicine. Had the outcome been in COFEC’s favor, we doubtless would have been intelligent, informed, concerned, and so forth. Contrary to the dissidents’ expressed opinions, I and the other members were well informed about the candidates and the issues and rejected dissident candidates and radical proposals in favor of the management, which has provided 35 years of high quality service based on sound proven methods.

An unattributed Times-Argus editorial published after the meeting, however, cautioned the co-op not to take "Tuesday's victory as a blank-check mandate to pay no further attention to legitimate concerns raised by critics over the past year." Although COFEC did not win seats, the editorial noted, "the vote count also showed that there is a sizable minority of members unhappy with the way things have been going, and whose concerns are not likely to go away just because of the vote.” Critical of rising electricity rates on the horizon, it predicted that more people would join COFEC’s camp over the next

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322 Higgins, “Co-op Power.”
326 Burger, “Sour Grapes.”
year as the rate increases went into effect. Bernstein reflected years later that the way the meeting had been managed also gained COFEC supporters. Members sitting in the audience became “appalled at the proceedings,” he mused, recalling a conversation with a local farmer after one of these meetings: “Vermonters don’t like to speak up,” the farmer told him, but he wanted him to know that a lot of people in the area were also unhappy with how the co-op was treating its members.

Figure 4.2: A Long Line to Vote, 1974, WEC. Registration workers overwhelmed with the record attendance, Washington Electric Co-op members waited outside to register for the 1974 Annual Meeting well past the official start of the meeting, inciting debate among registered members about the fairness of conducting business without them.

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328 WEC Archives.
Figure 4.3: Exercising Democratic Rights at the Annual Meeting, 1974, WEC. Members vote on by-law changes at the WEC Annual Meeting in 1974, as Willie Wiredhand cut-outs look on from the stage.329

A Decade of Contested Leadership

As promised, COFEC chalked the 1974 annual meeting up to a learning experience and continued to fight for changes in the co-op’s approach to members. Over the next year, COFEC continued to confront the co-op management over economic and accountability issues. Having discovered from the rate hike fight that the Public Service Board was a forum in which they could effectively impact the co-op’s budget decisions, COFEC informed the PSB of its struggles to secure greater member access to co-op records, which factored into the PSB’s decision to grant WEC a lower rate increase than it had requested.330 COFEC also learned a few lessons about effective campaigning. The 1975 Co-op Transformer was a slicker publication, with the candidates’ platforms up-front and bulleted. The group also

329 Lesch, “Challengers Defeated by Washington Electric Managers.”
found and publicized conflicts of interest for the nominated candidates.\textsuperscript{331}

More importantly, they attracted the interest of candidates with more campaign experience and public recognition: Robert Fisher, the candidate who was within 40 votes of a seat in 1974, was joined in 1975 by Margaret Lucenti, vice-chairman of the state Democratic committee, and State Senator Robert O’Brien. While all three claimed COFEC affiliation, they also made a point of distinguishing their platforms from each other more so than the COFEC candidates had done in 1974, with Lucenti highlighting the need for research into alternative energy resources, O’Brien focusing on openness and accountability to members, and Fisher detailing fiscal reform. “While we are in agreement on these issues and proposals, we are running for election as independent members,” the October issue of \textit{Co-op Transformer} stressed on the front page. “As WEC trustees, we will objectively ask for, consider and vote on the facts of all matters we deal with. We ask you, as WEC owner-members, to do the same at the annual meeting.”\textsuperscript{332}

The trio was further helped by the fact that the rate increases threatened during the 1974 election season had actually gone into effect over the course of the subsequent year, and they were not small – for some consumers, energy costs had increased by nearly 70 percent.\textsuperscript{333} “What’s at stake is more than efficient management,” O’Brien argued about the rate increases in the lead-up to the 1975 annual meeting. “It’s a question of members being able to continue to live in a rural area.”\textsuperscript{334} With more community involvement, the candidates claimed, the co-op could have saved some expenses outright and harnessed the creativity of collaborative problem solving on some of the seemingly intractable financial challenges the co-op was facing. “When democracy is truly at work in a co-op, forthright and clear discussion of budget matters as well as projected indebtedness should be given thorough and thoughtful discussion at all levels,” Fisher argued, adding: “The conditions

\textsuperscript{331} COFEC publicized, for example, that one of the nominated candidates, Frank Sahlman, was a major stockholder in a telephone company that used the co-op’s poles and that the company had gotten special deals from the co-op in the past compared to other telephone companies that also used WEC poles. If Sahlman, as a board member, were to be part of these pole use rate decisions, COFEC argued, he would be essentially “negotiating with himself for a better rate.” Gregg Blackburn, “Co-Op Power Struggle Coming to Vote,” \textit{Times-Argus}, 17 October 1975, WEC.

\textsuperscript{332} COFEC, \textit{Co-op Transformer} 5 (October), 1975, WEC.

\textsuperscript{333} “Washington Co-Op Meeting Oct. 18,” unattributed newspaper article attached to the WEC News Release about the Annual Meeting, September 1975, WEC.

\textsuperscript{334} Frederic Bayles, “Trio Would Sit as Trustees of Washington Electric,” \textit{Burlington Free Press}, 26 August 1975, WEC.
which exist now within the WEC are far removed from this concept of democracy."
Without this community oversight, the candidates contended, co-op boards were more
susceptible to being taken advantage of by for-profit energy producers and likely to follow
corporate best practices that undermine co-op principles.335 "I am not tied to any group or
special interest within the co-op," Lucenti campaigned; "If our co-op is to survive, we must
all try to work with each other; serve, not take over; appreciate and strengthen our
ownership in every way possible."336

WEC management also took a few lessons from the previous year’s elections. In 1975,
a third newsletter joined Cooperative Currents and COFEC’s Co-op Transformer in co-op
members’ mailboxes. FORE Co-ops Newsletter expressed the views of the Friends of Rural
Electric Cooperatives, Inc., a group led by co-op member Patrick Yaeger.337 FORE Co-op’s
stated goals were "to help the three candidates chosen by the [WEC] nominating committee
win election and to help get bylaw changes which had been approved by the Co-op Board of
Trustees passed at the annual meeting." In the newsletter, FORE carefully crafted a
message of a technocratic co-op run by experts, explaining its purpose as an advocacy
organization as follows: “to secure a broad representation of knowledgeable members to
assist in promoting better public relations of the Co-op; ...to offer liason between trustees,
management and staff and the general membership of Washington Electric Cooperative
Inc.; [and] to analyze management’s position and make such findings available to
members.” In other words, in contrast to COFEC’s goals of making WEC more open access,
FORE constructed itself as yet another gatekeeper between the co-op’s members and
management, explicitly discouraging direct member engagement. For example, the front
page of the FORE Co-ops Newsletter asked: “Is an Electric Co-operative Different from Other
Cooperatives?” Their answer is illuminative of the WEC co-op philosophy of the time:

Theoretically, the answer to our question is 'No.' It is basically the same. It has a
board of directors or trustees, elected by the membership; the membership is made
up of all those receiving services or products from the unit. ...Like all new operations
the members joining together [in the 1930s] gave free right-of-way over their
property to receive power. Even in many instances members pitched in and hauled
poles across their own and their neighbor's land. Some members even helped dig
holes for poles, as well as doing other chores to hasten the arrival of electricity on

335 Mavis Doyle, “COFEC Members Challenge Co-op Trustees,” unattributed article, 25 August 1975, WEC.
336 COFEC. Co-op Transformer 5.
But here the similarity ceases. Electricity is a highly technical industry. The Federal government, in its desire to assist the citizens in creating these electric co-operatives spelled out in the Congressional Act of 1935, known as the Rural Electrification Act, specific rules and regulations to protect the membership. The funds loaned by the government needed careful supervision and proper use to insure service to member users and repayment of the loan. ...Certainly, in conclusion, it is impossible to return a large technical co-operative to a simple status which it outgrew more than 30 years ago.

The FORE Co-ops Newsletter also moved responsibility for electricity policy away from the individual co-op. "Your trustees have to pay the same increased power rates," FORE wrote, listing a number of external factors that were "not within their power" and offering the loaded comparison: "Private utilities are telling the same story." As for a solution, they discounted the idea that more localism would achieve tangible financial benefits, claiming instead: "Lower power costs are not brought about by wishful thinking or words in print in an article. It is accomplished by hard work and time spent at meetings or rallies held by NRECA to advance [national] power cost saving projects." 338

COFEC, in contrast, continued to stress the rights of members to participate in co-op policy, including setting the budget and investigating local alternative energy sources, as well as the capabilities of the co-op business model to encourage community action. "Many people talk about local control," Bernstein argued in the lead up to the 1975 meeting; "well, this is one area where we should and can have a say about decisions which show up monthly in our electric bills. Unfortunately, our present trustees feel that it's none of our business." 339

Descriptions of the 1975 meeting tell another sensationalist tale of political jockeying. Co-op member Peter Kelman later sent a letter to both COFEC and the co-op. "I support [COFEC's] efforts to make the Washington Electric Coop both more responsive to the needs and wishes of its constituent members and more fiscally responsible," he wrote. "However, I would also like you to know that I deplored the fascist tactics employed by all sides in last Saturday's meeting. It was a farce and a travesty of Democratic process. I sincerely hope that in the future both [COFEC] and the non-COFEC members of the board can put aside

338 FORE, "Electric Rates are High - What is Next?", FORE Co-Ops Newsletter, 1975, WEC.
your acrimony and antipathy long enough to agree by some parliamentary procedure. May I be so bold as to suggest that Roberts’ Rules of Order be adopted...”340

On a more positive note, the 1975 annual meeting also showed that WEC could be a venue for deliberation. Journalist Mavis Doyle wrote about the meeting in the *Times-Argus*:

“The financial reports of the officers of the co-op have been routinely approved by members without question in past years, but on Saturday the debate continued for nearly 90 minutes before it was finally postponed until after the debate on the bylaws. Members whose pockets have been pinched by the rising electricity charges questioned [the co-op management] on all of the expenditures and delved into areas that have never before been questioned in public.”341

In addition to a second year of hotly contested elections and financial strife, mail-in voting became a central issue at stake in the 1975 annual meeting. Recently legalized as a viable option for co-ops in the state legislature by a bill sponsored by WEC board member and state representative Eva Morse, the seemingly technical mail-in voting issue had deep philosophical implications that cleanly divided the co-op management and COFEC yet again on the subject of representative versus direct democracy. The co-op management supported changing the by-laws to allow voting by mail-in ballot, because they thought it would enable more members to vote. Barry Bernstein, who by then had been appointed a member of a special committee set up to study the proposed by-law changes, conversely argued that simply looking at vote count missed the point. Voting-by-mail, the committee estimated, would cut attendance at annual meetings drastically (to as few as 10 persons, Bernstein claimed at one point), meaning that there would be fewer opportunities for questions and deliberation. Pointing out that annual town meetings do not allow mail-in voting, COFEC argued that mail-in voting, while it seems more democratic, would actually be quite detrimental to co-op democracy, because it would effectively limit democratic participation for many members to just the act of voting. They further noted that the past two meetings, which had had contentious issues, had been the best attended in co-op history, and that definitional and creative work on policy issues had been done through

340 Letter from Peter Kelman to COFEC, cc: Trustees of Wash. Elect. Co-op., October 1975, WEC.
341 Doyle, “Challengers Elect Three Power Co-op Trustees.”
member deliberation at these meetings.342

At the end of the day, all three COFEC candidates were elected, displacing not only the pro-status-quo candidates endorsed by the co-op nominating committee, but also the former President of the Board, John Larkin, who had been a WEC trustee for over 30 years and president since 1954. "When the vote results announcing the election of all three COFEC candidates came in, a tremendous cheer went up from the group," Allen Ryberg of The Country Journal later described the meeting. “Smiles lit up faces all over the hall. They had done what seemed impossible. Everything else was downhill - even the by-law change vote went in favor of the dissidents.”343 The vote-by-mail proposal was tabled for a year.

Unsurprisingly, the ousted co-op stalwarts did not go peaceably into the night. Upon identifying a discrepancy in the number of ballots and votes recorded, calls for a recount threw the election results into uncertainty for another few weeks. Even after the recount reaffirmed the legitimacy of the elected trustees, however, the three COFEC members found themselves a minority on the nine-person board. Moving along any policy, including the seemingly simple act of requesting special meetings, required constant internal diplomacy to get to a majority of five.

One of COFEC’s proposals for more member inclusivity in the first year – to move the annual meeting from October to August, when seasonal members could attend – required such a special meeting. Although Lucenti, O’Brien, and Fisher were able to get a fourth signature from the board for the special meeting, they struggled to get a fifth. Eventually, trustee Charles Carpenter signed because, as he resignedly told the Times-Argus, he believed that COFEC would have circumvented the board and secured the meeting through member petition, anyway.344

The COFEC trustees subsequently suffered negative publicity from displaced board members. In a Times-Argus editorial titled, “Democratic Control?”, displaced trustee Frank Sahlman accused the COFEC-affiliated trustees of wasting money on the special meeting, using their own tactics against them to suggest that their proposed August meeting would discriminate against farmers, winter seasonal residents, people who work on Saturdays,

342 Ibid.
344 “Co-op Meeting Appears Certain,” Times-Argus, 14 June 1976, WEC.
other working people who typically do chores or spend time with their families on Saturdays, and anyone loath to “leave the coolness of their summer or country homes to attend an all day meeting in the hot city.” Former trustee George Ricker followed with his own editorial, “Pull the Plug,” in which he called into question the integrity, motives, and competency of the COFEC-affiliated trustees. “The group responsible for this mess as nearly as I can ascertain has no gainful occupation other than to destroy what has been built by hard working people many of whom are gone,” Ricker accused. “I am proud to say I helped of my own volition to obtain easements and to string wire at no expense because I wanted electrical power for myself and my neighbors,” Ricker continued:

For twenty years I served as a trustee. I always found the Board trying to work for the good of all. ...The new regime has not saved the public anything, they have cost. ...Already I can see places on the line that need attention. I agree that many changes should be made as in any business but make them in an orderly way. No manager can give good service if being constantly harassed. ...Folks it is easy to scramble eggs but once done they can’t be put back together. Build, don’t destroy.

As in the previous two annual meetings, debate turned uncivil early on in the special meeting. For the sheer chaos implied within, the meeting minutes are worth quoting at length:

Mr. Bruce asked Attorney Donaghy to present the information in regard to the proposed bylaw change (purpose of the meeting).

Mr. Bruce announced Mr. O’Brien had requested a few minutes before the “mike”.

Mr. O’Brien spoke briefly in favor of the bylaw change as proposed.

Mr. Pancoast (WAS-125) spoke briefly presenting his views.

The atmosphere became one of general confusion and disorder.

Mr. Bruce accepted the responsibility of running the meeting, however found it impossible to execute parliamentary procedure. Motions were made and seconded in a very disorderly manner.

Mr. Donaghy, Mr. Rubin (PL-76), Mrs. Lucenti and Mr. Ennis all attempted to use the “mike”.

Mr. Ricker (GR-103) a former trustee spoke briefly indicating extreme

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345 Frank M. Sahlman, Sr., “Democratic Control?” letter to the editor of The Times-Argus, 23 June 1976, WEC; James M Quimby, Jr., “Special Meeting,” letter to the editor of The Times-Argus, 23 June 1976. Sahlman further criticized their choice of meeting venue for the special meeting, claiming that it was inherently exclusionary because parking downtown was difficult and the climb to the third-floor room taxing for older members.

346 Presumably this remark was referring to the fact that many COFEC members worked for the government and non-profits, while others, like Robert Fisher, were self-employed as a cabinet-maker and sculptor.

347 George Ricker, “Pull the Plug,” letter to the editor of The Times-Argus, 25 June 1976, WEC.
disappointment in the current disruption...

Several persons namely Mr. Benedict (NO_111B), Ethel Bower (PL-85), Barry Bernstein (CS-221B), Simon Plante (MI-64H) attempted to be heard.348

Ultimately, the hard-won special meeting had negative consequences for everyone involved. COFEC’s proposal to change the meeting date failed in the vote, and the members who attended left displeased with the co-op management generally. One co-op member subsequently lambasted the meeting organizers in a letter to the co-op board: “Saturday’s meeting showed neither so called faction was interested in a larger group of members – myself included – who are tired of the Co-op being the laughing stock of northern Vermont,” Bruce Bjornlund wrote to the new President of the Board, J. Rollin Bruce. “The meeting was a farce. I didn’t come to hear a political candidate or to listen to certain members speak about the ‘good ole days’. It’s 1976. Rates are high – the Co-op’s a mess. Unless you and your fellow trustees start running the Co-op in a business like manner – and soon – what will be left?”349 Thelma Waldo of Brookfield also wrote the co-op with her disgust at “the most unpleasant meeting.” In a handwritten letter with an increasingly heavy script, she vented: “The rude people who would not allow discussion of the question were certainly out of order and should have been silenced. ...It made me ashamed of them and myself for being in the same place. If there is to be any more voting for the Co-op please do it by mail.”350

Not only did the annual meeting stay in October, but the board subsequently decided to return it to its former Tuesday timeslot, reversing COFEC’s one victory at the 1974 Annual Meeting to move the annual meeting day to Saturday to encourage higher attendance by working members. Ennis explained in the following issue of Cooperative Currents that “after reviewing the records, it was determined that more people attended and more proxies were voted at the 35th Annual Meeting held on a Tuesday, than at the 36th Annual Meeting, a Saturday.”351 While the 1974 meeting did garner 27 more votes than the 1975 meeting, the mid-70s in general showed an increase in voting and attendance of over

__348__ Margaret Lucenti (meeting note preparer), Special Meeting of the Membership, 26 June 1976, WEC.
__349__ Bruce Bjornlund and J. R. Bruce, personal correspondence, 29 June 1976; 1 July 1976, WEC.
__350__ Thelma R. Waldo to the Directors and Trustees of Washington Electric Co-op, personal correspondence, 26 June, 1976, WEC.
__351__ Sailey Ennis, “Message from the Manager,” Cooperative Currents 37(10), 1976, 3, WEC.
double the previous normal range, the prior record being 335 votes, or just over 10% of the membership, in 1966. It is therefore less likely that the decision to move the meeting back to Tuesday was motivated by member turnout than by which members specifically would turn out. In the 1970s, WEC meetings were all day events, starting at 10:30 in the morning. This meant that anyone with a standard nine-to-five job would have to take a vacation day to attend the meeting. A midweek meeting, as COFEC argued in 1974, was difficult for younger working members to attend and would be more likely to attract the old guard of co-op members, retired native Vermon ters whose families had deep connections to the existing co-op management.

Campaigning heated up on both sides once again as the meeting approached. As COFEC continued their co-op awareness efforts, Frank Sahlman and Harvey Pilette, a former WEC employee, organized “Save Your Co-op,” a pro-management advocacy campaign that took over from the short-lived FORE Co-ops to support the non-COFEC candidates, and trustee candidate Roland Foster paid for radio ads. The WEC management also controversially organized a number of private meetings in members' homes leading up to the October meeting. General Manager Sailey Ennis defended these meetings with the argument that COFEC had taken over the previous year's public meetings, so the co-op had decided to try a new, more personal approach to area meetings. “It's really not a cooperative way to go about the co-op's business to use its resources for secret meetings all the members are not informed about,” Fisher challenged him, noting that the meetings were staffed by several senior co-op managers and a paid secretary. “I can't tell people when they're setting up a private meeting in their home who they can invite,” Ennis fought back, arguing that these “by-invitation-only meetings” were reaching more members than the public meetings had. “People don't go for the heckling,” he chastised COFEC.

The 1976 election once again brought victory for the co-op management, as well as a vote to approve mail-in-voting. Ultimately, COFEC's early victory would be a one-term experiment; after three years of struggle in a minority position on the Board, Lucenti,

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O'Brien, and Fisher were all displaced by 1978 (although O'Brien did serve as the President of the Board for three months in 1977). The 1970s taught COFEC the hard lesson that campaigns run on the promise of change have a hard time holding onto votes once they confront the messy realities of actual leadership in a hostile political environment.

Additionally, by the third year of hotly contested annual meetings, members started to express fatigue with the friction. COFEC was at that point an established presence, with the successful election of Lucenti, O'Brien, and Fisher, and the inclusion of COFEC in a few official roles on committees. Given their institutional inclusion, the enduring tension between COFEC and the co-op management in some ways represented just another issue the co-op had failed to resolve.\footnote{See, for example, the tension over COFEC monitors at the registration table in 1976: Shirley Buntin, Alice Smith, and Albert Gagnon, "Over the Shoulder," letter to the editor of The Times-Argus, 11 October 1976; Wallace Roberts, "Valid Poll-Watcher," letter to the editor of The Times-Argus, 13 October 1976, WEC.}

Nonetheless, these first few years set the stage for a new era in WEC, marked by the expectation of lively campaigns to win the attention and votes of the membership, the active interest of the local media in the minutia of running the co-op, and deep (though not always friendly) discussions about the role of the cooperative and its philosophies of management. COFEC may not have won majority representation, but they successfully incited change. Between 1975-1978, chairmanship of the board turned over five times, and, by the end of Lucenti and Fisher's service to WEC, the co-op had fired Sailey Ennis and brought in a new General Manager, John Rohr, who was subsequently replaced in 1981 by Robert Toombs.

Perhaps spurred on by this sense of flux, COFEC continued its activism well into the 1980s. As Bernstein predicted, the mail-in-voting ushered in record voting highs and record meeting attendance lows that dropped below the 1960s average meeting attendance, even as co-op membership continued to increase. Later, when he was president of the board, Bernstein would reminisce that the co-op took advantage of mail-in-voting by sending its employees out to knock on doors with stamped envelopes for members to send in proxy votes (which were blank, essentially giving the current board's nominated candidates a vote of confidence). Over two thousand members voted for the board of
directors in 1986 – an election in which Bernstein personally ran for one of the trustee seats – and COFEC lost by a small margin.

What finally tipped the scales for COFEC was the Seabrook Nuclear Power Plant project. Seabrook was a new construction project in which WEC had initially invested, but which suffered an alarming number of delays, cost increases, and capacity reductions during the 1980s. Subsequent activism over extricating themselves from a continued relationship with a costly project that was failing to deliver what it promised marked the beginning of the current era of WEC leadership: Barry Bernstein, Avram Patt, and a number of other self-described environmentally-conscious liberal-progressives finally began to take over co-op management and hold onto their seats. Thirty years later, Bernstein would be able to say that WEC was “probably the most progressive” co-op in the country.

Environmental Values and Local Democracy

While COFEC’s fight to reclaim democracy in WEC started in the 1970s with a broader platform of proposed changes, the main public face of their progressiveness as an institution in the twenty-first century is their environmental orientation. This section thus switches gears from a historical narrative of member engagement to examine the current relationship between WEC’s environmental projects and their commitment to democratic practice. The co-op’s particular approaches to environmental stewardship are illuminating of some of the different ways that democracy can come to be practiced in a cooperative context over time.

