

Free Cooperation

Grab the rules, play it hard.

Basic rules for free cooperation

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The following text is a transcript of the dialogue in *On Rules and Monsters. An introduction into free cooperation* -- a video by Christoph Spehr and Jörg Windszus.

The video takes the form of a 1950s monster movie pastiche, combining elements of classic genre films, such as *Godzilla*, the *Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Queen of Outer Space*, and *The Time Machine*. So, when reading this text, imagine you are watching a classic 1950s science fiction movie...

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WOMAN (off): So on the one hand, cooperation doesn't seem to make us free. On the other hand, living without cooperation doesn't make us free, either. How can we stay free in cooperation? What is free cooperation? To learn about free cooperation, we first must understand the three basic principles of forced cooperation. The first principle of forced cooperation is: **KEEP OFF THE BASIC RULES!**

(The Time Machine) The big gate is slammed shut. George tries desperately to open it again.

MAN (off): Forced cooperation is not tyranny -- or, more precisely: it is not something that looks like tyranny at first sight. But the basic rules will not give way to anybody. They are not negotiated between the members of the cooperation -- be it the workers of a factory, the employees at an office, the women and children in the patriarchal family, the people affected by the decisions of a given institution. The basic rules are kept behind iron gates. People and positions may be changed; some distribution of value may be negotiated; smaller rules may be changed and altered or even accepted to be refused. But the core of the cooperation, its basic rules, are not to be tackled by the real members of the cooperation.

WOMAN (off): The second principle of forced cooperation is: **NEVER STOP THE ENGINE!**
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(The Trollenberg Terror) The group is sitting in the gondola of the cable lift and is taken up the mountain. They see the >cloud< floating into the valley, closing in the houses. The >cloud< enters the downward station and freezes the cables. The gondola stops, goes on, stops again.

So on the one hand, cooperation doesn't seem to make us free. On the other hand, living without cooperation doesn't make us free, either. How can we stay free in cooperation? What is free cooperation?

MAN (off): Forced cooperation doesn't turn people into robots -- or, more precisely: it doesn't turn people into something that looks like robots at first sight. You may talk. You may quarrel while working. You may make proposals or even hand small protest notes. Some forced cooperations even allow you to vote or take part in participatory systems or in so-called >speech situations< where you may argue that some rules are irrational and that you could work better without them. But never, never must you use material power to push your interests. Do not freeze the cables. Do not stop the gondola. Do not go on strike, do not withdraw your workforce while talking. This is doomed and criminalized as monstrous behavior. If you try, you will get bombed for it.

WOMAN (off): The third principle of forced cooperation is: **SERVE OR PAY!**

(The Day the Earth Stood Still)

KLAATU: I came here to give you these facts. It is no concern of ours how you run your own planet. But if you threaten to extend your violence, this earth of yours will be reduced to a burned-out cin-

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der. Your choice is simple: join us, or pursue your present course and face obliteration. We'll be waiting for your answer. The decision rests with you.

MAN (off): Not every forced cooperation uses the whip -- or, more precisely: not every forced cooperation uses a whip that looks like a whip at first sight. In many forced cooperations, we are not forced openly to do what we are told. Only that it doesn't really make sense to deny. Because if we don't cooperate, if the cooperation splits, or gets spoiled, we are the ones to pay. If we disagree with our boss and split, he still keeps the enterprise, while we leave with empty hands. It's serve or pay: that makes choices so simple in forced cooperation.

WOMAN (off): Having understood how forced cooperation works, we can now articulate the three basic principles of free cooperation. The first principle of free cooperation is: **GRAB THE RULES!**

(Attack of the crab monsters) A man is walking down the dunes to the beach. Out of nowhere, a huge crab appears and grabs him. He cries.

MAN (off): In a free cooperation, all rules can be changed. Every member is free to challenge any rule, and the members of the cooperation decide about their rules. There are no >holy rules< that are barred behind iron gates and cannot be changed by the members of the cooperation.

WOMAN (off): The second principle of free cooperation is: **PLAY IT HARD!**

(The Time Machine) While George is fighting a Morlock and gets attacked by more Morlocks, one of the Eloi is considering his hand, deep in thought. Suddenly he makes a fist and knocks down the Morlock.

The Time Machine, Courtesy Warner Home Video



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MAN (off): In a free cooperation, all members have the same power to influence the rules. This power is not given by any formal structures of decision-making: talking or voting is not enough. Real power comes from the freedom and ability to withdraw one's cooperative activity, to hold back, to quit, to give limits and conditions to one's cooperative activity. To say or to signal: >No, if not.<

(World Without End) The commander comes in from the negotiations. He is angry.

OFFICER How was it?

COMMANDER They won't cooperate!

WOMAN (off): The third principle of free cooperation is: **STAY ONLY WHERE YOU CAN LEAVE, AND WHERE YOUR LEAVING IS MEANINGFUL.**

(The Time Machine) George notices the Eloi for the first time. Suddenly there are cries: Weena is drowning in the river.

GEORGE: Why are you sitting by?

As nobody moves, George leaps into the water and pulls her out.

GEORGE: You're alright