Energy reform has always been at least a part of COFEC’s agenda for making the co-op more responsible to the community. Interest in renewable energy started bubbling within WEC back in the 1970s, in the wake of the national oil crisis. A secondary point in the 1974 debates, alternative energy became a central part of Lucenti’s platform in her 1975 campaign, and Fisher organized a discussion session on alternative energy at the

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355 For example, in the 1974 annual meeting, Senator Aiken “urged watching nuclear power carefully, noted the rising popularity of solar and other alternative-power sources and urged cooperative members to become and remain active in the political process.” Dorothy Rosa, “Electric Co-op receives Pep Talk from Aiken,” Burlington Free Press, 10 October 1974, WEC; also, see the issues of Co-op Transformer from 1974.
In the 1980s, the co-op began to disinvest from nuclear, studied the potential of “cow power” (methane capture), and designed a Conservation and Demand-Side Management Program. In the 1990s, they started investing in solar projects. By the time renewable energy became a central topic nationally in the twenty-first century, WEC was well ahead of the curve.

WEC’s recent history implies a deep connection between democracy and environmental awareness. In the last decade, the co-op has actively promoted both member engagement and renewable energy and energy efficiency projects, often explicitly drawing links between the two. In addition, the co-op publicly and unabashedly criticized more profit-oriented activities in the energy sector, encouraging their members to also consider energy policy issues from a combined social, economic, and environmental perspective and drawing their attention to the politics of the energy industry.

In 2001, for example, Co-op Currents ran an article by popular environmental writer Paul Hawken on national energy policy. The co-op publication stressed its interest in “foster[ing] discussion among WEC members and other readers” and invited members to write in with their opinions about the article. In the next issue, they published a letter from a member whose thoughts were indeed provoked: “WOW!,” co-op member Lori Barg wrote to Co-op Currents, referencing Hawken’s argument that U.S. energy policy ignored the vast gains to be made from energy efficiency in favor of more market expansion (in this case, drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska). “All I heard [in the news] was ‘energy and economic crisis,’ not that it was a management (and greed) issue.” Barg’s letter went on to ask about the co-op’s energy efficiency and distributed generation policies. Co-op Currents followed with a personal response from General Manager Avram Patt, who pointed Barg to resources about Vermont energy policy and WEC’s current alternative energy programs and ended with a reasonably technical discussion about the pros and cons of microturbines.

A year later, Patt followed this discussion with an article called, “Enron’s Rise and Fall From the Co-op’s Vantage Point.” Patt could have been channeling Senator Norris from

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356 COFEC, Co-op Transformer 5; 37th Annual Meeting minutes, 5 October 1974, WEC.
beyond the grave, his article established so many parallels with the pro-public power
crowd in the 1920s-30s. Quoting American Public Power Association CEO Allan
Richardson, Patt argued that there is a great deal of evidence that “the process of
deregulation is more corruptible than the process of regulation.” The Enron scandal was
“predictable,” Patt continued:

They were never interested in serving the average consumer. I hope, after all the
pain and suffering of the thousands who lost their jobs and their retirement savings,
the innocent investors deceived by executives and accountants, and those who
suffered through rolling blackouts and other miseries, that we can now say good
riddance to the idea that what’s good for companies like Enron is good for the USA.
Maybe another way of saying this is: If we give the Enrons of the world what they
want, we will end up getting what they want. It doesn’t have to be that way.

Patt went on to proudly state that WEC is such an alternative with a clearly different
mission:

There is a difference between WEC and Enron and it’s not just in size. Our purpose is
to serve, and to make a difference. We are in this for the long term, and so we care
about whether our system is in good shape; we care about delivering reliable
service. We care about helping our members avoid using more energy than they
need to. And we care about where our energy comes from. We are increasing our
supply of renewable energy, not so we can see how much more profit we can make,
but because it’s the right thing to do, and if we do it right, it shouldn’t cost more in
the long run.

Patt did not go quite so far as to draw larger premonitions about the economy as a whole
(“We all have our opinions about what’s been happening in the corporate world in general,
and I have mine,” Patt wrote, “but as they say – ‘don’t get me started!’”). However, he
ended by talking about the power of the cooperative principles and companies that live by
them. “Did you think ‘Enron’ when you read those values?” He asks his readers. “Probably
not. ...Those cooperative values have staying power that the Enrons of the world can’t
buy.”

WEC also started to put its money where its mouth was, with some serious
investments in alternative energy sources throughout the first decade of the twenty-first
century. In addition to supporting small wind and hydropower projects, the co-op built a
landfill gas-to-energy plant in Coventry, Vermont, which started generating electricity in
2005 and currently supplies over half of the power consumed by WEC members. “Once

more, WEC has found the answer in self-reliance – generating our own power,” Co-op Currents editor Will Lindner wrote in support of plans for the Coventry plant in 2004, referencing the origins of the co-op in organizing to provide their own electricity in the 1930s. Toss organic waste with felicity,” local poet Geof Hewitt immortalized the new plant with somewhat more whimsical praise, “If it makes it to Coventry, it’ll come back as electricity!”

Arguably, one of WEC’s biggest successes is that, through their Coventry plant, the co-op has uniquely managed to decouple pro-environmental policy from cost concerns about renewable energy investment. Coventry is actually now WEC’s second cheapest power source after the publicly owned NYPA hydropower. While occasionally the co-op will get questions from their members about economy, they have sheltered themselves from one of the major complaints about renewable energy: that there is an inherent tradeoff between rates and renewables. Landfill gas is, moreover, less variable than wind or solar; Coventry “looks like nuclear to us,” Patt reflects. While there are debates to be had about the relative sustainability about harvesting human-created sources of methane versus wind and solar power, WEC serves as an example that a fully renewable energy portfolio is possible without major sacrifices on the part of the consumers.

Finally, the co-op’s recent annual meetings have been unique among co-ops in their approach to member education. At their 2010 annual meeting, the invited speakers were a panel of gubernatorial candidates who answered questions from members about their platforms on energy policy. At the 2012 meeting, the co-op invited Dr. Alan Betts, a local meteorologist and co-chair of the Vermont Climate Collaborative, to present on measuring the effects of climate change in Vermont gardens. Recent annual meetings have also boasted locally-sourced cuisine and door prizes from other local cooperatives; in the 2012 meeting, a member stood up to thank them for supporting local businesses. (Other door prizes included the board game Co-opoly and a political history of Vermont.)

360 Will Lindner, editor’s note at the end of “Memories of WEC’s Founding and the Role of E. Harmon Kelley,” by Nat Frothingham, Co-op Currents 65(8), 2004, 6.
362 All of the speakers who came were Democrats; they invited the Republican candidate, but he declined.
363 As a plus, the co-op boasted, Betts’ grandparents were members of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, a British co-op that is generally credited with being the first modern consumer cooperative.

166
WEC in the twenty-first century thus seems in many respects to be a co-op enthusiast's ideal utility: the co-op combines a commitment to openness and change with a community-oriented business approach that actively supports other cooperatives and small local ventures; they routinely revisit the environmental and economic impacts of the energy they consume; and they understand electricity as connected to a broader set of policy issues and try hard to encourage their members to do the same, through their newsletter and annual meeting speakers.

Nonetheless, WEC, like most electric co-ops in the U.S., continues to suffer from a democratic deficit. There are still WEC members who have no idea what a co-op is, including eight as of 2010 who refused to become members because they wanted nothing to do with anything “communist.” The annual meetings are sparsely attended, mostly by – as an employee from another co-op once commented about their meetings – the “silver and blue-haired lady crowd,” who come because their families have always come, or because the annual meeting is an inexpensive night out. Just over eight percent of the membership voted in 2012 on director elections and bylaw changes, a quarter of which were blank proxy votes. \(^{36}\) Recall that, due to the co-op’s legal advocacy in the 1970s, voting was possible via a mail-in ballot – in other words, the effort required to vote included taking the time to read the ballot, put a stamp on it, and put it back in the mailbox. WEC is located in one of the most cooperative-friendly territories in the country, it is a co-op that makes a big point of member engagement, and its public resources routinely branch out into topics of wider interest. So where are the members?

One can identify a number of hypotheses for low participation in twenty-first century WEC, some broadly structural, and some specific to the co-op. But there is also a more conceptual question behind this discussion, namely: what is the purpose of member participation in the co-op, and, conversely, what is the responsibility of a co-op, or other local democracy, to its members vis-à-vis participation? In other words, perhaps meeting attendance and voting statistics are not the right metric for judging the quality of democracy in such organizations, but rather they should be evaluated by metrics of

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\(^{36}\) While the by-law change was a reasonably obscure accounting practice resulting from legal changes on the Vermont PSB, it would affect the capital credits calculation – that is, how much money was returned to members.
inclusivity and transparency. Perhaps it is adequate for a community organization to be open to member engagement, so that it can serve as a forum when the need arises – a latent democracy. It might be enough that such organizations exist for their members as a potential venue for change, without having to be a place of fierce deliberation all the time.

Bryan observes the ebb and flow of participation in town meetings as a normal feature of local democracy. “Conflict draws people to town meeting,” he concludes simply. From a thorough quantitative analysis of statistics from hundreds of town meetings, he observes: “Beyond town size, issues are the single most important variable that draws citizens to town meeting.” He further quotes Dahl: “When citizens know the issues to be dealt with...are trivial or uncontroversial, they choose to stay home – and why not? But controversial issues bring them out.”365 In other words, a couple years of low participation during peaceful times is nothing to worry about; people will come back when it’s necessary.

But for this to work – that is, for conflict to truly draw people to venues where the issues at hand can be meaningfully deliberated on when it’s important – the community needs a certain level of civic awareness and competency at civic engagement. An important question, therefore, is: How does WEC measure up on teaching its members these civic skills? The answer seems, unsurprisingly, mixed. A WEC survey in 2006 found that WEC’s newsletter, now shortened to the more casual Co-op Currents, “enjoys high readership levels,” and the message it promotes encourages critical thinking around energy issues as well as debate. In addition to the annual meeting, WEC also hosts smaller meetings during the year to engage with members in different service areas. While they do well on energy policy education and outreach, however, WEC is not exactly the venue for deliberation it was in the 1970s days of COFEC and all-day meetings. Unlike at town meetings, business is for the most part not decided at WEC annual meetings; while there is discussion, it tends to be either ideological or informational. That said, there is a vote at the meeting for by-law changes; in theory, this could turn into a debate, as it did in the 1970s. Without another crisis, it is hard to know for sure if this quiescence is cyclical or systemic. As Bryan writes

about town meetings, but with great relevance to co-op meetings: "Vermont is (despite its
bucolic image) more a ‘postmodern’ society than the great majority of American states."\textsuperscript{366}

Another troubling sign of the enduring quality of democracy in WEC is that the most
avid practitioners still appear to be centered on the original members of COFEC. The
longevity of COFEC’s commitment is impressive but also illuminative. The names that
appear in the COFEC activism of the 1970s show up again in benign administrative contexts
decades later: Marion Milne, Charles Haas, Barry Bernstein, and Roger Fox, for example, all
have gone from insurgent dissidents in the sensationalist media coverage of the 1970s to
the smiling confident faces of bureaucratic normalcy in the co-op documents of the twenty-
first century. Of course, WEC’s post-COFEC bureaucratic normalcy is different from WEC in
the 1960s, and it is different from the typical NRECA-affiliated electric co-op. The co-op
spirit that infused COFEC’s early days remained part of their management philosophy as
they took the helm of the co-op. “We were considered radicals,” Bernstein muses, “but all
we were doing was going back to our [cooperative] roots” (Berstein 2010).

But going back to cooperative roots, especially in the case of the REA co-ops, means
little about the enduring practice of democracy. DeFilippis, in discussing a worker-owned
firm that was similarly “born of crisis,” observes: “now that the crisis has long since
subsided, the firm has become, for all intents and purposes, just another company – albeit a
particularly benevolent one.” (p. 85) It is unclear if WEC is closer to that – a benevolent co-
op that has gone back to its roots of being oriented towards community development –
than it is to the transformational democracy of the “new economy.” Specifically, its focus on
renewable energy may be limiting its scope too much as an organization, given the
potential of co-ops to be more general venues for community development. As Saul Alinsky
once said: “An organization needs action as an individual needs oxygen. With only one or
two issues there will certainly be a lapse of action, and then comes death. Multiple issues
mean constant action and life.”\textsuperscript{367}

The next case study considers a co-op that has explicitly valued environmental
concerns above economic ones from the beginning of a member-led movement for a more

\textsuperscript{366} Ibid., 292.
Communities through Deliberation,” 271.
engaged co-op. In Colorado ski country, co-op advocates have found the political will and the economic flexibility to bring environmental goals into their boardroom for debate.
Case II: Holy Cross Energy (Glenwood Springs, Colorado)

Building Momentum: Carbon Footprints and Co-op Boards

“In a nutshell,” Auden Schendler tells me, when I explain the scope of my research on electric cooperatives, “we did what Vermont did.” In some ways he is right, but in some ways the two co-op movements are nothing alike. Nearly three decades after COFEC started agitating for change in East Montpelier, Holy Cross Energy Cooperative (HCE) in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, underwent a similar turbulent period, sparked by Schendler and supported by a growing local culture of environmental awareness. Unlike the dissident ad hoc group of artists and community organizers operating COFEC on a shoestring budget, however, Schendler represents perhaps the most powerful local interest in the Roaring Fork Valley. Schendler is the Vice President of Sustainability at Aspen Skiing Company (in town, referred to simply as “SkiCo”). An accomplished outdoorsman and longtime environmental advocate, Schendler has become known as SkiCo’s “sustainability guru” and “Aspen’s Green Guy.” For the past decade, his job has been to reduce SkiCo’s environmental impact, which, as he interprets the mission, is a project necessarily global in scope. As Schendler describes the corporate sustainability field:

Achieving sustainability means solving climate change, period. But as far as I can tell, the public overwhelmingly thinks my peers and I are some relics from the ’70s, working on recycling and compostable cups, improving wildlife habitats, stuff like that. But I don’t know anything about those things, for the most part I don’t even care about them, other than tangentially. I work on climate change mitigation, through policy, emissions reduction, and clean power generation.\(^{368}\)

Climate change mitigation is crucial not just for modern green businesses generally, but specifically for SkiCo, because without snow in Colorado, there is no skiing, and without skiing, there is no SkiCo. Utilitarian explanations aside, Aspen has also been a cherished wilderness and a global intellectual center for decades, meaning that the local population is supportive of climate change mitigation, both politically and in terms of local planning. The nexus of the two has created space for creativity by people like Schendler. While he will

willingly admit that SkiCo’s for-profit business model results in occasional hypocrisy, he sees great potential in a place-based company taking an aggressive approach to reducing its environmental impact and acting as a leader in the industry.

When he first started exploring ways to minimize SkiCo’s CO2 emissions in the early 2000s, however, he found he hit a firm lower bound. Looking closer at the data, he realized it was because the emissions of the power mix the company bought from their utility had been increasing. This was Schendler’s introduction to the co-op world: SkiCo is a member of Holy Cross Energy Cooperative, meaning that the entire company has one vote in co-op elections, but otherwise has little power to influence the management, who by definition have to answer to the community-elected board of directors. Upon further investigation, he found out that the board typically ran unopposed and that elections had no press coverage. (Why? Because electricity is “so boring,” Schendler explains, a bit sardonically – who would cover it?) At first, he had trouble figuring out when HCE’s elections were held; Schendler recalls that the only place election information was posted was in the back of some newsletter that people never read. Once Schendler determined when and how elections worked, however, he started recruiting people to run in the yearly elections.

As in pre-1970s WEC in Vermont, Holy Cross Energy had been, in the words of more than one board member, “flying under the radar” for a long time; interpreting their mission as a service organization that existed to provide reliable electricity at the lowest possible cost to member-customers, the HCE board was similarly startled to confront sudden interest in co-op policy from local energy activists who saw themselves as member-owners. While, ten years later, HCE is now collaborating with SkiCo on new energy projects, Schendler was for a long time an unpopular name in co-op circles, and board members still have some qualms about SkiCo’s active endorsement of candidates. Schendler hypothesizes that, while HCE has always had a community orientation, actual engagement by a member with potentially disruptive policy goals felt like “meddling in someone’s family.”

At first, the co-op responded to this new era of contested elections protectively. For example, an HCE member only needs fifteen signatures to petition to be on the ballot, but Schendler discovered the hard way that not all signatures count. Even though HCE has a protected service area, and thus everyone who lives in that area uses HCE power, not everyone in the service area is a co-op member. Electric meters are tied to one name, and
the official members’ families (spouses or anyone else who lives in the house) are technically ineligible to sign a ballot petition or to vote in co-op elections, even if they are daily users of HCE power. The same technicality often holds true for tenants. In other words, not everyone in the co-op area is enfranchised to contribute to co-op policy. While many co-ops recognize this as unfair (and HCE has since been working on adding joint memberships to their bylaws), as we shall see in the following discussion on co-ops in Kentucky, this selective co-op citizenship can be used quite politically. In HCE, according to Schendler, strict adherence to membership lists was at first mostly a protective instinct. Nonetheless, a couple of early SkiCo backed candidates were invalidated because of mismatch between their petitions and the official co-op membership list. Moreover, Schendler explains, they were unable to access co-op membership records in order to double check the petitions. He jokes that the membership records must have been locked in some black box in HCE’s basement somewhere.

Once past the learning curve of co-op election particularities, though, Schendler used the organizational resources of SkiCo to support several climate change-focused campaigns across the HCE area. Current board member Lynn Dwyer, for example, remembers Schendler telling her, in response to her protests that she was too busy to run: “we’ll do everything.”

What did “everything” mean in the context of a co-op election? According to Schendler, standard modern tools: email, outreach, letters to the editor, pamphletting the town. While some people complained that SkiCo was bankrolling HCE elections, current board members explain it differently. Running for local elections like this are cheap, board member Megan Gilman recalls; she personally spent about $200 on hers, mostly for ads and door-hangers. Because of this, Gilman muses, local boards are a “pure form of democracy;” anyone who sees something that “doesn’t make sense locally” can run and try to make it better. The game is less how much you spend, she reflects, and more how influential you are and how many contacts you have. Thus, the main advantage of being backed by SkiCo was not money, but rather institutional support structure. “We’re good at advertising,” Schendler explains. “That’s what we do.” For example, Schendler anecdotally recalls convincing a local paper that HCE elections were worth covering in one of his first campaign seasons:
He called the paper and asked: Are you going to cover this election? No, he was told, electric cooperative elections are not interesting. He then challenged them: Covering this election is one of the most important things you can do regarding renewable energy and climate change. You think it’s not interesting?

So, he concludes, they covered it. Basically, Schendler summarizes, the role that SkiCo played in changing the HCE board is that “we daylighted the election.”

SkiCo was in many respects, however, just the forefront of a larger cultural movement in the HCE service area. While all of the current board members have been endorsed by SkiCo, many of them ran independently and were surprised to get a call from Schendler or to read his letters to the editor supporting them. Many of the current board members had been active in promoting energy innovation in a variety of contexts well before running for the HCE board, and they discovered the co-op much the same way Schendler did: realizing that HCE was a democratic forum for determining local energy policy, they became interested in the potential for widespread change that HCE represented.

Gilman, for example, is a founder and owner of one of the first companies in Vail Valley to offer energy efficiency and solar services. Before she ran for the HCE board, she had already been the chair of the Eagle Valley Alliance for Sustainability, served on a variety of county and city committees overseeing grants for green projects, and helped Colorado Mountain College design their environmental curriculum. As she glibly summarizes how she became interested in the HCE board, she has served on “every committee known to man” that is concerned with local energy and environmental issues. Through this work, she knew several members of the HCE board, and when the board member for her district retired, she decided to run. Unlike many of her current cohort, Gilman’s campaign was not aimed at ousting an incumbent, but rather aimed at representing a changing population; as a young business owner deeply engaged in energy transition policy, she felt she would be able to speak for a growing constituency of Vail residents that had not previously been represented on the HCE board.
The heightened visibility of HCE in the last decade has brought it to the attention of locals interested in community service more so than in renewable energy, as well. When current board president Michael Glass ran in 2007, he had been involved in a number of other community boards, so when he saw an ad in the paper for HCE elections, he thought it would be interesting to run. He had “zero agenda” for energy policy, he reflects on his campaign, and therefore thought that he could provide a “balanced perspective. He put together a modest campaign, sent letters to the editor, and used the business network he had developed in his career at Alpine Bank.

Change can happen on a co-op board in a variety of ways. When Glass was elected in 2007, half of the rest of the board he joined had been serving for over 20 years. When the last of the old guard, Carbondale rancher Tom Turnbull, retired in 2012, it marked his thirty-third year of service. The board had been headed towards a new generation, regardless; the expectation, however, was that board turnover would occur as it always had – with neighbor talking to neighbor, and longtime community members being appointed unopposed. Prior to the twenty-first century, with a couple of exceptions here

369 Images courtesy of Auden Schendler.
and there, most of HCE’s annual meeting minutes recorded literally zero ballots cast for board elections. Year after year, the election of board members is recorded in the meeting minutes as some variation of the following (from the 1969 Annual Meeting of the Members, which had an attendance of 9 members, including board members):

   It was observed that a half hour had passed since the time set for opening of the meeting by the notices thereof, and that it was unlikely that other members would appear.

   ...The situation arising from lack of quorum for the purpose of election of Directors was thereupon discussed, particularly with reference to suggestions made by REA concerning action to be taken in such cases. The President then pointed out that each incumbent Director had been nominated by the nomination committee for re-election. Mr. Parkison, attorney for the Association, then explained the manner in which this particular problem had been met at previous annual meetings.

   It was then moved and seconded that, as a quorum for the purpose of election of Directors was not present, the report of the nominating committee be approved, and that the incumbent Directors remain in office. Said motion was unanimously carried.370

In other words, no one came to meetings, no one particularly cared, and the board of directors continued to approve their own appointments. Turnbull, who joined the board in the late 1970s, explains that new board members were recruited back then “by chance and by luck,” and no one left the board except to retire or move away. He was originally asked to be a board member by a friend of the family who was currently serving on the board. Discussing Turnbull’s long service and the changes he’s seen in the HCE territory during his tenure, another board member commented: “You can imagine the conversation. They’re out mending fences together or something, and the neighbor says, ‘Hey, Tom, what do you think about being on the Holy Cross board? I think you’d be good at it.’” Turnbull reflects that he was resistant at first, because he thought it would be too much time, but he has found it to be very interesting, and progressively more so with the recent environmental component. He summarizes, about being on the HCE Board: “I can’t imagine going through my life without that experience.”

   By 2010, however, the board had tipped towards the growing demographic of renewable energy advocates in the HCE service area. With David Munk’s election in 2010, in which he beat out more conservative incumbent Robert Starodoj, who had been on the

HCE board since 1985, Munk would be the third explicitly “green” candidate to win in three years. Between 2008 and 2010, Munk, Dwyer, and Adam Palmer joined Michael Glass as the new face of HCE. By the time Gilman was elected to the board in 2011, she encountered an unprecedentedly young, environmentally friendly board that was welcoming of her expertise. She says she feels fortunate to have been elected when she was, adding that she does not envy Dwyer and Palmer for the struggles they went through when they were first elected. With the subsequent retirement of Tom Turnbull and Harold Clark from the board in 2012, Glass would eventually become the longest standing member on the board, and the culture of the board would be on average much more green – “a supermajority of progressives,” Schendler was quoted as describing the new board in a local paper. By 2013, the most conservative current members of the board would be Glass – the “zero agenda” board president who was nonetheless endorsed by Schendler in 2007 – and the recently elected Bob Gardner – a retired HCE employee who describes himself as a pragmatist, urging an approach to building HCE’s energy portfolio based on “what makes the most sense,” but who personally would like to see intensified local generation: more small hydropower and solar panels on every roof.

While HCE did not have fierce debates at annual meetings, vote recounts, or sensationalist press coverage during their transitional period, current board members remember more private instances of resistance and less-than-polite politics in response to their using the official electoral process to get onto the board – what Herr and Anderson would call “institutional micropolitics” aimed at maintaining the status quo. For example, ousted board members would occasionally show up at the next board meeting after the annual meeting, anyway, and talk at length about how the elections had been unfair. When Dwyer joined the board in 2008, she felt she had been elected as a leader in energy innovation and immediately started asking questions about HCE’s plans for renewable energy and energy efficiency programs; an older board member took her aside and told her, “Lynn, when I was elected, I didn’t open my mouth for six months.” At Glass’s first meeting, he unknowingly selected a seat at the table that turned out to be another

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board member’s traditional spot. When the older board member arrived, he informed Glass of this in an unfriendly manner and proceeded to stand over him until he moved. (Glass reflects that, in an attempt to avoid hostile dynamics at the beginning of his term, he meekly gathered his things and picked another seat.)

If WEC’s transition was a stereotype in small town politics, then, one could say that HCE’s culture change was a stereotype of old boys club exclusivity. As in Vermont, the co-op board perceived themselves as the true locals who understood the electricity business and the challengers as newcomers who were pushing a specific agenda. Meanwhile, the HCE challengers saw themselves as representing a growing demographic and protecting the co-op against a changing future. In HCE, however, the “true locals” were fast becoming a minority, and, historically speaking, this change was by their own design.

“What a Gamble!”: The Cooperative Origins of Commercial Skiing in Western Colorado

While these co-op contestations highlight a cultural divide in Colorado mountain country, it is worth stepping back to consider that the co-op itself played a large role in developing Colorado’s ski industry. Again, we can see here the persistence of the REA management doctrine of sustained growth in the service of keeping costs low for the community resulting in unintended consequences that dramatically changed the local culture and its sense of being rural:

In 1954, as the story goes, longtime central Colorado resident Earl V. Eaton was tromping through the mountains in the Gore Valley in search of uranium ore, when his Geiger counter led him straight to riches of a different kind: the perfect ski slope. Shortly after, Eaton returned to the area with Pete Seibert, the manager of a nascent ski resort at Loveland Basin. Eaton and Siebert had previously worked together at a small new ski area on Aspen Mountain, and Eaton wanted Seibert’s opinion on the potential for commercial skiing in the area he had discovered around his family home in Minturn. As the two men explored what would later come to be known as Vail Mountain, they began planning for a new industry around “mining snow” instead of ore. Disguising themselves as the Trans Montane Rod and Gun Club so as not to invite land speculation, the two men applied for a ski permit from the Forest Service, began buying land in the area, and started wooing
investors. By 1959, the newly formed Vail Associates had grown to twenty-six people and was actively planning lift construction and a recreational base village.373

Though commercial skiing existed elsewhere in Colorado, the fledgling Vail Associates initially encountered skepticism that a ski area “in this far away location [would] ever be profitable.” In particular, the shortsightedness of private utilities towards the potential of remote ski resorts would again encourage a turn to cooperatives to service rural entrepreneurship. Ed Grange, a former Holy Cross general manager and board member, recounts the first meeting of then-Director George Loesch with Pete Seibert:

I was in George’s office when Pete had arranged to meet with us one afternoon when he came to tell us of the problems he was immediately facing. He had been to Public Service Company374 in Denver to inquire if they would build the necessary power lines for his project. They had evidently told him that his dream of a ski area just simply wasn’t feasible, would never succeed and if he really was determined to have them build the power lines he would have to come with cash to pay for the cost of construction! Pete said that with the ski lifts now being constructed and everything else going on he just didn’t have any money to pay Public Service Company and he wondered what Holy Cross possibly could do to help him?? So after quite a long discussion about his development, George told him we would take it up with the Board and see what they might be able to do. ...Since we had been serving this rural valley since the early days with our single phase line and had just a few years ago extended the power line to the Greek sheepmen in the upper Gore Valley, we really considered this valley to be “our territory” and from Pete’s personal conviction that this was a feasible development with the possibility of lots of growth, I remember with much trepidation on everyone’s part, the Board saying “lets go ahead and do this with some sort of contract but without any set minimum or security to be required.” What a gamble! If this development would have failed I am sure we would all have been out of a job!375

Aspen had had some commercial ski infrastructure since 1947, so HCE would have had a sense of the potential of the ski industry. At the time, however, ski infrastructure was minimal and often off-grid. Converted military trucks carted skiers up some hills, while ski tows powered by Model T engines accessed others. No resort had more than a couple of

374 Despite its name, Public Service Company was a private utility structured on the holding company model. PSCO was in fact the conglomerate name of Colorado Power Company and Cheyenne Light, Fuel, and Power. It eventually merged with other regional power companies under the brand of Xcel Energy, which is currently (as of 2013) one of the major suppliers of electricity for HCE.
lifts and minimal on-mountain amenities.\textsuperscript{376} Certainly, the après-ski focused base village was not yet part of the Colorado skiing scene (see Figure 4.5).

\textbf{Figure 4.5: Downtown Aspen in 1948.} The Red Onion, which still exists, is a five-minute walk from the base of the Aspen Mountain gondola, the main ski lift.\textsuperscript{377}

Board meeting minutes from the period, however, indicate excitement about the potential of ski area development. For example, the March, 1962, meeting minutes record the co-op’s willingness to provide complete construction support for the Vail project:

There was a lengthy discussion as to problems of providing service to Vail Corporation, the new operations of which will be in an area now served by this Association. The Manager was instructed to continue negotiations with Vail Corporation to obtain a service contract, no minimums or security of any nature to be required of Vail Corporation. It was made clear that such new operations would


\textsuperscript{377} Photo courtesy of Gordon Baym.
require that an existing line be converted to three-phase. The Manager was instructed to commence work on the engineering details of such conversion.\textsuperscript{378}

In May, Vail Associates Ltd. officially paid their $5 membership fee and joined the Holy Cross Electric Association. The May meeting minutes record the progress, which “was approved, and by acclamation”:

Mr. Thurston, Manager, and Mr. Parkison, Attorney, reported in detail all that had been done, and all that was in the planning stage, with reference to engineering and construction in the Gore Creek area, and with reference to negotiations for a contract for service to Vail Association, Ltd. All of such was approved, and by acclamation, Mr. Thurston was instructed to proceed with all possible speed to bring about conversion to three-phase of the Gore Creek line, and engineering and construction of a stub line to serve the ski-tow of Vail Associates, regardless of the status of contract negotiations with Vail Associates.\textsuperscript{379}

Mr. Thurston then presented plans and specifications [for] the conversion to three-phase of the line from the Eagle River Northeasterly up Gore Creek to Vail Village, and approximately four miles of new construction from Vail Village to the proposed ski lifts.\textsuperscript{380}

A couple months later, with the Vail project in full swing, HCE added plans for underground power in Vail Village – “our first venture into the construction of underground power lines,” Ed Grange recalls – as well as line construction, while they were at it, to the more modest Aspen-area ski resorts of Highlands and Buttermilk. In 1967, they extended power to create Snowmass Village and ski resort, as well. (Today, the three areas are combined with Aspen Mountain under the SkiCo brand.)

\textsuperscript{378} Minutes of Meeting of HCE Board of Directors, March 1962, HCE.
\textsuperscript{379} Holy Cross Electric Association changed its name to Holy Cross Energy Cooperative in 1998.
\textsuperscript{380} Minutes of Meeting of HCE Board of Directors, May 1962, HCE.
Figure 4.6: Vail Under Construction, 1962. HCE General Manager George Thurston enjoys the view while visiting the new ski lift construction at Vail.  

Grange, "Holy Cross Electric."
Figure 4.7: Annual Meeting at the New Ski Village, 1964. Two years after HCE took on the project of electrifying Vail Village and the soon-to-be world-renowned ski area, the co-op hosted the Colorado Rural Electric Association Annual Meeting at the newly completed resort.\textsuperscript{382}

In doing so, Holy Cross arguably made the region into what it is today, as well as setting the stage for their own organizational evolution fifty years later. The new ski areas would eventually attract a different demographic to the area, replacing ranchers, farmers, and miners with a more cosmopolitan set of athletes, intellectuals, and wealthy seasonal residents. Despite the profound differences between Colorado mining and ranching culture

\textsuperscript{382} Grange, “Holy Cross Electric.”
in the early twentieth century and the glitzy cosmopolitanism of twenty-first century Colorado ski country, Turnbull recalls the change as being gradual – the kind of change that you do not see while you are living through it, until you look back on how things used to be. Turnbull moved to Carbondale, a town about halfway between Aspen and Vail by road, in 1960, when skiing in Aspen was a minor industry and Vail was little more than an idea without full funding. He laments not appreciating the Valley fully when it was more rural; he describes it as a place where most residents worked the land and you could know your neighbors. Just as he was, many of the HCE board members Turnbull served with over the years were asked to participate by people who knew them, and the board reflected the community – he watched it change from “natural resources people” - ranchers, beekeepers, saw mill operators - to local businessmen - realtors, small business owners, contractors - to the contested elections of the twenty-first century, when environmental concerns have shifted the board again to favor energy and sustainability professionals. “Today, the Roaring Fork Valley is a bustling, thriving series of towns,” Park and Pellow write. “Despite the nostalgic picture painted by the area’s few long-term residents, and contrary to the nativist ideal of Aspen as a stable community with deep local roots, the population here is constantly on the move. In fact, virtually everyone in the valley is a newcomer or a transplant.” It should hardly be a surprise therefore that the changing culture has led to changes in the visions of community boards, such as in HCE.

**Environmental Values and Local Democracy**

Despite the comparative friction of a decade of contested elections, however, the HCE board seems to once again be settling down. In 2013, HCE once more had an uncontested election, in which incumbents Michael Glass and David Munk retained their seats by default.

While HCE has had its fair share of friction, politics, and media fights over the last ten years, the culture change it went through can be interpreted in retrospect as less a fight for procedural reform than for agenda reform, unlike in WEC, where the major issues driving COFEC were concerns over transparency and governance, with renewable energy

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taking a back seat. In HCE, there were no hot meetings where the co-op struggled to figure out how to manage unexpected debate, nor has there been prolonged public advocacy efforts beyond candidates simply campaigning. While ousted board members may have felt a sense of injustice that a motivated cadre of sustainability professionals swept in and took over their co-op, the basic morals of the co-op were never called into question, and there was no protracted fight over visions of co-op self-definition. Rather, changing interests of the membership over time resulted, with the catalyst of Auden Schendler, in a tipping point that rapidly shifted the co-op agenda through a comparatively civil replacement of board members.

Out of the three case studies, HCE is the only one for whom climate change was the dominant trigger behind board turnover. It is interesting to consider this on two levels: both that climate change has real local meaning for the Colorado mountains, as opposed to being a more abstract value about “thinking globally,” and that the HCE service area is wealthy enough that economic issues are not as critical here as they are in other co-op territories. I have spent a lot of time in Western Colorado, and, while Colorado ski country – the playground of the rich and famous – has its own stark inequities, I am always struck by what local government and other public organizations are able to do when they have adequate financial resources. Holy Cross is one such organization. Not beholden to a state regulatory board and with a membership that almost never contests rate increases, HCE has been able to raise revenue for a dedicated program on energy efficiency and allocate funds to support local clean-energy generation projects.

Over the last decade, HCE has been investing in and/or providing support for small-scale generation projects throughout its service area. HCE has been working with SkiCo and Oxbow Mining Company to build generation facilities that run on the methane produced by the mine.384 The co-op has also put its strong support behind local energy entrepreneurs, including the partially locally-owned Eagle Valley Clean Energy LLC’s plans for a biomass plant in the nearby town of Gypsum, which will use “waste wood” as fuel, and Roaring Fork Valley resident Paul Spencer’s solar farmshare project, the Clean Energy Collective (CEC), which allows members to purchase individual solar panels that are installed in a large

array and managed jointly. In addition, the co-op encourages its members to construct their own generation projects (mostly solar), offering substantial rebates and net metering rates. In 2012, Randy Udall told a reporter from the Aspen Times, “This valley is arguably the leading hotbed for solar photovoltaics in the entire Rocky Mountain region. ...Holy Cross doesn’t brag on what they’re doing, but they are kicking ass.” Finally, the co-op practices what it preaches in using green building technology: in a recent extension of the HCE headquarters in Glenwood Springs, the construction included a number of best practices for energy efficiency, including natural lighting and automatic sunshades, as well as a dedicated place on the roof for solar panels.

Figure 4.8: New Construction Practices What HCE Preaches, 2011. Caught in the act of energy efficiency, automatic shades adjust for natural lighting and temperature control in the new HCE building (photograph by author).

All of this said, with plans for their energy mix to exceed 20% renewables by 2014, HCE’s energy goals are more modest than WEC. While the co-op has started to accept the risk of beginning to switch to their own generation and investment in local renewable energy projects, however, these projects account for much less of their total energy mix than Coventry does for WEC. Admittedly, this is due partly to the fact that HCE is still bound by contracts with coal-fired plants and other energy providers, over whose generation decisions the co-op has little control, and it is further worth remembering that WEC also gradually eased into renewable energy generation. Avram Patt humorously recalls that one of their first projects—a small hydropower plant which supplies 3-5% of their power—was partly a response to get environmental activists from COFEC off the back of the board of directors. WEC also had to extricate itself from a relationship with Vermont Yankee, a nuclear plant, before the co-op could seriously shift their energy portfolio; in fact, WEC had an ownership share in Vermont Yankee until the entire plant was sold in 2002.

While the HCE local generation projects are obviously much more than passive aggressive renewable energy investment, however, it is worth stepping back to consider what kind of environmentalism is driving these policy changes in the co-op. The kind of environmentalism practiced in HCE could be described as a professional, expert-focused process of rational planning. The perspectives of some of the board members towards renewable energy investment are illustrative of this:

For example, recently elected board member Robert Gardner argues that the number one role of an electric co-op is to provide good service and reliability. While he personally cares deeply about the environment and climate change, his focus as a board member is “making sure this organization continues to flourish in an effective way,” not to be an early innovator in renewable energy. Renewable energy is not as reliable as coal-fired power, he explains, so unless the co-op is willing to deal with more outages, “we need a reliable mix.” He says that there is societal pressure for utilities to take on the risks of renewable energy, but for co-ops, that’s the members’ money. He suggests that he would rather see some other organization, whose main goal it is to think about these things, provide RE and EE services, and HCE to provide financial support—a partnership that

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“takes the administrative aspects out of HCE’s hands,” because he doesn’t think they have the resources or expertise for that. People think that utilities should be the first stop for RE, he says, but that’s not necessarily the best use of resources.

Megan Gilman similarly argues with the sensibilities of a business owner that energy efficiency and renewable energy technologies are good investments from an economic and efficiency point of view, in addition to their environmental benefits. There are so many good reasons for working towards more RE/EE based energy, she explains, that she does not actually think about climate change very much in her work. Gilman feels strongly that RE/EE adoption is disadvantaged by the nature of current government subsidies and incentives for the energy industry; she explains that, because most subsidies for coal and oil are on the production or company side, these incentives are “hidden” from the public. In contrast, renewable energy subsidies are much more visible because they go to individual consumers. The upshot of this unequal visibility, she notes, is that no one has to prove that coal companies deserve their subsidies. Megan firmly believes that the actual costs of oil and coal make renewable energy cost efficient, especially when one factors in the long term environmental and health costs. She reflects: “We’re not doing right by our customers if we’re not investing in renewables.” She also is aware that HCE has the political will to take some risks with energy policy, and, as an entrepreneur, she knows that adoption of new technology is easier when you can point to someone who has adopted it and show that it’s working for them; she wants HCE to be in the position of being at national electric co-op events and being able to raise their hands and say, “I did it, and here’s how you can do it.” But while Gilman is actively pushing for energy innovation through her role on the board, her perspective is entrepreneurial, not ideological.

The HCE board’s environmentalism is an interesting mix of values, between what environmental scholars call “challenge-response” and “Postmaterialist” models of environmental activism. A brief foray into theories behind environmental activism will help situate HCE more clearly as an organization, and explain some of its recent energy policy work:

Gottlieb notes that the environmental movement has been split for a long time between conservation groups and nature enthusiasts, on the one hand, and groups that are more critical of the structural factors that maintain environmentally destructive
relationships, on the other. The latter, he notes, have often been “wary of the environmental label, associating it with issues such as population control, anti-urban elitism, and personal responsibility linked to a ‘blame the victim’ approach.” This tension is still evident today between, for example, anti-toxics and environmental racism activists, many of whom don’t want to be called environmentalists, and the professionalized conservation organizations and environmental technicians, such as “sustainability” or “green energy” professionals.388

The problem, in a nutshell, is that the environment has a long and complicated symbolic history in Western society linked to aristocratic notions of morality and identity, and has therefore been used as a proxy for social relations – a true “commodification” of nature in the Marxian sense – even as the same people often were engaged in building resource-intensive economic empires. Raymond Williams muses along these lines that environmentalism is partly the product of “the great interferers...proclaiming the necessity of non-interference,” while Lawrence Buell notes that “good Americans” feel “obliged” to show respect for nature.389 The real problem with such commodification of environmental values, however, is that such ideals have often become justifications for projects to “save” nature at the expense of local communities.390 In a sense, environmentalism is divided between those who seek a legitimate critique of capitalist relations, and those who seek to consume nature. The goal for those of us who study such relationships, these scholars suggest, is to disentangle from environmental rhetoric exactly whom the environment-in-question is being protected for and whom it is being protected from.

Inglehart suggests two ways contemporary individuals develop concern for environmental issues: in the “challenge-response” model, individuals develop awareness

388 Gottlieb, Forcing the Spring; Brulle, Agency, Democracy, and Nature.
of environmental issues because they see environmental degradation in their own lives; whereas, in the “Postmaterialist values” model, individuals develop concern over the environment as part of a larger world-view that emphasizes “self-expression and the quality of life.” Interestingly, Inglehart notes that in comparative studies of environmental values, “severe environmental pollution and high levels of Postmaterialism tend to occur in opposite types of settings” and only by “analytically disentangling their joint effects” does the relevance of either factor become meaningful.\(^{391}\)

Meanwhile, Jones and Dunlap find that women and non-whites in the United States are *more* likely to express concern for the environment during an economic downturn - an observation that fits well into a “challenge-response” model of environmentalism that privileges personal experience over financial resources. These studies of environmental values all support the idea that environmentalism can be both a critique of and an internal activity in capitalist systems.\(^{392}\)

In fact, within the “Postmaterialist values” model, the idea that consumption-oriented environmentalism is “blaming the victim” becomes oddly less important from an individual perspective, and in a perverse way even supports a value-orientation towards self-discovery.

This is not to say that Postmaterialist environmental values are never mobilized in environmental action; quite the opposite. While the multiplicity of values encompassed in “environmentalism” may be unsettling from the perspective of different individual beliefs, it makes a useful rallying framework for collective action. Keck and Sikkink define environmentalism as “a frame within which the relations among a variety of claims about resource use, property, rights, and power may be reconfigured.” Mertig and Dunlap see environmentalism as a potential “ideological ‘glue’” to hold together various other social movements, particularly those labeled “new social movements,” which explicitly challenge the status quo in advanced capitalism.\(^{393}\)

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In recent years, energy activism seems to be one such movement that is capable of coordinating challenge-response environmentalism with Postmaterialist environmentalism. Especially in ski towns such as Aspen, residents heavily influenced by a wilderness and outdoor sports culture to be already attuned to their natural environment have been seeing their lifestyles and livelihoods threatened by environmental change. The Aspen Canary initiative, for example, calls for recognition that: “High alpine mountain towns like Aspen are seeing the effects of climate change before many other places, making us ‘canaries in the mineshaft’ for global climate impacts.”

Perhaps one of the more odd manifestations of this hybrid mountain town environmentalism is SkiCo’s “Save Snow” initiative for climate change mitigation. Launched in 2006, the Save Snow campaign focused on incorporating renewable energy technology at the resorts as well as continuing Schendler’s goals of raising climate awareness. On October 24, 2009, SkiCo joined environmentalist Bill McKibben’s 350.org global climate change event, which coordinated 5,248 rallies across 181 countries to call for action in preparation for the global climate meetings in Copenhagen that December. Joining a series of visually provocative protests, including climbers rallying on the “melting glaciers” of Mount Everest and government officials in the Maldives “holding an underwater cabinet meeting,” Aspen’s climate activists showed up dressed in full winter gear with their skis and snowboards to spell out “Save Snow” on a bare mountaintop. Schendler later commented on the event: "Welcome to the revolution. Expect only more street protests like this as we as a society demand action on the challenge of our time."

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395 “To preserve our planet, scientists tell us we must reduce the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere from its current level of 400 parts per million (‘ppm’) to below 350 ppm.” (350.org); Coverage of the Save Snow event include: http://www.aspentimes.com/article/20091019/NEWS/910199997; http://blogs.westword.com/showandtell/2009/10/aspen_joins_worldwide_environm.php.
In the realm of environmental movements, “Save Snow” is an odd duck. It simultaneously has both serious local implications while seeming almost frivolous outside of the ski town context. That is, “Save Snow” has less external resonance than other environmental signifiers – the environmental atrocities associated with mountaintop removal in Kentucky, for example. When one only looks at the public face of Aspen, it is thus easy to be critical of such activism as Postmaterialism in its most insipid form: that of protecting specific environments for the wealthy elite in an exclusive enclave that obscures a deep dependence on industrial processes and waste management practices occurring elsewhere. Lawrence Buell has referred to this kind of nature appreciation as “environmental doublethink,” sustained by the American habit of “compartmentalization”.

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in land use; the combination of environmental sensibilities with a still “consumption-addicted” culture, Lawrence Buell observes sardonically, has led us to create “pretty ghettos” of protected nature that we then hold up as symbols of ecocentricity.\textsuperscript{98}

Environmental justice scholars have similarly identified combined economic and spatial logics of “environmental privilege” or “environmental elitism” as a flipside of environmental racism.\textsuperscript{399} Connecting to an emerging literature of “whiteness studies” that seeks to understand (with the same critical lens that has been applied to mechanisms of inequity) how categories of privilege are created and maintained, Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David Naguib Pellow specifically single out Aspen and the Roaring Fork Valley as a case study in environmental privilege. The message from such critiques would seem to be that if snow is saved, it will be at the expense of a degraded environment elsewhere, and only for those privileged enough to appreciate it.\textsuperscript{400}

It is worth stepping back to reconsider SkiCo as an organization and its role in the Roaring Fork Valley, however. On the one hand, SkiCo is a massively economically extractive industry. On the other, it is without a doubt an “anchor institution,” not only firmly based in the Roaring Fork Valley, but also completely reliant economically on a continued quality of place, both cultural and environmental.\textsuperscript{401} While it would be easy to critique the “Save Snow” campaign as postmaterialist values or the reinforcement of environmental privilege (or, more colloquially, “first world problems”), it is important to remember also that Aspen is a company town. The presence or absence of snow makes or destroys livelihoods that have been built up around the particular socio-econo-


\textsuperscript{399} Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David Naguib Pellow, \textit{The Slums of Aspen: Immigrants vs. the Environment in America’s Eden} (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 3; Robert D. Bullard, \textit{Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality} (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 9. Environmental racism has long been documented as a structural outcome of industrialized society operating under the distributive logic of private property and capitalist markets for land in combination with the cultural and economic legacies of centuries of racial discrimination. Pellow and Park contend that the flipside to environmental racism is “environmental privilege.” They explain: “environmental privilege results from the exercise of economic, political, and cultural power that some groups enjoy, which enables them exclusive access to coveted environmental amenities such as forests, parks, mountains, rivers, coastal property, open lands, and elite neighborhoods. Environmental privilege is embodied in the fact that some groups can access spaces and resources, which are protected from the kinds of ecological harm that other groups are forced to contend with everyday” (4).

\textsuperscript{400} Park and Pellow, \textit{The Slums of Aspen}, 179-80.

environmental logic of the region. To some, “Save Snow” in Western Colorado is as much a campaign of survival as “Stop Mountaintop Removal” is in Eastern Kentucky. It only appears more benign because of the place-status of each in the global economy. Eastern Kentucky coal country, as a provider of raw resources, is rendered nearly invisible, except for those committed to publicizing its environmental atrocities. This is because those who reap its benefits do not go there; the coal mined in Kentucky comes to them. The Roaring Fork Valley, on the other hand, is a place resources flow into, and has thus become an iconic image of pleasure and privilege globally. But the potential for major loss and resultant gross inequalities due to environmental change is very real in both places. One indicator of the deep feelings about climate change in the Valley, Del Worley suggests, is that HCE surveys still showed a member preference for renewable energy investment even in the first few years of the recent recession. The mining analogy from 1950s Vail still holds; snow is Western Colorado’s coal.

As a place resources flow into, Aspen’s problems are closer to “global city” problems than to other “rural” areas. A particular site of production in a “transterritorial marketplace,” Aspen’s working class is largely not locals, but those attracted to the centers of global wealth in hopes of stable jobs and better opportunities, on the one hand, and the ability to work in highly specialized professional environment, on the other.402 It is illuminative to consider that Park and Pellow’s political ecological critique of Aspen focuses on immigration as the key “domination of the other” that illuminates and reinforces unhealthy human-nature relationships (whereas a political ecology of Eastern Kentucky, as I show in the next section, must grapple with the region’s deep history of coal mining amidst a more stable community of small landowners).403 Playing on the original Olmstedian ideal of using urban nature as a way to teach civility and Aspen’s long history of merging the sublime wilderness experience with philosophical and intellectual thought leadership, I propose (somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but not entirely) that we consider

403 Here I am referencing a quote by David Harvey, who, in a discussion about the Frankfurt School, wrote that there is a parallel movement in capitalist society of “the domination of nature as ‘other’ and the domination of ‘others.’” Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*, 137.
Western Colorado, in counterpart to the logic of global cities, as a “global park and playground.”

It should be less surprising in this light that Aspen’s public advocacy has long been global in scope, well before “Save Snow.” In their discussion about possibilities for greater social justice in the Roaring Fork Valley, Park and Pellow follow the anecdote of “The People’s Summit on Globalization,” a progressive conference organized in 2000 as an explicit contrast to the elite and exclusive “Globalization and the Human Condition” conference held concurrently at the Aspen Institute, a prestigious think tank modeled on the academic approach of the University of Chicago. The People’s Summit highlighted the “social and ecological devastation associated with economic globalization.”

It is kind of poetic - not justice, exactly, but a parable of a sort – that the “global playground” of Aspen has environmental problems that are explicitly global. In Raymond Williams words, the irony is that the “great interferers” who have been “proclaiming the necessity of non-interference” through their retreats to places of environmental privilege are suddenly facing the existential threats of climate change even in their mountain retreats. I say this less accusatorily than it seems; it seems rather highly logical that if one plays at a global scale, one’s environmental externalities will be global also. Thus, local environmentalism becomes by necessity a matter of thinking local and acting global, like Schendler’s quote at the beginning of this case study. As Rebecca Henderson says, companies that are place-based “care about externalities.” They have to, she explains, because “if you’re in a local community, an externality is not external.” For the snow-dependent Roaring Fork Valley, caring about externalities means that SkiCo is compelled towards climate change mitigation efforts and advocacy, taking the communities of highly specialized snow professionals with it, and consequently shaping local energy policy in HCE.

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So, ultimately, what does it mean for co-op redemocratization to be business led? The case study of HCE indicates that there is a wide range of possibilities for different kinds of co-op democracy. Specifically, the recent cultural shifts in HCE have been less of a resurgent co-op populism than a targeted agenda reform led by what Briggs calls the community grasstops. Schendler, Dwyer, Gilman, Glass, and others fit well into the definition of “a community’s influencers or leaders, not necessarily the traditional political or economic elites” that have been instrumental in figuring out mechanisms for change. While grasstops movements can be quite innovative and productive, however, they can also bring about a civic culture closer to representative than deliberative democracy. This business and local “influentials” led redemocratization of HCE demonstrates that co-ops

406 Briggs, Democracy as Problem Solving, 44.
can be a venue for policy and technology innovations without being a venue for deliberative practice and civic experimentation.

The main implications of this difference arise in the scope of the board’s mandate. A board elected on the promise of process reform – more democracy, more transparency, etc. – has a different mandate than a board elected on the promise of policy reforms such as a stronger commitment to renewable energy, energy efficiency, and environmental stewardship. Arguably, the former co-op board is empowered by its voters to act as a community service organization, that is, one which sees electricity as a “means to an end,” the end being a better quality of life for the community in general; whereas, for the latter co-op board, it is a fundamental question of how much they are empowered to stray from their mission to target community goals beyond environmental projects. Because HCE holds elections every year (for at least two board members), the board members feel that they receive pretty immediate feedback on what the members want and whether they are providing it (at least, that is, among the members who are engaged enough to vote), and they explicitly see the major issues that arise in elections as giving the board a direction. Some board members worry about whether it is an abuse of power to subsequently develop co-op programs that have broader equity aims as well, which essentially “make the utility into a social entity,” as one board member put it.

“On bill financing” is one such ideological challenge for HCE. A program for making energy efficiency affordable for everyone, on-bill financing allows co-op members to take out a low-interest loan for new appliances, insulation and weatherization construction, and other energy efficiency upgrades and pay off the loan monthly through their energy bill. While it is not clear how much the costs balance out in practice, the idea is that members should not see an increase in their average bill during the term of the loan, because of the savings they reap in energy efficiency. As either the lender or the guarantor of the loan (in the case of HCE, they partner with a local bank), however, the co-op assumes some risk for these individual energy efficiency projects – not a huge risk, but it still represents a moral judgment on the part of the board about the proper use of common funds. Renewable

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407 This is referencing a comment by Martin Lowery, NRECA Executive Vice President, External Affairs, who told me in an interview that he sees electric co-ops as having the bottom line of “service,” that they exist to do what the community needs them to do.
energy investment is another such judgment, Gardner observes; while they have a popular and successful renewable energy program, he says, it is important to ask about such decisions: “is there a huge cross-subsidization for a small group?” and “is that something you want to do as a utility board?” But other board members feel that: “In the energy world of today and the energy world of tomorrow, our role as a utility is broader than [selling kilowatt hours].”

Tracy Warren and Patrick Lavigne at the NRECA will tell you that electric co-ops are fundamentally “self-help organizations,” which are there “to do for the community that which no one else will do for them.” But the community has to be able to coalesce around common issues, to “demand” the things they want, and the board has to balance being responsive to community interest while acting responsibly with community assets. Some issues, they caution, are “volatile,” and when co-ops branch out into areas beyond electricity provision, there is always risk for the community. HCE seems to be currently in a moment of self-definition vis-à-vis local economic development that many co-ops have confronted over the years. Throughout their history, co-ops across the country have experimented with exactly what Warren and Lavigne described: serving as a platform for other community interests that remained unfilled, including mainly other utilities such as propane, telephone, satellite TV, and broadband, but also including local business ventures such as taking over a closing bakery, building an ethanol plant, and owning a fish farm.

HCE is ultimately a complicated case study that serves as an important reminder that not all private industry is antithetical to local organizing, not all environmental reform in electric co-ops is deeply tied to local emancipatory reform, and that sometimes seemingly radical social programs can come out of more conservative organizations, if there is a strong ethic of place and sufficient funding. As a local community-focused business, HCE currently provides many benefits that are explicitly social but are less contentious in terms of co-op policy. For example, HCE has a small amount of employee housing for linemen who otherwise could not afford to live in the Roaring Fork Valley. HCE also prides itself on having a reputation for being an excellent employer. It is an upstanding local business, if not quite an outstanding co-op. The ongoing challenge for HCE will be to decide how much they want to keep fostering the civic momentum the last ten years of contested elections have built, or if they see such momentum as artifacts of particular eras.
of culture change, capable of being revitalized when next the need arises. A culture of continued civic engagement and co-op transparency, after all, has its pros and cons for a professional management environment. As Mike Glass puts the dilemma, in regards to the co-ops’ elections policies: “Publishing more information, in my opinion, doesn’t seem like a bad idea. But in the world we live in, no good deed goes unpunished.”
Case III: Eastern Kentucky Power Cooperative and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth

*Coal has always cursed the land in which it lies.*
- Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, 1962

Building Momentum: A Long History of Energy Activism

In Eastern Kentucky, the fight between co-op boards and community members is still ongoing and likely to last for years to come. Though a vibrant campaign organized by the local community development organization Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) has united members of many of the sixteen distribution co-ops in the Eastern Kentucky Power Cooperative (EKPC) area, the fight for control of co-ops in Kentucky looks very different in the twenty-first century than those in Vermont and Colorado.

For one thing, in Eastern Kentucky, it is impossible to talk about energy policy without talking about coal. The car-dependent landscape is a daily textual barrage of “Friends of Coal” bumper stickers warring with “I ♥ Mountains” and “Stop Mountaintop Removal”; “Faces of Coal” passes by on the highway to be replaced on the next car with the satirical “Farces of Coal,” or the slightly more moderate but still morally laden, “Friends of Mountains and Miners.”

This daily highway battle of affiliation is a twenty-first century manifestation of a fight that has been ongoing for a century between coal companies and local communities in the greater Appalachian mountain region. Coal mining has been a part of the Eastern Kentucky economy since at least the 1820s, when the coal from the mountainous eastern part of the state found a ready market in the urbanizing areas of Lexington, Frankfort, and Louisville. Montrie connects the beginnings of coal mining in the region ironically to outside concern for the “backwardness” of Appalachia, which, he writes, became interpreted in capitalist circles as an invitation to exploit the region’s natural resources. Improved transportation networks led to logging and coal operations under the development-focused ideology of a New South Creed, which in turn led, Montrie writes sardonically, to a “one-way flow of resources out of the region,” as “resources owned by

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outside investors [were] removed to fuel industrial expansion” elsewhere. Eastern Kentucky thus became implicated in a “particular type of modernization” – a similar argument to the one James Ferguson has made about copperbelt Africa in the twenty-first century409 – that there is more than one kind of modernity, and conditions of scarcity and exclusion is not unmodern but rather marks one’s position in very modern relationships of spatially codified status and resource flows. In this sense, talking about Appalachia as “impoverished,” as Montrie does, is exactly the correct word; for centuries, its wealth has been extracted. The “enduring paradox of Appalachia,” Montrie continues, is “that the inhabitants of a land so rich in natural resources could be so poor.”410

Probably the most poignant and enduring symbol of this structural relationship of impoverishment is the “broad form deed.” With the discovery of coal in Eastern Kentucky came a cadre of prospecting agents who consolidated mineral rights across a landscape of small farms and sold these rights to large coal companies, usually located outside of the region. These broad form deeds were so called because they not only separated mineral rights from surface-use rights, but also granted the holders of the deed a broad range of allowances for extracting their sub-surface property as well as protections from liability for any “necessary” externalities of said extraction (including surface improvements, surface resource use, pollution, and waste). Historical consensus on the broad form deed phenomenon is that it was a clear case of exploitation of small landholders unprepared to enter into complex property rights negotiations with coal company lawyers. Caudill, for example, paints a picture of a stereotypical broad form deed signing, in which a dapper city slicker arrives with a proposal for a hardworking illiterate farm family in an isolated part of Eastern Kentucky; after spending the day chatting with the farmer while tromping through his well-tended fields and pastures, the agent sits down with the farming couple, liberally praising the wife’s cooking, and expounds enthusiastically on the win-win situation of transferring mineral rights. The farming couple is easily convinced by the charismatic agent and, figuring they have no need for the minerals lying unused beneath their productive farmland, they agree to the sale. The day ends with the illiterate couple signing over their

mineral rights with an “X” by their names at the bottom of a document they cannot read and which has been incompletely explained, not knowing that they granted the agent not only the rights to the minerals and oil beneath their farmland, but also the rights to any surface land, timber, or water needed for mining and transportation purposes and scanty protection for the (surface) landowners. “Written in finely printed ‘legalese,’” Montrie reflects, “the broad form deeds often signed over the rights to ‘dump, store, and leave upon said land any and all much, bone, shale, water, or other refuse,’ to use and pollute water courses in any manner, and to do anything ‘necessary and convenient’ to extract subsurface minerals.” In fact, as written, the broad form deed explicitly constrained surface rights to those activities that would not constrict the mineral right holder’s ability to access their property.

Of course such one-sided contracts were eventually contested, but the sway of the coal industry on Appalachia remained strong for many decades. In 1956, Kentucky upheld the rights of the broad form deed holders in the legal case Buchanon v. Watson, giving mining companies nearly free reign to employ mining techniques that constrained landowners’ abilities to continue to conduct surface activities such as farming and husbandry, as well as setting precedent for the legality of the deed in an increasing number of similar lawsuits over the next few decades. With the concurrent rise of strip mining – a technique that literally destroys the surface layer (often, through the use of explosives) to get at seams of coal underneath – the broad form deed became a rallying point for local

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411 Caudill, Night Comes to the Cumberlands, 73-74. The typical protection afforded the surface property owners was a statement along the lines of preventing mining operations from being “performed . . . in an arbitrary, wanton, or malicious manner.” Blakely Elizabeth Whilden, “Mineral Rights in Central Appalachia: A Brief History of the Broad Form Deed in Kentucky and Tennessee,” unpublished paper, University of North Carolina School of Law Environmental Law Project, 2012, 5, available online: http://studentorgs.law.unc.edu/documents/elp/2012/whilden_final.pdf.
412 Montrie, To Save the Land and People, 66.
413 An example of a broad form deed is preserved by the project: West Virginia: Documents in the History of a Rural-Industrial State; the sample broad form deed, for the West Virginia Coal Company, states: “there is reserved to the parties of the first part [surface rights owners] all the timber upon said land except that necessary for the purpose here inbefore mentioned; and there is also reserved the free use of said land for agricultural purposes so far as use is consistent with the rights hereby bargained, sold, granted or conveyed [for the mineral owners]” (p. 196).
landowners. Eventually, environmental activists would bring national attention to these practices through the synecdochic imagery of “mountaintop removal.”

By the end of the twentieth century, these injustices perpetrated by absentee mining corporations spurred the formation of a broad coalition of community activists across coal country that came to call themselves the Appalachian Alliance. In the early 1980s, an Appalachian Alliance-commissioned study revealed that in twelve Kentucky counties with Appalachian mineral resources, the ten largest landowners, who owned 34% of the land, paid just 11% of the total property taxes. In response, Kentuckians organized their own smaller coalition – the “The Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition,” or KFTC – whose scope broadened over the next couple of decades to contest not only practices of extractive wealth, but also environmental concerns about the coal industry, as well as broader community health and social justice issues. Many of KFTC’s early fights were classic environmental justice struggles: locally grown, heavily organized by working class community members with little previous advocacy experience, compelled to action by tangible signs of injustice in their communities, who learned strategy as they went and made creative use of the resources they had – such as KFTC’s first chairperson, Gladys Maynard, who, as a local hairdresser, used her large network of weak ties through her clients to disseminate information and encourage activism over unfair coal taxation policies.

Today, KFTC stands for “Kentuckians for the Commonwealth,” and climate change has joined the broad set of community health, economic, and local environmental ills associated with coal mining and coal-powered electricity. In particular, climate activism has given anti-coal activists a strategy, as KFTC puts it, “to move from fighting the bad to being a catalyst for positive change.” Climate change concerns lend to the ongoing struggle a global imperative for Kentuckians to replace their coal industry with less-

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415 These were still by-and-large absentee owners – see, for example, Whilden, “Mineral rights in Central Appalachia, 1: “By the mid-1980s, the Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force documented that in the eighty counties surveyed across central Appalachia, seventy-two percent (72%) of the surface was owned by an absentee owner; forty-seven percent (47%) owned by out-of-state owners and the remaining fifty-three percent (53%) owned by out-of-county owners.”
417 Ibid., 31.
polluting generation options, and the set of technologies needed for renewable energy and energy efficiency projects fit well into Eastern Kentucky's decades-long fight for non-extractive local industries, good jobs, and more equitable models of wealth generation.

Figure 4.11: Coal Keeps the Lights On in Kentucky, 2012. A pro-coal sign decorates a front lawn in Kentucky (photograph by author).

Because Eastern Kentucky is primarily powered by electric cooperatives, there is, moreover, a "democratic" venue to fight for such changes. Electric co-ops in Eastern Kentucky are formally connected as members of a generation and transmission cooperative, the Eastern Kentucky Power Cooperative (EKPC). As a G&T co-op, EKPC is a cooperative owned by cooperatives; it exists solely to provide electricity to the sixteen distribution co-ops that make up its membership. This case study therefore concerns a much larger fish than the two previous sections on distribution co-ops. EKPC is a second order of governance – the EKPC board is made up of representatives from the representative boards of the sixteen member-owned distribution co-ops. Member
engagement thus has to occur through different channels, at different levels. Rather than simply running for the board, or stirring up member concern to change the by-laws, creating change at the level of a G&T co-op requires more creativity and a campaign on a grander scale. The actors are also different: in addition to individuals and local businesses, the stakeholders in this case study include national NGOs, such as the Sierra Club, coordinating with regional NGOs, such as KFTC and MACED, as well as government involvement through the Kentucky Public Service Commission (PSC) and other ad hoc advisory committees. Action in such coalitions occurs simultaneously through regulatory agencies, the media, the aforementioned NGOs, and in a large network of distribution co-ops. Moreover, the changing politics of any individual distribution co-op does not necessarily have a measurable environmental impact, as it does in co-ops with more autonomy, such as Washington Electric and Holy Cross Energy, because its power supply is ultimately managed by EKPC.

**Electric Distribution Service Areas**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSC Regulated Rural Electric Utilities</th>
<th>PSC Regulated Investor Owned Utilities</th>
<th>Multi-Service Areas</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Big Sandy REC</td>
<td>American Electric Power (ACP)</td>
<td>Jackson Energy Cooperative &amp; KU</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blue Grass Energy Cooperative</td>
<td>Duke Energy-Kentucky (K)</td>
<td>Meade County REC &amp; LG&amp;E</td>
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<td>Louisville Gas and Electric Company (LG&amp;E)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Warren REC</td>
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<td>TVA West Kentucky REC</td>
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**Figure 4.12:** EKPC Service Area, 2008, Kentucky Public Service Commission.
Recently, the EKPC co-ops appeared on KFTC’s radar because of a proposed new coal generation facility at its J. K. Smith Station on the Kentucky River in Trapp, KY. The new plant would have been a 278-megawatt, coal-fired plant costing an estimated $819 million. Concerned about increased air and water pollution, as well as the necessity of more coal-based energy production, several environmental organizations contested the plans for the new plant. A coalition began to form out of protests at public hearings and environmental assessments.

2006 was not a good year in general for EKPC, giving their opponents over the Smith project a great deal of fodder for contesting the necessity of another coal plant and whether EKPC was up to the task of managing another large generating facility in general. The year started with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency filing a lawsuit against the G&T co-op for an acid rain violation in its operation of the William C. Dale coal-fired generation facility near Winchester. While the Kentucky Public Service Commission approved the proposed Smith plant in August, by October, the PSC expressed formal concern over EKPC’s financial health, requiring that the co-op begin to file monthly and annual financial reports. In November, EKPC’s longtime CEO retired. After an EKPC-commissioned audit recommended EKPC “develop alternative strategies for meeting its future electric power needs,” the PSC expanded its investigation in December to also investigate the co-op’s “need for new electric generating capacity.” By the end of the year, Warren Electric, a distribution co-op in south central Kentucky that had been planning to join EKPC, canceled its proposed membership in favor of remaining in the Tennessee Valley Authority service area.

Shortly thereafter, a drop in electricity demand precipitated by the financial crisis called into question EKPC’s need for increased capacity in the first place. A number of studies commissioned by EKPC, PSC, and critics of the proposed plant showed that

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investments in energy efficiency would be less expensive as a way of regulating energy supply than building a new plant. In 2009, the Kentucky Environmental Foundation, the Cumberland Chapter of the Sierra Club, and KFTC commissioned an independent report on the Smith plant, "The Right Decision for Changing Times: How East Kentucky Power Cooperative Ratepayers Benefit from Canceling Plans for a New Coal Burning Power Plant In Clark County." The report found: "The cooperative’s priority to build new coal-fired power plants is misaligned with the direction of capital markets and energy policy. Coal is no longer a low-risk or least-cost fuel source for utilities or their ratepayers." The same year, the three organizations, together with three individual co-op members – Father John Rausch, Dr. John Patterson, and environmental author Wendell Berry, filed a petition with the Kentucky Public Service Commission (PSC) contesting the approval of the plant. Berry argued that PSC approval had "become too much a matter of routine" and that "Inertia at this time is indefensible." Calling on Catholic values, Rausch wrote in an op-ed to the Lexington Herald-Leader:

...a renewed economy depends on high moral and ethical standards. Our current economic crisis came from quick profits without regard to community. The cardinal virtue of prudence dictates that when we can meet our electric needs through greater efficiency or renewable and sustainable methods, we choose them.

Generating electricity while endangering the health of others is a violation of the common good of the present generation, but destroying the environment violates the common good of future generations.

Also, the poor, the low income and those without health insurance will remain the most vulnerable to the sicknesses and diseases from the coal-fired plant’s emissions, thus causing the greatest harm to the least among us.

In Catholic theology, violations of social justice like this fall under the Commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," because a violation of the common good is theft from all.

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East Kentucky Power Cooperative has an opportunity to lead into a new era. We don’t need to walk in the dark, though we can turn off unnecessary lights.\textsuperscript{422}

In February 2010, a coalition of EKPC distribution co-op members organized under KFTC sent a letter to the U.S. Rural Utilities Service voicing concerns about its approach to EKPC debt. Among other things, this letter implied that the RUS’s focus on industrial development remained since the days of the REA and was potentially on a similar self-defeating course. “In facilitating loans for EKPC, RUS is not providing a safety net,” the letter cautioned, “but rather cutting new holes in an already thin net through which co-op members will fall.”\textsuperscript{423}

In the first few years, the anti-Smith campaign was a traditional activist and legislative fight, fought in the streets and courtrooms. As the anti-Smith campaign drew on, however, two things became clear: first, KFTC realized that it was in fact fighting many of its own members, in their capacity as member-owners of their electric cooperatives; second, the agitation and publicity around the Smith plant alerted electric co-op members with an independent interest in energy policy to the existence of KFTC as an institutional structure that could help them work for change in a more systemic way.

As anti-Smith activism drew dissident co-op members from around Kentucky into the KFTC community, and, especially after KFTC hired Sara Pennington to run their New Power Campaign in 2009, the new coalition began trying to change distribution co-ops from the inside. Well-versed in the connection between local democracy and sustainable energy policy since the broad form deed initiative in the early 1980s, KFTC started encouraging its members to run for their co-ops’ boards of directors. They threw their full weight behind candidates running with agendas of change, helping them produce campaign material, raise community awareness, work with the media, and navigate co-op bureaucracy.

With all of KFTC’s organizing experience, however, Pennington’s New Power Campaign still involved a steep learning curve. Between 2010 and 2013, KFTC was involved in a handful of campaigns for co-op boards, some of which they lost before they


\textsuperscript{423} Letter to Phyllis K. Fong, 23 February 2010. Courtesy of Sara Pennington.
could even run. In several EKPC co-ops, the rules for running for the board were hard to
find and harder to interpret. Not all lack of transparency in these co-ops was malicious. In
some cases, the co-ops had never before had a contested election, and the sudden member
interest required the co-ops themselves to scramble to figure out their own policies. In
others, however, the board of directors enforced (and, in at least one case, enacted)
draconian rules that allowed them to stifle member interest on technicalities such as filing
dates or member information on petitions not precisely matching co-op records.

To date, no election has put a KFTC member on an electric co-op board, but the
group of energy activists has won a place at the table in other ways. They have figured out
how to work with their boards of directors on transparency and process reform; they have
formed coalitions with other local development organizations, national NGOs, and state
government agencies; and they have raised support for renewable energy and energy
efficiency projects across the state.

Interpreting KFTC’s redemocratization of electric co-ops is thus less straightforward
than in WEC and HCE, where members agitating for change started taking over their
boards within a few years. Because it involves a much larger area and a more complex
governance structure, one has to approach the electric co-op community in Kentucky at
multiple levels. The following discussion examines several of KFTC’s interventions into
EKPC governance, moving from activity at the level of the distribution co-op to broader
coalitions, as well as tracing the institutional learning of both the co-ops and KFTC
throughout this process.
Getting Involved, Coming Together

Part of the ongoing work of an organization like KFTC is to draw in like-minded activists and provide a more professional structure for community interests. Such coalition building connects to different segments of the population for each new campaign, often bringing together people with diverse reasons for engagement. It is therefore both a repository for experience gained through individual initiatives as well as a support structure to encourage continued effort where individuals may not be as willing to continue to push forward.

In 2009 and 2010, KFTC supported four candidates for co-op board elections. Most of these campaigns were completely new territory for the co-ops. Used to apathetic memberships, many co-ops had never had a contested election.

In 2009, co-op member Randy Wilson ran for the Jackson Energy Cooperative board of directors on a platform of energy policy reform and local development through clean energy investment. The first candidate to oppose an incumbent board member in the co-op’s history (since Jackson Energy was founded in 1938), Wilson ran a vibrant grassroots campaign that brought together hundreds of Jackson Energy members. KFTC members reflect that, while they mounted an impressive campaign, however, they were ultimately

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outgunned by the co-op, who was able to use its proxy vote policy to bring in a large number of empty ballots left to the assignment of the board. While Wilson ultimately did not unseat the incumbent board member, Wilson’s campaign was both a learning experience for KFTC and a stimulus of energy discourse in the region. “The response Randy got to his nomination, captured through hundreds of conversations about energy efficiency, renewable energy, and electric cooperative reform,” the Appalachian Transition Initiative would later summarize the campaign, “is an indication of a growing hunger for change in the region and an affirmation of the power of grassroots organizing.”

Around this time, Owen Electric Cooperative member Tona Barkley was also becoming an avid energy reform activist with KFTC’s New Power campaign. Barkley had joined KFTC somewhat serendipitously: When Barkley retired from Kentucky Educational Television in Frankfort, she decided to use her free time to learn more about climate change. She initially joined the Frankfort Climate Action Network, helping with campaigns such as “Lighten Up Frankfort,” which aimed to encourage individual action based on the “low carbon diet” model. Growing frustrated with the difficulties of getting people to participate, however, Barkley started looking for ways to make more systemic change.

As a member of an EKPC distribution co-op, Owen Electric, Barkley decided to try to get more involved in her co-op. She emailed the board asking if she could attend their board meetings, but received a response that the board meetings were not open. Shortly after being rebuffed by the board, Barkley learned that Owen was in between CEOs; she decided to wait for the next CEO to be appointed, hypothesizing that a new CEO would bring culture changes within the co-op. Barkley’s gamble paid off when the newly appointed CEO, Mark Stallons, called her and invited her to visit the co-op. This first visit was a private meeting with Stallons and the Vice President for Member Services, in which the two men told her about all of the co-op’s “green” initiatives, including landfill gas recovery, demand side management programs, and Envirowatts – an option provided to members to pay a premium for renewable power (in the case of Owen, from their landfill project) instead of the standard EKPC mix.

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Barkley signed up for enough Envirowatts to cover her household’s electricity usage, but, reminding the two men that her concerns were broader than individual environmentalism, continued to push them on the co-op’s policies towards member involvement. Stallons ultimately invited her to come to the next meeting and propose by-law changes. Barkley recalls that, even with the CEO’s invitation, she was not allowed to attend the whole meeting; rather, she was “ushered in” at a specific time to make her request. Drawing on her experience as a communications professional, Barkley explained to the board why their lack of transparency and their approach to member relations was bad business practice. The board was nice, she recalls, and they smiled and listened to her, but then they voted not to make meetings open to members.

After this, she started looking more seriously into the by-laws and discovered that she could run for the board herself within the next couple of years. It was around the same time that Barkley first connected with KFTC. Technically a member because she had once played music at a KFTC fundraiser, Barkley had little connection with the organization. She ultimately became involved when her stepdaughter — knowing of her interest in local energy policy — suggested that she host a house party for the Stop Smith campaign. This was Barkley’s first introduction to Pennington and the New Power movement. She started attending hearings for public comment on the Smith plant and became active in the Stop Smith campaign. After working on this for a couple of years, she was wavering about her plans to run for the Owen board — based on her experience with previous energy activism, she worried that it would “eat [her] alive.” This was when Pennington called to tell her that another KFTC member, Dallas Ratliff, was planning to run for another open seat on the Owen Board, for a different district. Pennington suggested that they run together.

Barkley couldn’t know this at the time, but her experience with Owen would be one of the least antagonistic examples of member engagement in the EKPC area. She only needed forty signatures to petition to be on the ballot (as opposed to the 500 signatures Randy Wilson had to collect to be included on the Jackson Energy ballot426), and the Owen Electric nominating committee was lenient about the petition including exact full names and member numbers. Both she and Ratliff managed to file successful petitions with the

426 Appalachian Transition Initiative, “Randy Wilson’s Story.”
nominating board and were added to the Owen Electric ballot for the 2010 annual meeting. The co-op staff honored their request for a member list so that they could send out campaign postcards, providing the information to them in a digital format and requiring only that they sign an affidavit assuring that they would not use the list for any other purpose and would destroy it afterwards. Proxy voting is forbidden under the terms of Owen’s by laws, so the campaign strategy only required convincing members to vote.

The most trouble the two KFTC candidates received from the co-op came at the annual meeting itself. They set up a table outside of the meeting, before registration, as did their opponents; “it was like running the gauntlet,” Barkley jokes. While they were staffing the table and talking to members, a man came up to her to let her know he had been on the board for 16 years and they had never had community members contest the board this way.

“I don’t appreciate you stirring up trouble,” the ex-board member accused her.
“We’ll have to agree to disagree,” Barkley responded lightly.
“Well,” he said, and Barkley recalls his voice dripping with disdain, “I know who you are. You’re green.”

Neither Barkley nor Ratliff won their districts in 2010. Barkley lost to a woman whose husband had previously been a board member and who had been nominated by the committee. Barkley took the defeat philosophically. “People are just not interested in this,” Barkley muses, adding that only members actively concerned about climate change were motivated to actually listen to them talk about redemocratizing the co-op, and, she adds, there are “precious few of those [climate change advocates] around here.” Plus, she adds, in Owen County, “if you haven’t lived here your whole life, you’re an outsider.”
The same year, Steve Wilkins tried to run for Blue Grass Energy Cooperative, a co-op just south of Owen, which encompasses the area around the KFTC field office in Berea, out of which the New Power campaign is run (see Figure 4.12). Similar to Barkley, Wilkins had been a member of KFTC for years, but before retirement, his participation had also been limited to donations – the kind of activism that involves, in Robert Putnam’s words, “moving a pen, not making a meeting.” He had been happy to donate to KFTC, because he liked thinking locally and was “in favor of anybody who is going to fight for people’s rights.” When he retired, though, he decided he wanted to give back in a more engaged way than occasionally writing a check.

As a Blue Grass co-op member, Wilkins initially met with the board member for his district to discuss the economic analysis for the Smith plant and diversifying their power supply. The Vice President of Market Relations was also at the meeting, Wilkins recalls, and the board member let him do most of the talking. Wilkins’s description of the board

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member could be a metaphor for the co-op as a whole: the son of one the founding members of the co-op back in the 1930s, the board member was “stodgy” and uninterested in change. Unimpressed with the leadership at Blue Grass, Wilkins decided to run for the board himself, with the support of KFTC.

Wilkins calls himself naïve in retrospect about his approach to the co-op. The first place he went for information was the co-op website. While he was able to find a list of board members and their hometowns, however, the website had no information about what district each board member represented, nor was there a map or any way to identify the boundaries of the districts. Since board member Ned Gilbert also lived in Berea, Wilkins assumed that Gilbert was the representative board member for his district, and started making plans to run for his seat when his term expired in 2010.

To run for the Blue Grass board by petition in 2010, a member needed to collect 285 signatures from other co-op members. About a month into Wilkins’s campaign, after he and a half-dozen other KFTC members had collected hundreds of signatures, another member told him that Blue Grass had just posted on their website a district map, which indicated that Wilkins’s representative was not Ned Gilbert, but Danny Britt. Moreover, Britt was in the middle of his term and would therefore not be running for reelection in 2010. Wilkins immediately called the co-op office to check his district, but the office staff was unable to give him an answer. Finally, the co-op called him back to let him know that they had looked into it for him, that the districts had been revised a couple of years earlier, and that he was in fact in Danny Britt’s district. They apologized for the confusion, explaining that he was the first member to ever ask about his district.

Unable to run for election, Wilkins and other concerned Blue Grass members tried to petition to put two proposals on the agenda for the upcoming annual meeting. Wilkins’s description of this attempt is a textbook example of the myriad ways in which bureaucracy serves to protect existing power structures, and is worth quoting at length:

We attempted to get two proposals before the members at the upcoming annual meeting scheduled for June 3. The first proposal sought open board meetings, ready access to the minutes of board meetings and other relevant documents, and open and fair elections. The second proposal was for BG Energy to aggressively pursue “on-bill financing” strategies.

...We met the requirements cited in the BG Energy by-laws, which speak to submission deadlines and that proposals be “legitimate.” However, BG Energy’s
lawyer notified us that the proposals were not appropriate to be brought before the membership and would, instead be presented to the Board for their consideration.

Here is the quote from the by-laws: *No proposal shall be voted upon at the annual meeting unless it has been placed on the agenda at least 40 days prior to such meeting. Any legitimate proposal may be placed on the agenda by any member by filing a copy of the proposal with the Secretary within the time allowed with a request it be submitted to the Annual Meeting for consideration.*

Working with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), a lawyer they have on retainer was of the opinion that our proposals did qualify to go before the membership. However, deadlines had passed by that time.

We requested to be present at the directors’ meeting during which the proposals would be discussed. We were first told that the CEO and counsel would have to determine if the proposals should be brought to the Board. We were also told there was a form to complete. This form would be evaluated and a decision would be made whether we might be allowed to attend the portion of that meeting related to our proposals. We submitted the form only to be told that the Board had considered our proposals at their April 22 meeting...

We requested a copy of the minutes of that meeting, or at least the portions of the meeting related to our proposals. We were provided with another form to request the minutes, once again to be evaluated and a decision made whether to grant our request. That’s where we stand as of this writing...

Even in publicly traded corporations stockholders can put proposals before other stockholders for a vote without being blocked by the corporation. The corporation may state their opposition to a proposal, but still put it to a vote of stockholders. So, it appears that BG Energy may be even more closed than a public company.428

If You Can’t Join ‘em: New Strategies and New Organizations

After the Wilson and Barkley/Ratcliff campaigns and Wilkins’s struggles to even get on the ballot, Pennington and the group of co-op activists in the KFTC community went back to the drawing board and reconsidered their strategy. Largely, they realized that winning a board seat was not the only way to effect change in co-ops and that there were smaller acts they could take to work collaboratively with their co-ops and have their voices heard at different governance levels. Wilkins recalls that KFTC involvement with co-ops has been iterative: at the beginning, he reflects, they lacked a long term plan for comprehensive change, and it was only after they lost several elections that they started to be more strategic. More recent efforts, he assesses, have focused more on identifying individuals and organizations that would be supportive (as well as who would be barriers). He specifically credits Pennington’s leadership for this transition.

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428 Courtesy of Steve Wilkins, New Power leadership workshop, April 2012.
One major victory resulting from this reorientation of the KFTC New Power community has been their increasing participation on a number of regional and state-level policy initiatives investigating renewable energy and energy efficiency possibilities in Kentucky. 2010 was a tumultuous year for the New Power Initiative: after the unsuccessful co-op board campaigns in the spring, the Stop Smith campaign won a major victory in November – the plant was canceled, and, as part of the settlement, a new energy policy entity, the Demand Side Management and Renewable Energy Collaborative (DSM&RE Collaborative) – or, as it came to be known colloquially, the Clean Energy Collaborative – was signed into law. Under the terms of the settlement agreement, EKPC committed $125,000 for the development of this collaborative body intended to bring together EKPC and its distribution co-ops with community development and environmental organizations, government representatives, and local industrial interests to find creative policy and technology solutions for Eastern Kentucky's energy economy over two years. Recognizing the major victory of a formal body for collaboration on energy policy in Eastern Kentucky marked for the New Power Campaign, Wilkins exclaimed: "When I heard the news... I was ecstatic. I said, 'Woohoo!' The news of not only the plant being canceled but also opportunities for collaboration with the co-ops is a breath of fresh air!"429

Designed on the model of consensus decision making, the mission of the Clean Energy Collaborative was formally stated as follows: "to evaluate and recommend actions to expand deployment of renewable energy and demand-side management, and to promote collaboration among the Parties in the implementation of those ideas" and to "provide counsel to EKPC in the area of providing safe, reliable electric service at fair, just and reasonable rates through the adoption and implementation of appropriate demand side management ("DSM") strategies and renewable energy ("RE") development opportunities."430 The Collaborative's charter gave EKPC the right to appoint the chair, with the community coalition including KFTC, KEF, and the Cumberland Chapter of the Sierra Club tasked with appointing a vice-chair. The working membership of the Collaborative

included representatives from all EKPC cooperatives, the environmental NGOs involved in the Smith Plant lawsuit, and related local community development organizations, as well as representatives of the Kentucky PSC, the Attorney General of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, and Gallatin Steel Corporation, a major industrial customer of EKPC. Additionally, the charter included provisions for the chair and vice-chair to “jointly invite other members who have relevant and appropriate perspectives on DSM and RE, and are encouraged to involve as one such member an individual experienced in delivering DSM or related services to low income residential electric customers.” The vice-chair appointment went to Tona Barkley, with Steve Wilkins serving as a committee member.

Figure 4.15: A Place at a Co-constructed Table, 2011, KFTC. KFTC’s Steve Wilkins participates on the DSM&RE Collaborative next to a representative from one of EKPC’s distribution co-ops.

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432 The first chair appointment went to David Mitchell of EKPC (KFTC Newsletter, 11 May 2011), who was replaced by David Crews, EKPC’s senior vice president of power supply (EKPC Press Release, 23 October 2013).

The Collaborative ran for two years, with regular meetings and public forums, ultimately producing a series of twelve recommendations for EKPC. These included expanding the co-op's Envirowatts program; investing in more solar generation infrastructure as well as providing the option for co-op members to lease their own solar panels; continuing to allocate resources for research and experimentation with DSM technologies and programs; increasing their support of on-bill financing programs in Kentucky; and creating an "energy ambassador" program for volunteer co-op members interested in learning more about DSM. While thus far the Collaborative has only issued recommendations, the members are optimistic about their work and future possibilities for ongoing partnership. “All of us have benefitted from this process,” Chairman David Crews, EKPC’s senior vice president of power supply, praised the Collaborative after its final meeting in October 2013. “Everyone involved has gained a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the viewpoints of the other stakeholders at the table.” Pennington summarized the process as “a very enriching, often challenging, but ultimately very productive and truly collaborative effort,” calling on EKPC to continue to research best practices in energy efficiency and offering KFTC’s continued support. “We stand ready to work with you,” Pennington promised, in her

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closing statement to the Collaborative: “from assisting with and augmenting co-op public relations efforts among members, community leaders and institutions; to helping find solutions for distribution co-ops to accrue revenues adequate to maintain reliable infrastructure and personnel; to assessing and defining cost-benefits in ways that express co-op values; and to displaying our support to the PSC for the co-ops’ EE and RE efforts.”436

Beyond the Clean Energy Collaborative, KFTC members have been expanding their role as community energy development experts within an increasingly active policy network around the new energy economy. For example, early on in his work with the EKPC Collaborative, Wilkins was also invited to participate in a Collaborative on Stimulating Energy Efficiency in Kentucky launched by the Department for Energy Development and Independence. From a casual interest in getting more involved in energy activism with KFTC, Wilkins reflects that he is now learning about industrialization issues and thinking statewide. He has also been working with Berea’s municipal Environmental Sustainability subgroup on the potential for on-bill financing to promote economic development.

After the resolution of the Smith Plant controversy, KFTC ran an article in their spring newsletter called: “Members are encouraged to attend electric co-ops’ annual meetings,” in which they advocated: “In years past, KFTC has encouraged members to talk with their board members about the proposed coal-burning Smith plant. But now that project has been cancelled, it’s time to start having good conversations about increased investment in energy efficiency and renewable energy.” They include a list of topics members could bring up at their annual meetings, impressing on them the importance of a positive spin – for example, “Let them know you are excited or encouraged by the Clean Energy Collaborative with EKPC...” and “thank [your] co-op representatives for participating...” – and listed the dates of all of the EKPC distribution co-ops’ annual meetings.437

Wilkins, for one, understands that change happens slowly and through these kinds of widespread concerted efforts; he hopes that KFTC and the broader community of co-op

436 Sara Pennington, “Closing Statement to the DSM/RE Collaborative,” on behalf of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, Kentucky ENvrirnomental Foundation, Mountain Association for Community Economic Development, and Sierra Club – Cumberland Chapter, October 2013.
advocates in Eastern Kentucky can continue to be the "gnat" or the "little haunting voice" that eventually encourages a bigger movement. He muses: "If enough mosquitoes start biting you all at once...."

Ongoing Efforts: Shelby Energy's First Contested Election

Among the allies that the KFTC New Power Campaign amassed were a group of committed members of another EKPC co-op, Shelby Energy. According to member Carlen Pippin, Shelby Energy used to be a premier place to work in the area, but recently the co-op has been struggling with pervasive problems. In 2006, Shelby Energy was in serious trouble: after three on-the-job deaths in ten years, the Kentucky PSC had ordered a management and safety audit of Shelby Energy, citing the co-op for eight violations pertaining to the safety of linemen and others during work on high voltage lines; intra-co-op strife had led to the Shelby linemen forming an union; and the Vice President of Operations was being investigated for using co-op resources for personal ends. By the end of the year, the CEO of Shelby would retire, leaving behind, in Pippin’s words, “a bitter, split organization.” As of 2012, the co-op was still on probation as a result of the PSC audit.438

After a rate hike in 2009, Pippin decided it was time to get more involved. As a long time resident and business owner in Shelbyville, Pippin knew many of the Shelby board members and linemen, and he was concerned about the troubles in the co-op having a negative impact on the community. After having a request for board meeting minutes denied, Pippin started asking to attend the meetings in person. Even though he knew the chairman of the board personally, the co-op required him to fill out a request form a month in advance. The chairman did, however, invite him to address the board with his concerns at the meeting. Pippin recalls that he must have asked the board about thirty questions, starting with how co-op relations could have deteriorated to the point that the eleven linemen in a forty person company found it necessary to unionize?

Unsurprisingly, Pippin encountered a set of bureaucratic barriers to tangible involvement with co-op policy. He soon discovered that the board wanted everything to go through their attorney and that they were loathe to respond to his questions in writing.

Troubled by visible problems of the co-op and by his own experience being managed by the board, Pippin started requesting to go to meetings every month, dropping off his requests regularly at the co-op’s drive-through window where members can pay their bills. Between 2009 and 2012, Pippin went to a co-op board meeting at least once every quarter, at one point bringing ten other members with him, and he sent a steady stream of emails to the board with questions about co-op management. When the co-op board continued to refuse to respond to his questions in writing, Pippin took his concerns to a local newspaper and convinced a reporter to come to a board meeting. “Most people go to one co-op meeting and then go away,” Pippin muses, “but not me.”

Nonetheless, being the lone voice of the membership calling for accountability from the board started to wear on Pippin. 2010 was a “pretty lonesome year,” he recalls. Around that time, he started wondering if there was anyone else in the area working on the same concerns he had about co-op democracy, transparency, and quality. Eventually, late in 2010, someone mentioned KFTC to him. He looked up the organization online and got in touch with Pennington. “From that day on, I had an ally,” he says. In January 2011, he and his-daughter-in-law drove to a KFTC meeting for the first time, and he found himself impressed, both with the participants and the issues. “They believe in being stewards of this earth,” Pippin praises the group.

Not only did KFTC connect him to a broader community of concerned co-op members in Kentucky, it gave him the opportunity to learn about co-ops around the country. Later that year, he traveled with a small group of Kentucky co-op members to a national conference in Atlanta of progressive co-op activists and thought leaders. The conference, “Achieving the Potential of Public Power: An Electric Cooperative Member Conference,” was a two day event with speakers from other co-ops, renewable energy professionals, and public servants around the country, including Randy Udall from Western Colorado, an influential sustainable energy advocate in HCE circles.439 Affirming the importance of networks and knowledge sharing in advocacy efforts, Pippin reflects that he was “refueled” by the conference.

Although Pippin cares deeply about energy policy, especially for energy security and strategic planning purposes, his primary interest in reforming Shelby Energy continues to be organizational. As a member with a long-time local’s interest in community development, he has been pushing the co-op to have open meetings, more transparency and easier records access, democratic elections, and better job quality for their employees. In response to his advocacy and movement building efforts, the co-op has started to change slightly. The board could still be heavily critiqued for its undemocratic approach to board turnover; since 2010, two board members retired intentionally off-cycle from the annual meeting elections, allowing the board to appoint interim directors without broader member input, and the rare contested election has been heavily swayed by proxy votes, where the member has been able to navigate the co-op’s procedures for petitioning to be on the ballot at all. However, Pippin’s presence at board meetings prevented the board from simply appointing new directors with no public process. For the two retiring directors, Pippin encouraged the co-op to advertise the vacancy and take applications. After posting the positions online and in the newspaper, they for the first time appointed two new members without explicit connections to the current board: Diana Arnold, a retired school teacher, and Pat Hargadon, a Kentucky Farm Bureau employee, both were well-known members with deep ties to the community, but, Pippin notes enthusiastically, they are also both interested in change. Hargadon even started meeting regularly with Pippin and another KFTC member, Patrick King; after their third meeting, the group of three named themselves an official Member Advisory Committee, and were occasionally joined by Diana Arnold. While a year into his term, Hargadon told Pippin that he still felt as if the other board members saw him as the new kid on the block (half of the board members have served for over twenty years, the Chairman having been on the board since 1976), the group has continued to press the board on a range of issues. Pippin has also been building a separate monthly community meeting for people concerned about Shelby

440 Meeting Minutes of the Shelby Energy Member Advisory Committee, 24 April 2012, courtesy of Patrick King and Carlen Pippin.
441 The Advisory Committee’s requests uncannily parallel COFEC concerns in the 1970s: they ask, for example, for member inclusion in the co-op newsletter, access to meeting minutes and financial records, and more accountable voting procedures; they also accuse the board of protecting their mistakes through obscuring information and for changing the by-laws as a protectionist measure for board incumbents (meeting minutes, April 24).
Energy, which has grown into a combination of co-op and KFTC members. He hopes that if they can change Shelby, it will be a pilot for other co-ops to also reform.

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Are you a customer of Shelby Energy?

Then you are a member-owner of it because Shelby Energy is an electric cooperative.

Member-owned electric cooperatives were intended from the beginning to be run by and for their members.

There is now a movement in Shelby County to reform Shelby Energy back to its intended foundations.

"In 2010, Eastern Kentucky Power Cooperative, the rural energy company Shelby Energy purchases its power from, was the subject of a scathing audit due to financial mismanagement in the face of multiple rate increases. One of the audit's recommendations was not to the board, but to rural cooperative members, saying that in order to bring about real reform, they must band together and change their company from the inside."

We're working to do just that. Join us!

Attend our monthly meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of every month. Contact 82abn1966@gmail.com to learn more or get involved.

Next meeting: May 8th, 2012 at 5:30pm - 6:50pm.

Hudson Room of the Shelby County Library

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Figure 4.17: Community Outreach, Shelby Energy Member Advisory Committee, 2012.442

One recent sign of change in Shelby territory is that the co-op held a contested election in June 2012. Literally the first candidate-by-petition to run for election in the

442 Courtesy of Carlen Pippin and Patrick King.
history of Shelby Energy, co-op member Sonia McElroy fought a tough battle simply to be included on the ballot and lost by a large margin at the annual meeting. Nonetheless, McElroy’s campaign demanded awareness both internally within the co-op as well as in the larger community.

McElroy first became interested in her co-op because of a proposed 217-acre coal fly ash landfill project she heard about at an Extension Council meeting. Concerned that a coal ash landfill would be an environmental burden on the county, which already had a large landfill that imported trash from Louisville, McElroy decided to get more involved in anti-coal ash activism. Through this, she met Lauren McGrath of the Sierra Club, who had been involved with the anti-Smith fight, along with Pennington and others from KFTC. McGrath subsequently introduced McElroy to the KFTC group in Shelbyville; in December, 2011, McElroy attended her first KFTC meeting, and by the spring, she was running for the Shelby Energy board of directors.

In explaining the string of events that led to her campaign, McElroy recalls that she “just happened to be at the right place at the right time.” Like most of the co-op advocates in this study, however, McElroy’s serendipity seemingly has less to do with random chance than with the fact that she has been heavily involved in her community for a long time: in addition to being active with the Extension Council, McElroy was a Trimble County Library board member, former president of the North Central Goat Producers Association, and a member of other local professional associations of livestock farmers. As an active participant in a wide array of organizations focused on community education and modern husbandry, it is of little surprise that McElroy would eventually come into contact with the community development and environmental sustainability network that had been coalescing around Eastern Kentucky.

Once she decided to run for the Shelby board, McElroy’s biggest battle was simply to make it onto the ballot. Shelby’s strict process for candidacy-by-petition had disqualified a potential candidate the year before, and McElroy took his experience as a lesson and an expectation. As her account was officially in her husband’s name, her first hurdle was for the co-op to recognize her as a member. Obtaining recognition from the co-op of her eligibility involved several weeks of phone calls and emails between McElroy, McGrath, Pennington, Shelby CEO Debbie Martin, Shelby attorney Donald Prather, and various co-op
staff, concerning McElroy’s membership and establishing the boundaries of McElroy’s
district. At one point, Martin called McElroy to disqualify her from the race, necessitating
that she formally reestablish her legal eligibility through Prather.443 In a follow-up email
exchange with McGrath, Prather excused the co-op as being inexperienced: “The
Cooperative is not trying in any way to inhibit anyone from running for a director seat. Any
actions or inactions which might appear to be such an effort are in fact rooted in the fact
that the Cooperative, at least not since the 1980s and I believe ever, has had anyone even
attempt to run on a petition until last year.” Prather added, in a follow-up conversation
with reporter Joe Sonka of the Louisville-based magazine Leo Weekly, that appointment to
the board by a nominating committee is “how it always worked, and quite frankly, it
worked very, very, very well. Overall, it’s been the finest group of people I’ve served with
on a board. They’ve just been very honest, high integrity, dedicated, etc. And I’m not just
giving you a spiel on that.”444

Once McElroy had attained formal administrative membership, the next step was to
submit a petition for candidacy with 100 members’ signatures. This was a matter of good
old-fashioned networking and legwork. She started with the people she knew; then, she
drove around and knocked on doors, with McGrath and KFTC members volunteering to
help go door-to-door for her; and, a barbershop downtown put up a poster and a petition
for her. But again, McElroy had to be careful that the people who signed were recognized
by the co-op as official members and that the members’ information was in the correct
format for co-op accounting (a matter which also necessitated much discussion and wading
through contradictory information445). Once during her campaigning, for example, she
found herself at the door of a member of the Shelby board nominating committee and his
wife. He didn’t listen, she recalls, but his wife did; she told Sonia that she agrees that there
should be change in the co-op, and she wanted to sign the petition, but her signature would
not count because their account was in her husband’s name. Joe Sonka followed McElroy on
one of her door-to-door campaigns to raise advocacy about the co-op election and get

443 Email correspondence between Lauren McGrath, Debbie Martin, and Don Frasier, 23 March 2012, courtesy
of Sonia McElroy; Joe Sonka, “Grassroots energy: Trimble County woman campaigns to shed light on rural
444 Sonka, “Grassroots energy.”
445 Including: the subject of petition format, the requirement of member numbers, and whether members had
to be in McElroy’s specific district or not. Email correspondence between McGrath, Martin, and Frasier.
members to sign her petition to be on the ballot. He recounts that conversations were supportive of McElroy but skeptical that change was possible:

“Yeah, I'll sign it,” says Donald Clifton, a retired utility worker and local blue ribbon honey maker. “I doubt it will do any good, though. They're kind of hard-headed over there.”

...“I'll appreciate your vote in June, because I will get on that ballot,” McElroy tells Clifton. “Because Donald, things do change. I know I have an uphill battle, but I'm going to do it.”

The petition McElroy submitted to the Shelby board for inclusion on the ballot ultimately had 169 member signatures supporting her candidacy, including six Shelby Energy members who decided to join KFTC after talking to McElroy about her campaign.

McElroy first heard through Pippin that her petition had been approved as valid. Shortly after that, the Shelby Credentials and Election Committee requested that she attend a meeting at 6:00 PM on a Friday night to determine whether she was eligible to serve as a board member and to discuss registration and voting procedures for the upcoming election. Finally, at this meeting, McElroy was certified to run for the Shelby Energy Cooperative Board of Directors. In the lead up to the election, however, the Shelby board expressed some discomfort with holding a contested election. An excerpt from the May 2012 board meeting minutes shows their interest in limiting discussion and debate around the elections:

The Committee discussed and made decisions regarding various aspects of member voting for the election. They want to keep the focus of the upcoming annual meeting on celebrating Shelby Energy’s 75th anniversary, keeping everything on a positive note in order to avoid discouraging members from attending future meetings. Each candidate will be provided a space just inside the entrance door at which that candidate may display one poster and introduce themselves to members as they first enter the building. No handouts will be allowed by any members or guests, whether in the parking lot or inside the building.

In addition to campaigning on a platform of co-op reform and energy policy, McElroy tried hard to illuminate some of the built-in inequities in the election process, particularly regarding proxy votes. EKPC distribution co-ops’ proxy vote policies have been a big challenge for KFTC, in general. KFTC members recall board members going around

446 Sonka, “Grassroots Energy.”
447 Sonia McElroy, personal correspondence with author, 6 May 2012.
448 Shelby Energy Cooperative, Meeting Minutes of the Board of Directors, 24 May 2012.
collecting members' proxy forms at annual meetings, such as during Wilson’s campaign for the Jackson Energy Board. In Shelby, the board changed its policies on proxy votes during (and, some of the New Power activists hypothesize, in response to) McElroy’s campaign, limiting members to three proxy votes each, though board members have unlimited proxy votes. This new policy meant that any ballot turned in blank to the co-op office would count as a proxy for the board to allocate as they see fit. Because of this policy change, “Don’t vote your proxy” quickly became part of McElroy's campaign message.

Otherwise, McElroy’s campaign was predominantly a labor of networking. Noting that email was especially important, McElroy focused simply on getting her message out via all of the channels she had built up over the years through her husbandry and community work. She spoke at meetings of various associations in which she has long been a member, including those with quite different goals and politics than the anti-coal ash campaign, such as her local cattlemen’s and goat producers’ associations. Finally, McElroy contacted an NPR reporter she had met through her coal ash activism and asked her to cover the campaign.

At Shelby’s annual meeting at Henry County High School on June 22, 2012, McElroy recievied 83 votes to Stevens’ 1024. As this final vote count is an order of magnitude more votes than the number of members attending the meeting, the voting process clearly reflected the co-op’s proxy policy. At the credentialing meeting a month earlier, McElroy had learned that the co-op had in the past received typically 800-1000 proxy forms for uncontested elections. “That is a lot of votes to be cast by Board Members,” she noted, acknowledging that her campaign was handicapped by this essentially automatic padding of the votes for incumbents. After the annual meeting, McElroy reflected: “In the future, the Shelby Energy By-laws would need to be revised to allow for a fair and democratic process when electing Board Members. The proxy system only serves to keep the current Board Members in their positions. I would advocate for a process that allows the Shelby Energy Cooperative members to know well in advance who is running, what their qualifications are, and does away with the current proxy system but allows mail in voting.”

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450 Sonia McElroy, personal correspondence with author, 6 May 2012.
It is interesting to consider the difference in mail-in voting preferences between 1970s Vermont and 21st Century Kentucky – that in one context mail-in voting is anti-democratic, because it reduces attendance at meetings; whereas, in the context where few members attend meetings anyway (and, in Kentucky, there are more understandable structural reasons, since co-ops cover such a large territory), it lowers the bar to participation enough to hopefully invite new perspectives? In McElroy’s perspective, however, the reforms needed in Shelby Energy will require a concerted effort by members including but also beyond voting reform – if things are going to change, she says, “it’s going to come down to grassroots stuff.”

Figure 4.18: Sonia McElroy at the Shelby Energy Annual Meeting, 2012, KFTC.451

Signs of Change in the South Kentucky RECC

As of 2013, KFTC has not yet managed to elect anyone to a co-op board in the EKPC area. But they have encouraged visible change, both at the state regulatory level and locally,

within the co-ops. More so than other co-ops, they have created working relationships with government actors at the state and municipal levels to coordinate climate policy and environmental justice action. It is also undeniable that KFTC and its affiliated co-op activists have raised awareness in the region as a whole, and the EKPC co-ops are no longer forgotten businesses blending into the background of Eastern Kentucky, quietly making decisions on boards disconnected from the membership.

Recent elections show just how much the co-op activists in Eastern Kentucky have brought electric co-ops once more into the public eye. In 2013, KFTC member Ray Tucker ran for the board of his co-op, South Kentucky RECC, in a race that pitted him against fifteen other candidates for the seat in his district. This eventful race was precipitated by a mass resignation of four board members and the co-op attorney from the South Kentucky RECC, following member activism that brought allegations of corruption and conflicts of interest against the board. Even a year prior, when McElroy was running for the Shelby board, contested elections were confusing enough that the Shelby attorney admitted in an email that the co-op had no procedures for member registration and voting at their annual meeting. "but information is being gathered from Owen Electric Cooperative regarding their procedures since they've had prior experience."452 Now, contested elections seem to be becoming the norm – even, as in the case of South Kentucky, a norm that is visible and holds public interest. According to local coverage of the South Kentucky election in May 2013, nearly 25% of the membership voted for the four new board members.453

Environmental Values and Local Democracy

Eastern Kentucky is neither a mecca for urban liberal counterculture like Vermont, nor an elite seasonal destination like Colorado with strong Postmaterialist values and a direct connection to climate change; it has its own unique strand of progressive radicalism. The Appalachian identity runs strong in the EKPC service area (signified in part by the local pronunciation, Appa-LATCH-a), particularly in Berea, where KFTC is headquartered, and the ethics associated with it obviously influence energy activism in Eastern Kentucky.

452 Correspondence between Donald Prather and Lauren McGrath, 27 April 2012, courtesy of Sonia McElroy.
453 Commonwealth Journal, 7 May 2013; South Kentucky RECC, “South Kentucky RECC Directors Resign”; Letter from Alan Anderson to members of SKRECC.
Appalachia has a long history of local progressive politics, hearkening back to Populist
movements in nineteenth century and strengthened by a long history of struggle over
coal. It is a culture that values an enduring sense of place, with hard-coded social
responsibilities and a sense of justice that connects people and land. In the twenty-first
century, one way that this has manifested is in the diverse ecosystem of local community
development organizations and the strong presence of national environmental NGOs such
as the Sierra Club. Some community members involved in these organizations joke about
the “Berea Mafia,” a strong network of community development professionals and activists
that often work together in the service of economic diversification, environmental
protection, cultural heritage, and social justice in Eastern Kentucky.

The link between the health of the land and the distribution of wealth generated in
Kentucky – or between environmental and social justice – has thus long been part of the
mission of KFTC. A KFTC history and retrospective on their 30th anniversary explains it as
follows:

People in the southeastern counties of Kentucky, where KFTC has its roots, have an
essential cultural relationship with the land, and a strong history of organizing and
working for change – labor unions, black lung associations, quilt circles, community
efforts to fight strip mining, welfare rights organizations, and just caring for
neighbors. ...Eastern Kentucky is also an area largely known and defined by its
abundant natural resources and its long history of attempts by others – largely
absentee corporations – to control and exploit these resources.

Wilkins says it more simply: “What you do to the land, you do to the people.”

I realized only after-the-fact, having chosen these case studies for reasons other
than landscape, that all three of my case studies are in or near mountains. It is worth
considering whether mountain geographies have their own particular social logics, if
nothing else, due to urbanization trends in the early twentieth century; as environmental
historian Sara M. Gregg writes, “the mountains have remained a place apart for much of the
nation’s history.” But there is also something enduringly civic about mountain life. While

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454 See, for example: Hahn, The Roots of Southern Populism.
455 KFTC, 30 Years, 5.
456 He is here evoking an old mantra in Kentucky anti-coal activism: “If the land was destroyed, the people
were destroyed,” which stems at least as far back as the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People.
Montrie quotes AGSLP supporter Alice Slone, To Save the Land and People, 62.
457 Sara M. Gregg, Managing the Mountains: Land Use Planning, The New Deal, and the Creation of a Federal
Landscape in Appalachia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1.
none of my case studies continue to be isolated valley communities in the twenty-first
century, one can imagine that some of the ethos of making a living in harsh mountain
valleys remains inscribed in these places. In his study of Vermont town meetings, Bryan
muses on a small theoretical literature connecting geography to democracy – specifically,
the theory that the small egalitarian towns that develop in mountain valleys lend
themselves to the practice of direct democracy. Bryan writes:

One finds no grandeur in [the small towns of] Vermont, no temptation to pretension.
Valleys and hills, twisting ridges, dark gulches, and bright slopes create a mosaic of
opportunity for little clusters of settlement. They also preclude big ones. Vermont
topography offers no wide-open spaces where people can spread out. Nor does it
feature vast watersheds that funnel commerce into great cities. Lacking too are
mountain-grassland junctures where large batches of people are wont to gather. No
seaports congregate the crowds of enterprise.458

But for the ski-country grandeur, this also describes Western Colorado. But for the river of
coal flowing into big cities, likewise does it describe the development of Eastern Kentucky.
At least for those who still position themselves apart from these extractive economies,
mountain ethics seem to endure, manifesting in values compatible with the deliberative
democratic ideal inherent in co-op principles.

Contemplating his campaign after the fact, South Kentucky RECC candidate Ray
Tucker wrote: “As Wendell Berry said 20 years ago, we need a new political party that
represents the people and the land.” He added, pointedly: “KFTC is that organization.”459
Many of the KFTC members discussed in this section readily acknowledge that their efforts
would have been “impossible” without the support of Pennington and the KFTC network.
Instead of having to do everything from scratch, they had an existing network of volunteers
and, as basic as it seems, an office support staff for the mundane but necessary political
mobilization tasks of making copies, compiling mailing lists, sending out information, etc.
McElroy credits KFTC and the Sierra Club as her most powerful tool in fighting the
bureaucratic obstacles that Shelby Energy had constructed to protect elections. “They did
stalling tactics like this to [Taylor] last year,” McElroy explains, referencing the member
who tried and failed to petition to be on the ballot before her, “and he told me, ‘Well, you

458 Bryan, Real Democracy, 109.
459 Ray Tucker, “Ray Tucker Reflects on his Run for Rural Electric Co-op Board,” KFTC Blog, 17 May 2013,
can forget it. It’s rigged, and they won’t let you win.’ But he did not have the support that I have.”

There are two important lessons to learn from Kentucky about this kind of place-based democracy: first, their understanding that civic action is also political action; and, second, their active awareness that an engaged citizenry requires constant effort. They are quite explicitly working towards the ideal of deliberative democracy, where information is readily available to every citizen, debate is fostered, and action is encouraged. The New Power guidebook highlights a quote from a member illustrating their focus on civic education and deliberation, not specific issues, as a means to political change: “We want to make every KFTC member more informed about issues than the average bear. When we have thousands of informed, concerned folks talking to each other and impacting their communities, then elected officials will pay attention.”

How do they do this? For one thing – and I write this with full respect for the different constraints that electric co-ops face – KFTC has none of the existential doubts of electric co-ops about being a multi-issue organization. Because KFTC focuses on a range of issues beside energy policy, it is able to keep momentum (because there is always conflict somewhere), to connect community members with different values, and to often make explicit linkages between environmental, economic, and equity agendas. Members describes the KFTC community as “a real stew;” because they work on so many different issues, from electric co-op democracy to tax reform to voting rights, the organization draws together people with a range of political and social views – “sort of like family,” Wilkins muses, adding that he’s “in favor of anybody who is going to fight for people’s rights,” despite whether their politics match his.

KFTC also focuses on the mechanics of social movements and enduring political engagement. Realizing that activism is not an automatic response for many Americans, not even (or perhaps especially, given media fatigue) in the face of information about gross injustice, KFTC explicitly teaches leadership and gives community members models for engagement (as opposed to simply trying to rally people around issues). For example, the New Power initiative holds leadership training events for co-op members and encourages

460 Sonka, “Grassroots energy.”
them to make change by the simple act of spreading the word among other members that electric co-ops are democracies and they have the right as members to be involved in energy policy. In this role, KFTC seems to be able to function uniquely as both a “tertiary association” (like the Sierra Club, etc.) and as an activist group, and, more importantly, to encourage members to transition easily between the two cultural roles. Wilkins, based on his and others’ experiences with KFTC, says that the organization has become “good at seducing members to be more active, to find their voices”; they “tease out the activism of others.” He attributes this to the “skill of KFTC’s support staff.”

Finally, KFTC promotes a model for deliberation on a large scale. One of the main roles of “New Power Leaders” is to commit to connecting with five other co-op members and to disseminating information to these members as relevant. By creating a network for information sharing with a commitment to regular discussion of energy issues, KFTC hopes to reach 25,000 people over five years. Because there is a formal organization at the center of this network, this information sharing importantly occurs within a structure that allows co-op members to channel ideas and problems back to KFTC, and hopefully, back to their co-ops as well. This model of New Power Leaders who are in regular contact with five members proposes a model for deliberative democracy on a large scale that occurs through a sort of winnowing of responsibility within a citizen hierarchy set by interest. Eventually, a wide community is reached, even if only for a few minutes every now and then.

Despite KFTC’s enduring efforts and despite their ability to reach a diverse civic audience on other issues, unfortunately, the co-op members that have been pulled into redemocratization movements in Kentucky thus far fit a very specific demographic: essentially, retired professionals. In addition to the time needed to get involved in technical issues, energy policy is enough of a hot issue in Kentucky politics that working members sympathetic to the New Power Campaign do not always want to be associated with it in public, in protection of their own careers. It is possible that KFTC is facing a class divide, too, of the kind that heavily marks co-op politics in Holy Cross Energy: the surest way to get people interested in electric co-ops right now seems to be through climate change advocacy, and climate change policy advocates are not as diverse or inclusive a group as

462 Putnam, Bowling Alone, 52.
463 At the New Power Leadership workshop, one attendee sat out of group pictures for this reason.
many - political ecologists, certainly – would hope. Pennington, for one, has noticed this uniformity among New Power leaders and is actively trying to figure out how to foster real diversity within the electric co-op movement.
Discussion: Power to the People?

Brothers and sisters: I want to tell you this. The greatest thing on earth is to have the love of God in your heart, and the next greatest thing is to have electricity in your house.

-A Tennessee farmer, early 1940s

In the 1940s, Tennessee Valley Authority Chairman David Lilienthal wrote about electric co-ops, “I have been at such meetings where throughout a whole day as many as 2000 farmers and their wives and children discussed the financial and operating reports made to them by their superintendent and board of trustees, and later while we ate a barbecue lunch watched new uses of electricity demonstrated.” NRECA historian Frank Gallant records that rural electrification “got [people] up on their feet, sent tears running down their cheeks.” Gallant reflects: “The socially transformative work of REA and the co-ops in those early years of rural electrification was frequently described as a ‘movement,’ or ‘cause,’ whose fervor sometimes bordered on the religious.” Avram Patt has also described the history of rural electrification in the WEC service area as “close to a religious experience.” Electricity, it is claimed, brought “new life to rural America.”

It is easy to see from such grand claims why a researcher would expect to find a strong history of community participation and engagement in early co-op affairs. These recollections, combined with the relative absence of community knowledge about cooperatives now, moreover implied a clear story of decline of the “cooperative spirit” in America. Going into this research, I predicted that this decline would match other forms of civic engagement in America over the 20th century, peaking in the 1950s and falling off sharply through the new millennium, with a small recovery in the last ten years. Taking this as a hypothesis, one of my first goals in collecting co-op data was to look at records indicating participation trends and see if co-ops showed signs of being part of the same pendular flourishing and decline as other civic institutions.

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464 Pence, The Next Greatest Thing, 2.
465 Cooper, “From New Deal to Bad Deal?”, 348; Gallant, Local Lights, 2-3.
466 Putnam, Bowling Alone, 48-64.
This is a portion of the crowd which attended the ceremonies marking the setting of the first pole of the $207,875 REA-financed project, sponsored by the Richland County Cooperative Electric Association. Note the bunting-bedecked pole over speakers head, at left.

Nearly all of the 1,400 families to receive current over the REA rural electric project at Meadville, Pa., turned out for the celebration and picnic marking the setting of the first pole.

Figure 4.19: Pole-raising Celebrations Across America, c. 1936, NRECA Library.

However, I quickly found that historical records and member recollections painted a spottier and more hesitant picture of community involvement throughout co-op history. With some notable exceptions, co-op participation rates have always been low. There was no "decline," there simply has not been much movement of any kind, until recently.

The following figure shows compiled statistics on co-op voting and meeting attendance trends in three co-ops - WEC, HCE, and a third co-op, Orcas Island Power and

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Light Cooperative in Eastsound, Washington, which is a co-op I visited during my preliminary research.  

While it ended up not being one of my case studies, it serves (along with anecdotal evidence from other co-ops) as a modest check that my case studies are not complete outliers, historically. This data comes from meeting minutes and RUS reporting forms from the co-ops' archives. Gaps are present due to discrepancies in reporting requirements from year to year.
Compiling voting and attendance statistics into these participation graphs confirms visually a number of trends I have observed more qualitatively through archival, oral, and participatory research:

First, these electric co-ops have been excellent at growing; particularly, one can read broader impacts in local growth in this data. For example, the rate of new members joining HCE obviously increased after 1960 when the ski industry took off. OPALCO experienced similar growth when its scenic setting in the San Juan Islands was discovered as a vacation destination by an increasingly urban Northwest.470

Second, growth has not been matched by participation, nor was there ever much participation, even at the beginning. These metrics are supported by many oral histories of the early years of rural electrification, which identify a slew of problems with community commitment. For example, John Bellefuille, who was a teenager in Vermont during rural

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469 Compiled from meeting minutes and RUS records.
470 As a side note, I personally cannot understand why more people do not attend OPALCO's annual meetings just for fun; to serve its membership scattered across several islands, OPALCO rents a Washington State ferry once a year and throws a dinner cruise as their annual meeting.
electrification and canvassed the town of Tunbridge to convince people to join the Washington Electric Cooperative (WEC), recalls that it took quite a bit of persuasion to get his neighbors to sign up. Partly, he explains, rural residents were skeptical that they would actually get electricity, because of a long history of failed meetings with for-profit power companies. While he agrees that electricity gave people “a different outlook on life” and was an equalizing force between cities and the countryside, he also notes that electricity usage progressed slowly because it cost money to switch to new equipment. HCE former General Manager Ed Grange also recollects community resistance to using government funding and concerns about taking on community debt. Perhaps most telling, however, is Bellefuille’s recollection that his parents moved in the 1920s from Haverhill, Massachusetts, where they had electricity, to Tunbridge, Vermont, where they did not, because they wanted to raise their children on a farm. In other words, lack of electricity was not a deal breaker for everyone in residential decisions in the 1920s (although Bellefuille remembers that they brought a couple of Edison lamps with them as souvenirs). These stories and quantitative data are much more aligned with my research on the heavy-handed influence of the REA on co-op organizational design and management in Chapter 3 than they are to the more common and somewhat revisionist histories of co-ops as wildly popular grassroots efforts that subsequently became boring service providers along with the general decline of civic engagement in America. For some, surely, getting electricity was “the next greatest thing” to the love of God, but for many it was a new uncertain technology, and for still others, getting electricity through government funding was circumspect.

Furthermore, these graphs show little movement in participation trends even as the areas they served were clearly experiencing rapid changes. In many co-ops, the co-op management struggled to stay solvent in the face of REA constraints for decades, more often than not taking out additional government loans to remain afloat, because the REA still had the best interest rates. REA loan constraints continued to impose strict adherence to professional management guidelines that left little room for community self-determination, even as the communities were growing, possibly becoming wealthier, and developing different needs for community development. With the formation of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) in the early 1940s, the co-ops’ loyalties
were further pulled towards a professional service culture and away from the more chaotic but individually tailored process of local democracy.

After several decades, however, and especially as energy became a topic of national interest in the 1970s (and, after a brief hiatus, again around the turn of the twenty-first century), my case studies showed that some members began to push back against the separation of co-op management from co-op membership. Realizing that their status as owners gave them the right to vote on co-op policy, these members started calling for more meaningful forms of engagement than the chance to attend a yearly community meeting high on entertainment and low on substantive discussion. One can obviously see the effects of these re-democratization movements in the above graphs, including COFEC activism in WEC participation in the mid-1970s as well as climate change advocacy in HCE territory in the early 2000s. Then again, one can also see the limits of such activism in actual voting trends. At the height of COFEC’s influence in the mid-1980s, voting rates in WEC topped out at just over 33%, a third of the membership. South Kentucky RECC’s scandal-caused and massively contested election in 2013 drew an unprecedented 25% of voters. In HCE, the board is excited when voting reaches 10%. While these numbers may not be all that different from other voting trends in America – several of the HCE board members pointed out that their recent voting records are equivalent to the typical turnout at state primaries during a presidential race471 – they are still not very impressive, and “normal” non-conflict years are much less so. As we explore the impacts of co-op redemocratization, therefore, it is vital to remember what redemocratization tends to produce, quantitatively – namely, some active engagement by a non-majority.

**Explaining Enduring Low Participation**

The enduring lack of participation in co-ops, even “good” ones, is thus a subject worth revisiting from a more structural perspective. In the early years, co-ops would promote member involvement by turning annual member meetings into community recreation events, and by holding raffles for electrical appliances and electricity rebates. As of 2013, many still use the model of a county fair with door prizes to entice members to attend the

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471 This claim is supported by data; see for example: http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm
annual meeting. Participation now, as it was then, remains low in most co-ops and is helped by incentives such as electricity rebates. In Holy Cross, for example, 250 to 300 (out of over 55,000) members show up to their annual member meetings. Of these, the HCE staff observe, most of the attendees are people who have been members since the ‘50s and ‘60s. Similarly, although WEC holds two smaller community meetings per year in addition to the annual member meeting, Avram Patt reflects that a lot of the attendees are older members who come because they and their families have always come. The numbers are similar in Eastern Kentucky.

KFTC activists cite the entertainment focus of the meetings as a problem rather than a solution to attendance. “Why drive all the way to Shelbyville for a hot dog and a lightbulb?” McElroy muses. Wilkins, similarly, reflects that the Bluegrass Energy annual meeting is aimed at families as a “no cost entertainment experience”; the business part of the meeting lasts maybe twenty minutes, he recalls, most of which is taken up by pre-packaged NRECA PowerPoint presentations. Then everyone leaves with a bucket full of lightbulbs. He is greatly frustrated by how “canned” the meeting is and wishes that the co-op would make room in the meeting for actual discussions with their membership about issues such as energy efficiency. “You’re not going to get anywhere unless you convince people to work with you,” he concludes about the co-op’s approach to the annual meeting, “instead of just being a company that sends you a bill every month.

Many studies aimed at the nuts-and-bolts functioning of local democracy have shown that levels of civic engagement are often a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, community participation teaches people how to be more effective citizens and how to engage politically on issues they care about; thus, “people develop many of the democratic traits assumed by liberal theory only through their embeddedness in a vibrant civil society.”

A key lesson here is that both participation and non-participation are self-sustaining processes. Pervasive structural inequalities that lead to exclusion from democratic institutions thus leave some groups chronically out of the public sphere and grant more power by default to special interest groups who know how to navigate the

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policy process. As these disempowered groups see their interests continually being marginalized, they further disengage. “Citizens will not participate if they have no impact,” Moore writes. “The stifling of public participation leads only to path dependence on unsustainable processes and technologies linked to limited isolated interests.” Rich et al. add that processes that are nominally participatory but in reality leave little room for actual participation – such as a co-op annual meeting focused on entertainment over discussion – are remarkably disempowering. “Power and participation are inextricably linked,” Frug writes: “a sense of powerlessness tends to produce apathy rather than participation, while the existence of power encourages those able to participate in its exercise to do so.”

![Figure 4.21: Meeting Attendance Then and Now.](image)

From the beginning, co-ops struggled to get members to attend annual meetings. The 1944 meeting of WEC members (left) featured dancing, vocal performances, and a presentation about a local seeing-eye dog in addition to co-op business. The 2002 article in *Rural Electric Magazine* (right) demonstrates how little things have changed (beyond perhaps the appeal of community dances).

Co-ops can be strikingly contradictory on the question of participation. Most of the time, it seems, co-ops expect low participation while readily noting that it’s a problem they should address. Suddenly, when the idea of participation is raised in practice, co-op employees and members tend towards hyperbole about how much more work it will be for the co-op. For example, at the pivotal 1974 WEC meeting, John Burger of Walden argued against the co-op having open records: “If you people are interested in where your last penny is going, well, picture what would happen if 5,000 members appeared at the door and asked to see the books;” a “Marshfield member” likewise worried that open records would burden management and be “a lot of costly work.” The minutes of the Shelby Energy board meeting following the co-op’s 2012 annual meeting state that the annual meeting was “a little over budget partly due to the additional expenses of the contested director election.” A member services representative from one of my case study co-ops once joked that my research would make them have to hire more people.

Obviously, these arguments are mostly rhetorical. Data on participation shows that people who get involved in co-ops are not the average public but those inclined to be joiners – those who have had experience with co-ops in the past, people involved in other civic groups or local government, community leaders, etc. For example, the COFEC challengers in 1970s WEC elections included members who had been part of other co-ops, who served on the PTA and 4-H board, who were involved in local politics, who, in one case, had written a thesis on Vermont town meetings. In HCE, the “new” board of the twenty-first century also serves on multiple community boards and committees and has a history of regular volunteer labor - as Gilman put it, they have been on “every committee known to man.” In Kentucky, active KFTC members have experience in public outreach and media, professional education, farming and husbandry associations, and community service. Convincing regular citizens to get involved is one of the major challenges of local organizing of all stripes, and, while effective local organizers can rally a large number of people to come to an event, sign a petition, or maybe even vote, inspiring the same number

474 Lesch, “Challengers Defeated by Washington Electric Managers.”
475 Shelby Board Meeting Minutes, August 2012; Given that the annual meeting already cost $36,763.47 for 200-300 people, it is unclear why the costs of a contested election were significant to the budget of the meeting, and it seems much more likely that this statement was put in there passive aggressively, but this is just speculation.
of people to independently go to a co-op board with specific individual requests about their business operations is an entirely different ballgame.

The spirit behind such rhetoric, then, seems less about the functional burden on the co-op as it is about the persistence of professional management philosophies. A rich STS-based literature has for decades documented the technocratization of certain kinds of human activity and its implicit separation from the civic sphere, the differentiation of "experts" from mere mortals.476

Part of the same cultural phenomenon, but from the opposite perspective, much has also been written over the last century about the professionalization or bureaucratization of the civic sphere: urban reform movements have mellowed to public health and safety professions, environmental activism to massive NGOs, populism to service organizations and lobbying groups, community support networks to market-based individualism.477 Starting with Weber’s concerns about the trend of Western society towards bureaucracy as a way of life, social theorists have long worried about the effect of the rationalization of social relationships on the ability of citizens in democratic societies to participate in authentic political practice – that is, to determine the material, structural, and power relationships that define daily life.478 In particular, rational-bureaucratic social organization is seen “to encourage the domination of the market over politics,” leading to a world of “isolated mass hermits” who define their worlds based on the media, consumer power, and “compliance with systemic imperatives.”479 Environmentally-speaking, professionalization has moreover become associated with “managing and controlling the by-products of industry rather than changing its processes and outcomes,” a departure, according to Robert Gottlieb, from early environmental activists who were quite explicit about their

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structural critiques of an increasingly market based rational-bureaucratic society, defining the “environment” as both human and non-human health.\textsuperscript{400}

The above work leads to several important critiques of modern social relations. First, the separation of “technical” decisions from social ones leads to a number of problematic externalities, whereas many of these decisions are well within the capacity of non-experts, given the right forum and access to information. Second, the implication that there is nothing “technical” about civic processes leads to an impoverished civic sphere, despite much evidence (from my case studies as well as others) that great gains are made when local activists approach civic engagement as an activity demanding skill creation and knowledge dissemination, including committed efforts of community education and training. Communalism is not automatic; one must learn how to run meetings, amass and effectively employ collective resources, navigate between internal conflicts, and so on.\textsuperscript{401} Both of these lead to critiques that what often is defined as “technical” in the first place is largely political and economic, and the processes that command the most resources and capital tend to be taken out of the civic sphere.

\textbf{From Technobureaucracies to Technodemocracies}\textsuperscript{402}

The electricity market is an important case study for exploring possibilities for revision of these relationships. A hybrid of extremely “technical” science and profound social, spatial, and policy implications in implementation, electricity provision in practice complicates the separation of technological decision-making from social policy. The case studies considered in this chapter contest such trends in practice, offering examples of how technical decisions can be made civic and vice versa. On the “technical” side – e.g., scientific/engineering/economic/management knowledge – these co-ops have engaged in processes of member education and a re-politicization of “technical” decisions, leading to some profound questioning of basic normative assumption that grounded such decisions previously (for example, “we need to keep costs as low as possible;” “renewable energy is too expensive;”). On the civic side, they have brought more resources to the policy

\textsuperscript{400} Gottlieb, \textit{Forcing the Spring}.
\textsuperscript{401} Bryan, \textit{Real Democracy}; Briggs, \textit{Democracy as Problem Solving}.

246
implications of electricity provisions, through establishing new governing bodies and advisory committees, winning media attention, and raising community awareness.

Taking HCE’s comparative lesson about national democratic behavior is a good reminder that if we discount such small instances of local democracy, we have to also discount our publicly cherished mechanisms of national democracy. Obviously, the democratic practice of a few can have real impacts. While the small amount of increased participation in some co-ops has not been a panacea for national energy policy or rural development writ large, it is an interesting and productive experiment in local resource governance. Changes in management philosophy affect how resources are used, specifically what happens to capital locally, which can have profound impacts on community development and community vibrancy. More local control over resources makes economic transactions more personal, revealing the social relations behind business decisions and illuminating opportunities for experimentation.

One of the main lessons I draw from my case studies is that small actions that refocus electric co-ops more towards local issues tend to have big results because they are sorely needed. Abstract good business practices adopted from a national office (e.g., the REA) or professional business community (e.g. NRECA) promote business decisions that by design give little attention to the local scale. When the national economy is the scale of transactions (as New Deal/post WWII policies encouraged), it makes sense to assume universal economic principles and simply try to get the best deal for the capital one is sending elsewhere. Presumably everyone else in the community is engaging in the same economic transactions at a national or global scale, and the fate of the locality – in terms of business – is determined by the aggregate of the individual deals independent companies make in the national/global marketplace. But this means that the fate of the locality is also left to the valuation of a broader market, a set of relations that lead to externalities such as environmental injustices.

The trick to not becoming someplace else’s externality is to take control of how value is defined, and make sure that local definitions matter in economic transactions. As renewed engagement has refocused co-op communities on context- and community-specific problems, the co-ops in my case studies have turned from following REA or electric utility industry best practices to developing their own. Sometimes this has led to surprising
outcomes. Importantly, this is not a zero-sum game; contrasting local capital capture to protectionism or isolationism, studies in economic democracy argue for the importance of at least letting capital circulate a couple of times before it leaves a community. Democratic management of electric utilities, specifically, implies a new relationship between capital and the environment.

These co-op redemocratization movements have challenged, in local contexts, many of the formative REA notions about how to run a cooperative, especially, in the last few years, the necessity of continual growth and low rates at any cost. As these movements have gained strength, they have moreover produced new local opportunities through renewable energy generation and energy efficiency projects, new ideas about financing infrastructure renovations, and new community partnerships.

In this chapter, I somewhat unapologetically take the side of the redemocratization movements, not because I believe they take an unbiased and uncomplicated view of the public good, but because I am less interested in the final politics of the co-ops involved than I am in their ability to be changed based on member engagement. Regardless of the politics of the initial dissenters, should a co-op begin to function more democratically, it in theory should create ample room for further contestation by other concerned groups. In fact, what many co-op advocates would like to see is not a fight between climate activists and the status quo (which seems to be the norm in redemocratizing co-ops over the last couple of decades), but contested elections where candidates have lively competing visions for future local development.

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483 DeFilippis, Unmaking Goliath; Serang, Howard, and Thompson, "The Anchor Mission."
Figure 4.22: Democratic Externalities of the All-Electric Lifestyle, 1976, WEC. This cartoon both makes fun of COFEC, for trying to get apathetic members engaged, and WEC, for being worthy of critique for high rates. Moreover, it contains within it a small history of the REA and electric co-ops in general. Likely, these men have electric heat because they were encouraged through their co-op and REA promotional literature to aspire to the all-electric house. A legacy of REA policies that valued co-op member consumption over participation, these members embody the externalities of such one-size-fits-all national economic policies.

What Kind of Democracy?

Enthusiasm for sparks of democracy should not prevent continued critical inquiry into what kind of democracy has been realized, however. As Selznick canonically wrote about the TVA, the ethic of democracy itself can be used as a gatekeeper, creating a culture that only tolerates certain kinds of discourse and obscures actual decision-making processes through their need to conform aesthetically to ideal ones.\textsuperscript{484} So it is worth stepping back and asking: what are the different kinds of democracy practiced in these co-ops? Have they fostered more local deliberation and community control? Have they created

\textsuperscript{484} Selznick, The TVA and the Grassroots.
new civic infrastructure better suited to twenty-first century problems? Or are they more of the same, just with new leadership?

I use civic infrastructure here not as a normative term but as a descriptive one. Civic infrastructure implies neither authentic deep democracy, nor inclusion, nor equity. It does not even imply civic capacity. The REA built a civic infrastructure, too, in the sense that it constrained ways of interacting within communities, fixed certain resource flows, and made new relationships possible. Arguably, the civic infrastructure the REA created was communalism with consumerism, cultivating a sense of duty and sacrifice to maintain a rural lifestyle without the deliberative processes that empower people to define what that lifestyle should be exactly. If one lets go of the myth that economic relations are somehow separate from social relations and views the economy as part of civil society, then neoliberal market relations are also a form of civic infrastructure. Just like private power companies racing REA co-ops to build lines into the most profitable rural areas, civic infrastructures can compete with each other and be in conflict; they can even build “spite lines” that make other nascent forms of civic infrastructure less viable.

The original REA’s vision for co-ops was, in David Held’s typology, Schumpeterian democracy – a technocratic rule of elites. The vision of more recent community movements has been for more deliberative democracy. Schumpeterian-style co-op management constructs an image of co-op membership as a different kind of animal – an apolitical one – over which the trustees have a responsibility of guardianship. Under deliberative democratic rule, such “elected dictatorship” becomes unacceptable.

A quick review of the models of democracy brought about in my case studies shows a wide range of governance reform possibilities within successful community engagement movements:

Holy Cross Energy in Colorado remains the closest to the older, Schumpeterian model of democracy. Even as the board members celebrate the changes they have brought about, they worry about providing a functional continuity of leadership for the co-op staff, and they highlight the steps they have taken to develop technical and business expertise in

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405 Phil Thompson, personal conversation, November 2013; also see Foley, Adam’s Fallacy, and Marglin, The Dismal Science.

406 Held, Models of Democracy, 137.
the electricity field. They are inclusive – open to community interest and community projects – but wary of direct participation. Arguably, HCE’s transition was a crisis of agenda, resolved by a simple changing of the guard.

COFEC brought deliberation to meetings of the Washington Electric Co-op in Vermont and succeeding in changing the co-op’s board and mission, but did not manage to retain the high participation rates of its members. It thus remains a kind of participatory democracy without regular participation, which by default also becomes more of a representative rule of technocrats. In Vermont, because the working ideals of the co-op include transparency and member education, the “technics” are of a somewhat more political nature – we could call it a benevolent technocracy, perhaps.

KFTC perhaps comes the closest to achieving the informed and active membership requisite for deliberative democracy. Creating a geographically dispersed regional network of co-op activists, it has brought the community development implications of energy policy more into the public eye in Eastern Kentucky, and it has encouraged increased involvement in the EKPC distribution co-ops. However, KFTC also continues to struggle with issues of inclusion.

The electric co-op network eighty years after its creation shows how cooperative businesses can easily become narrowly focused economic institutions within a market-based civic infrastructure, but when they manage to connect to broader issues that are relevant to their members’ lives and the fate of their communities, they can foster a more engaged and democratic civil society. As these movements continue to push for more member engagement, it is important that process issues – the form of democratic practice, the expectations and responsibilities shared between co-op leaders and members, and the vision of ongoing governance – remain part of the discussion. If a movement to redemocratize a co-op membership fails to produce enduring democratic participation, whatever else it has managed to achieve may be important environmentally or economically, but it will have little lasting impact civically.

Electricity Provider or Community Service Organization?

While three case studies is not enough of a sample to draw predictive conclusions, these case studies ultimately raise a number of new hypotheses about the role of electric co-ops
in fostering more enduring democratic structures for their communities, as well as the connection between democracy and environmental values. I end with a discussion of these issues:

(1) First, when co-ops are single issue – i.e., just electricity providers, or even just local energy policy venues – they may be excellent businesses, but in all likelihood they will be terrible democracies.

Electricity is boring. Few people want to sit around talking about rates and power outages. A few more are interested to talk occasionally about renewables and energy efficiency; however, my case studies show that even where environmental and energy concerns prompt community interest in their electric co-ops, these concerns tend to lead to issue-based activism, but do not automatically lead to process-based activism – that is, a creative rethinking of how the co-op can better serve the community. It is only when energy policy becomes tied to possibilities for local development – local innovation and job creation, social justice, local as well as global environmental health, creative uses of community resources, etc. – that electric co-ops have become meaningful democratic forums.

Because not all co-op leaders or members are comfortable with co-ops taking on this role, it is worth asking: is it the co-op’s job to be multi-issue and to take on the task of civic education among its members? According to the ICA “co-op principles,” explicitly yes. Of course, one of the most frequently observed characteristics coming out of the small body of research on co-ops is that co-ops tend to have scarce resources. With noted exceptions, they are generally small businesses operating often with a tight budget in a competitive world.487 Because electric co-ops are somewhat an exception to this, they perhaps have more of a responsibility to member education, but they should still not be blamed for not single-handedly educating the public about cooperatives and economic democracy.

In the case studies examined here, both in terms of who participates and how co-ops can effect change, it is apparent that co-ops work best when they are part of a thriving ecosystem of community-focused institutions and civic engagement. Of course, this, too, is a dangerous observation, structurally speaking; lest I accidentally contribute to the “small government, big community” rhetoric that has been steadily decreasing public services and

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487 See, for example: DeFilippis, Unmaking Goliath, 141-151.
available funding for communities, it is worth noting two key points. First, electric co-ops are more effective when local government is part of this ecosystem – for example, in WEC and KFTC’s collaborations with their state regulatory boards in Vermont and Eastern Kentucky, as well as KFTC’s ongoing involvement with state-sponsored renewable energy policy committees. Second, electric co-ops are a special model among community service organizations in that they generate their own funding as part of their central mission (e.g., as opposed to fundraising, donations, or grants), and, because many electric co-ops have a protected service area making them officially or by-default monopolies, they generally have more flexibility with these funds than other co-ops who do not share the luxury of operating in protected service areas.

The protection offered electric co-ops due to the nature of the electricity industry is quite profound, actually, and something that should be discussed more in electric co-op advocacy circles as a unique resource for furthering economic democracy (in a coordinated multi-organizational context). Because electricity infrastructure is so expensive to build, many utilities (IOUs, munis, and co-ops alike) have legally-defined service areas, in which they are designated the only electricity provider in perpetuity in exchange for the obligation to serve everyone in their territory. Martin Lowery refers to this arrangement as a “regulatory compact” – “acceptance of the obligation to serve in return for the right to monopoly service.” Although some co-ops are also beholden to regulatory Public Service Boards/Commissions, and, as businesses, they must ensure basic standards of performance and solvency, their protected status makes them less likely to suddenly go out of business than smaller cooperatives or ESOPs that operate in more competitive markets. Unlike more specialized collectives that provide alternatives to mainstream market options, electric co-ops are moreover not voluntary (except for people with the means or desire to go off-grid); as the local electric utility, they serve a wide range of the population, including many members with no previous interest in or even awareness of the concept of economic democracy. Because electric co-ops command a large budget and make decisions with widespread environmental consequences, they moreover have a significant amount of

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489 Including eight people in Vermont who refuse to be members because they don’t want to be part of something “communist.”
influence over local development. The nature of their stability, budget, and audience means that electric co-ops arguably have more room to experiment than other co-ops.\textsuperscript{490} Finally, the legacy of the REA network means that electric co-ops are tied together nationally across 47 states. The implications of this network’s potential to contribute to a larger political project capable of producing “new social and spatial practices” around democratic wealth generation and more local control over development should be obvious.\textsuperscript{491}

The greater stability and reach of electric co-ops raises questions about how much these organizations in fact act as a local government more so than a local business. This is not unique to co-ops; it also applies to for-profit companies that find themselves in similar social roles. Google’s employee transportation network immediately comes to mind, for example.\textsuperscript{492} There are already a number of ways that electric co-ops quietly act in this capacity beyond the more volatile issues of shaping energy policy. For example, WEC – and many other co-ops around the country - act as “mediating institutions” between the community and the RUS (formerly REA) program of community development zero-interest loans.\textsuperscript{493} They also offer benefits such as membership in credit unions and other group discounts to members. Some electric co-ops have diversified into low cost services similar to electricity in terms of distributional issues, such as telephone and broadband Internet services. HCE maintains a small amount of employee housing for linemen who have trouble affording the cost of housing in the exclusive Roaring Fork Valley. In some sense, because co-ops have a stable constituency and already manage a number of community programs, movements for more democracy in electric co-ops is closer in practice to experimental governance methods such as participatory budgeting than it is to typical civil society advocacy.

\textsuperscript{490} MacLeod makes similar arguments about Mondragon in \textit{From Mondragon to America} - that the Mondragon region is able to experiment more because it has set up structures that give it more economic stability and interdependence.

\textsuperscript{491} DeFilippis, \textit{Unmaking Goliath}, 150.


With this in mind, the common argument that co-ops are first responsible to their members for cost of electricity and that they are constrained by their need to run as responsible businesses in a market economy seems limited and almost a little irresponsible. First, their “regulatory compact” inherently gives electric co-ops more social responsibilities than other companies, even without the existence of their cooperative charter. Moreover, in the current context of energy policy, the concept of an apolitical utility is impossible – even (especially?) if the utility claims their main goal is providing service at the lowest cost; these days, a political commitment to lowest costs above all implies a commitment to coal, which means explicit denial of environmental and social externalities. In an energy economy organized into protected service areas, a focus on lowest costs also denies electricity consumers important choices about the production of their energy. “When you hear someone speak of a market,” economist James K. Galbraith cautions, “the first question should be: is it real? Is there a commodity, and can one really choose among competing suppliers?” If there is no real choice for consumers, he argues, then the use of metaphors of supply and demand creating a self-regulating system merely hides the possibilities for companies to exploit the system for their own profit at the expense of the quality of the product.

For electric co-ops, the work that hiding behind market metaphors and cost constraints does is to deny the inherent political nature of the cooperative model, and, by doing so, to absolve electric co-ops of their responsibilities to their members as a community organization. This leads to a second hypothesis, namely:

(2) Electric cooperatives do not function as solely market institutions; therefore, their business model fundamentally has broader constraints and responsibilities beyond maintaining economic competitiveness.

In my research, co-ops have only been able to achieve functional and sustainable local democracy in practice when they acknowledge their broader role in the community as part of their business mission. The concept of the “regulatory compact” could be put to more use here; in addition to the responsibility to provide electrical service to a protected service

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area, a revised “regulatory compact” should explicitly acknowledge that a regulated utility (or one with a protected service area) does not operate in a free market – i.e., under conditions of competition – and that community benefits are lost when it pretends that it does. The compact should also acknowledge that by not having the constraints of competition, such utilities have a responsibility to act as social entities that decide some policy and distribution decisions based on non-economic factors. This would include not just energy policy decisions, but also social equity and local development goals.

My final hypothesis addresses this last point about equity and development. Since the beginning, as I discuss in chapter 2, electric co-ops have struggled to extend the benefits of community ownership and cooperative power to everyone. While most Americans now have easy access to electricity, the ownership advantages of cooperative power have been increasingly curtailed by changing socioeconomic conditions in the United States over the past several decades. Any revision of co-op mission to focus on local development goals will need to take these constraints into account, as discussed below:

(3) Electric co-ops still do not reach the most disadvantaged members of a community.

Because of the nature of cooperative ownership in combination with the socioeconomic forces shaping current co-op territories in the U.S., the direct democracy promoted by many co-op advocates has some problems of inclusion in practice. Modern co-ops have an awkward relationship to capitalist class relations, because even as they promote a kind of economic democracy, they also (unintentionally?) privilege ownership and discriminate against communities with a high level of turnover. This was less an issue in the 1930s – although tenancy has always been a troubling issue for co-ops<sup>495</sup> - but in the increasingly dual economy-based, placeless culture of the twenty-first century, some co-

<sup>495</sup> Correspondence and memos from the first few years of the REA regularly come back to questions of tenancy and co-op membership, often with a note of class prejudice; for example, in correspondence with the project manager for a co-op in Kentucky, REA Director of Engineering and Operations C. A. Winder wrote in 1940: “A tenant farmer should be accepted as a member of the cooperative only if he is a responsible person who can be expected to meet his obligations and who is not merely a transient in the economy;” in 1938, Udo Rall wrote to C. A. Winder that tenants “have no stake and no sense of ownership in it, and therefore assuredly no sense of loyalty to it nor any positive interest in making it an economic success;” and so on. Information Services Division, Office Files of Udo Rall, Head of Cooperative Education Section, Proxies 1938-40 - Worker’s Education, Box No. 4, Record Group 221, US National Archives.
ops are increasingly segregated socioeconomically – and we know, in America, that this means racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination as well.496

This increasing divide is problematic not just in terms of class, but also in terms of workplace democracy. Originally, electric co-op employees had to be members (and many still are), but over the decades, there has come to be a rift in some co-ops between the employees and the board of directors, who are elected by the members. Many electric co-op employees are not members because they are not property owners. In some co-op territories, especially those that succeeded in rapid economic development, it has become increasingly the case that renting is more affordable than owning. Many of these co-ops’ employees are not able to be members because they technically do not own their electricity meter interfaces, and many more have sought housing outside of the co-op territory, trading lower housing costs for a long commute to work. The last thing a co-op should be is an institution of economic democracy for exclusively property owners in wealthy areas.

While I am sure that most co-ops do not mean to be discriminatory in this way, a strong ethic of localness runs through the co-ops in my case studies, which, in the current political economy, is increasingly tied to class. During an era where the idea of roots and the definition of being a local are shifting, the electric co-op world is still a place where place matters. While I believe most of the co-op advocates using ideas of localness to protect their co-ops do so with the aim of protecting the co-op from cosmopolitan outsiders (e.g., seasonal residents497) coming in and refashioning the co-op towards some place-less universal ideal, the shibboleth of localness also inherently discriminates against those who are mobile out of necessity, and those who have never had firm roots.

Moreover, calling for more labor in the service of local self-determination risks being synonymous with calling for more civic volunteerism without a broader political project of economic equality – the message being that only those with the resources to do so have the right to labor in the service of their own life. There are a number of equity concerns regarding volunteer community labor of the kind needed for most deliberative

496 See, for example, Park and Pellow, *The Slums of Aspen.*
497 Auden Schendler, for example, has encountered some deep-seated resentment about the role of the ski industry in Holy Cross Energy territory. People who have lived here all of their lives see the big private jets that bring seasonal residents from all over the world into their valley, he explains, and SkiCo itself attracts a lot of employees from the East Coast. Even once these people have been working in Aspen for twenty years, Schendler comments, they are still seen as outsiders.
processes currently, especially in the case of otherwise resource-poor communities. Except in extreme cases where existing injustices compel already strained community members to find the time no matter what, those community members with the time and energy to volunteer to work on community development concerns are often local elites or retired professionals. While the work these groups do is valuable, community members with fewer personal resources and more time constraints should also be able to also participate in decision-making processes that will impact their lives. Practically, this means that deliberative processes need to start from a point of material reality, including: making sure there is childcare available for parents to participate in public deliberative processes, changing the location of meetings and events to reach different communities, encouraging local businesses to get involved and allowing their workers to spend some company time and resources on local public issues, and/or establishing funds to reimburse travel expenses or other material contributions.

“We often forget that it was once assumed the United States would move inevitably in the direction of ever greater equality,” Alperovitz muses. Given that this has not been the case in practice, some democracy theorists suggest that it is necessary to reassess whether democracy can work in the context of major inequalities.498 Were co-ops to focus more explicitly on inclusion, especially by experimenting with ways to draw in members for whom participation is difficult and for making participation relevant for their members, they could contribute important lessons for the continued significance of democracy in a highly industrialized, mobile, and unequal society in general.

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498 As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2.
Chapter 5: Conclusion: Oppositional Energy and Civil Economics

For all this country’s obsessive concern for its “economy,” we rarely stop to ask what an economy is for.


Energy as Commodity, Energy as Infrastructure

Energy is the ultimate commodity. As easily alienable and nearly as fungible as money (or the money commodity), it is sold in intangible units, the kilowatt-hour, a concept that only has meaning in the uses to which it is put. Though technological challenges of storing energy mean that sometimes produced energy is wasted, energy markets – the actual trade of electrons on the grid – come reasonably close to a free market.

But electricity markets are far from free for the end consumer, even – especially – under deregulation. Because the infrastructure needed to transmit electricity from producers to consumers is expensive and time-consuming to build and maintain, the electricity sector tends towards monopoly. The political and economic power inherent in the inefficiencies of the power industry have long been contested ground between public and private interests. In 1925, Gifford Pinchot wrote in an eloquent appeal for greater public control of the power industry: “Either we must control electric power, or its masters and owners will control us.” The first federal regulations on the power industry were designed to target these monopoly tendencies of the energy industry that led to consolidation of profits through the exploitation of customers. Critiques of the economic inefficiencies and unchecked exploitations of the “holding company octopus” in the 1930s can be read retrospectively as a harbinger of the Enron scandal in the early 2000s.

When we start thinking about such industries not as the foundations for economic markets, but as social infrastructure, the political nature of this enduring struggle becomes

obvious. Control of such infrastructure governs so much more than electricity delivery; it also determines natural resource use, possibilities for local development, the flow and distribution of capital, and the nature of the connections between people. These relationships consequently create the building blocks for the kinds of society that are imaginable and implementable in particular localities.

As I argue in the previous chapter, community ownership of electricity on its own is likely to do little to change society; however, the history of rural electric co-ops in America as well as current efforts in many co-ops to rethink societal relationships to energy infrastructure proffers potential role models (complete with cautionary tales) for the kinds of institutions and political projects that could shift current extractive relationships to more local, democratic control.

Moving from Alternative Energy to Oppositional Energy

My introduction started by making a distinction between alternative and oppositional movements for culture change. Current thought on the energy crisis tells us that we need more alternative energy. What I have tried to show throughout this exploration of electric co-ops over eighty years is that what we actually need is oppositional energy.

What's the difference? Alternative energy as a concept draws a comparison with the current dominant energy resources, including coal, gas, and oil; the alternatives proposed are technology and policy solutions that, many hope, will fix impending environmental crises and allow society to continue on as it has been otherwise. Some see technological change as an inevitable progression between humanity and nature that will end in sustainability – the “ecological modernization” camp of environmental sociology, for example, argues that industrializing countries must work through a kind of environmental Kuznets curve, in which environmental degradation must get worse before it gets better, but that ultimately the “natural” path is towards greater environmental quality through advanced industrialization.501 Others less optimistic see a future of managed scarcity,

where technological and regulatory innovations under the current global political economy allow not only for wealth but also for risks, pollution, and degraded environments to be increasingly unevenly distributed based on a structural inequitable social hierarchy. This is the future made possible by a switch to alternative energy without more fundamental questions about the societal structures that created such damaging environmental relationships in the first place.

In contrast, oppositional energy reconnects to electricity's early promises of social empowerment and equity. The opposed social structures include not just dependence on fossil fuels, but also the economic and political structures that have led to such unhealthy relationships with these energy resources, as well as the kinds of production apparatuses that depend on the dual exploitation of people and nature. What might be the result of investments in oppositional energy? I argue that it would be social institutions built around the awareness of the politics of energy; oppositional energy would start from questions about what makes sense locally, in terms of resources and needs.

In Table 5.1, below, I summarize some of the major differences between alternative and oppositional perspectives on building a new energy economy, using electric co-ops as the institutional basis. In this dichotomous approach to energy infrastructure, the “alternative solutions” path offers technical solutions aimed at enhancing and maintaining the status quo, while the “oppositional solutions” path focuses on changing relationships of ownership and governance to create a more equitable and sustainable social framework. I propose this distinction as a theoretical exercise more so than a roadmap; it is obviously incomplete and too general to point to specific actions, but rather begins to identify the kinds of energy infrastructure needed to create different futures.

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Table 5.1: Alternative Energy and Oppositional Energy

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<tr>
<th>Energy Infrastructure</th>
<th>Cooperative Business Models</th>
<th>Economics</th>
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<tr>
<td>New energy technologies (solar, wind, hydro, biofuels)</td>
<td>Community ownership through membership shares</td>
<td>Support for “fourth sector” businesses</td>
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<td>Demand Side Management and energy efficiency technologies</td>
<td>Capital credits</td>
<td>“Triple-bottom-lines”</td>
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<td>Market mechanisms (cap and trade, etc.)</td>
<td>Representative board of directors</td>
<td>Corporate citizenship / corporate social responsibility</td>
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<td>Microgrids</td>
<td>Employee ownership</td>
<td>Civic education, including for movement building</td>
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<td>On-bill financing for energy efficiency upgrades</td>
<td>Local investment</td>
<td>Burden of proof on producer that new industrial activity is needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-owned generation</td>
<td>Focus on inclusion and deliberative agenda setting</td>
<td>Separation of economic growth from “the public good” in economic goal setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial ecology</td>
<td>National networks</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explicit political agendas</td>
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The key points of the “oppositional” path are as follows:

(1) Changes in physical infrastructure can involve not just new technology but also creative innovations in how technology is deployed, including rethinking spatial organization, ownership, coordination of resources, and collaboration with other local activities;

(2) Because cooperative ownership can mean a variety of different things in practice, cooperatives need to be aware of the social externalities of their business models; an “oppositional” perspective would go beyond the currently widespread non-participatory model of community ownership, which mainly focuses on the economic health of cooperatives, to organize cooperatives around a definition of “community” that is explicitly inclusive, including towards their employees, their transient members, and those members
who have little experience with deliberative decision making. Moreover, because electric co-ops are part of a national network with existing channels of communication and ample political, financial, and media resources, their potential to organize as a political body around a new energy economy would be explicitly acknowledged and utilized;

(3) Finally, “oppositional energy” requires a better defined connection between civil society and the infrastructure that shapes the daily life of citizens, as well as the perspective that economic activity should be in the service of raising the general quality of life, not just average material wealth. This is fundamentally different even from the recent enthusiasm for “triple bottom line” businesses that incorporate social and environmental goals along with economic ones, because these models still privilege privately run corporations (or representatively run cooperatives) as expert institutions that deliver more equitable and sustainable goods to a passive public. The oppositional institutional model would, by contrast, focus on organizational models that build from and are in service of community visions.

Co-ops as Institutions of Civil Economics and Social Transformation

Historian Timothy Mitchell points out that “the economy” did not become an object in its own right until the mid-twentieth century. Prior to that, he observes, economy simply “meant something like, ‘the principle of seeking to attain, or the method of attaining, a desired end, with the least possible expenditure of means.’ ...By extension, ‘money economy’ referred to the attitudes and transactions of commercial exchange, a way of ‘dealing with men and things.’”503 Within a brief fourteen-year period, Mitchell notes, the use of the word in contemporary discourse shifted from economy as a “set of attitudes and relations” to the economy – “a distinct social sphere [as well as] the realm of a social science, statistical enumeration, and government policy.” Through exploring its linguistic transformation, Mitchell argues that “the economy” should really be reinterpreted as a twentieth century artifact; “like all things artifactual,” he continues, the economy “was

made out of processes that were as much 'material' as they were 'cultural,' and that were as 'real' as they were 'abstract.' ...The realization of the economy made possible new practices (of development, management, and government, to name a few), new claims to expertise, new equivalences, and new silences.” Seemingly unnoticed by a culture of modernity that shifted relatively peacefully (if not naturally) into these new technocratic practices and relationships, Mitchell reflects, “the definite article that slipped gently into the world between the 1930s and the 1950s was a marker of one of the most profound intellectual and political changes of the twentieth century.”

Following Mitchell’s discussion, it is worth considering the possibility of un-claiming “the economy” as its own autonomous sphere in political economic theory in the twenty-first century. As Mitchell reminds us, the economy is not a thing, after all, but an orientation towards resources defined by social relations. In fact, by that light, it is not only possible but arguably more accurate, and therefore responsible, to view “the economy” as not autonomous at all, but rather fundamentally a part of civil society. In place of “the [autonomous] economy,” I have tried here to contribute to research on institutions of economic democracy and other kinds of community-based ownership as ultimately building a practice of “civil economics” – a set of economic practices and relationships that arise out of and contribute to the flourishing of a vibrant civil society. Beyond the intentional parallel of civil economics to civil society, the choice of terms is specific. The definition of “civil,” as opposed to civic, is “of or relating to ordinary citizens and their concerns.” The double entendre of civil also meaning showing etiquette and respect in economic practice is intentional, implying that we owe each other basic human decency in our social interactions, whether or not they are mediated by money, and in co-constructing a lifeworld; such social graces are not automatic, often even explicitly not expected, within relationships of private property, commodity exchange, and free markets. The critical project of putting such “civil economics” in practice is not creating a “new” economy, nor an apolitical shift of development responsibility to already overtaxed local businesses and

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504 Ibid., 81-82.
505 J. Phillip Thompson, personal conversation with author, November 2013.
506 “Civil,” Oxford American Dictionaries (Oxford University Press), Mac OS X 10.6.8 Dashboard App, accessed December 10, 2013. Compared to civic: “of or relating to a city or town, esp. its administration; municipal; of or relating to the duties or activities of people in relation to their town, city, or local area.”
governments, but an approach to current socioeconomic relations as an ongoing part of a deeply entrenched political project, which seeks to expand the debate about economic policy.\textsuperscript{507}

Many existing organizations, including KFTC, WEC, and others, understand this political project as fundamental to restructuring their local energy economy. Rather than seeing community ownership as a straightforward palliative for broader economic inequities, these communities view themselves as fostering deliberative venues where the purpose and form of economic practices can be revised, debated, and contested. As KFTC member and leadership trainer Lisa Abbott argues: “We don’t have a lot of democratic institutions in our lives where disagreements are handled well.”\textsuperscript{508} In actively working to foster a safe and productive environment for local deliberation, organizations such as KFTC offer a practical lesson for the calls for more local democracy in the political ecology and “new economy” literatures. These organizations know well that local democracy is not an easy procedural process, but involves struggle among diverse issues, interests, and needs, and that not only is the existence of such struggle normal, but in fact it should be welcomed as a generative process that leads to greater mutual understanding and potential social innovation.

But let me reiterate that organizations such as KFTC have this awareness because of explicit political economic orientations. I have shown in this dissertation how easy it is for cooperatives to be brought into traditional capitalist projects of perpetuating growth-oriented and wealth-consolidating economic agendas. Barely even alternatives to capitalism, many co-ops have in the past acted as institutional solutions to crises of capitalism, enabling a reorganization of labor, resources, and capital that creates new markets and increases industrial efficiency. But I have also shown that the same co-ops retain the potential to educate and make new connections within their membership communities. As in any civic institution, co-ops ultimately go in the direction their

\textsuperscript{507} Arguing for the necessity of political transformation around economic issues, Wolff writes, for example: “The struggle in Washington continues between a somewhat crisis-weakened but still dominant mainstream and its very moderate Keynesian critics. Both sides speak and act as if their positions mark the limits of legitimate debate and fully exhaust the space of economic policy options.” Wolff, Democracy at Work, 9.

\textsuperscript{508} Lisa Abbott, “Organizing for Change.”
communities tell them to go; they reflect the assumptions and desires of their membership, including, too often, apathy.

Despite all of the discussion here about oppositional politics, going back to the basic cooperative principles reveals a set of reasonably uncontested American ideals: inclusion of many kinds of diversity, a focus on education, democratic decision making, economic fairness, a combination of local autonomy and institutional coordination where appropriate, and concern for community as a fundamental goal. The electric co-op network has both the national network and the political resources to rally around these principles as the building block for economic and energy policy. But years of history show that this is not automatic, nor is it likely that this vast network is waiting for a tipping point or critical mass of community ownership, as recent cooperative literature suggests. The research presented here thus indicates a need to build institutions capable of reflecting in practice the complexities inherent in these goals; as Abbott calls for, to be able to handle conflict, and, I would add, to handle experimentation, including room for trial and error. In practice, local democracy may be one of most fragile of American traditions in the twenty-first century; a number of co-op members across Vermont, Colorado, and Kentucky, however, are certain to agree that it is worth putting in the attention and work that allows it to flourish.
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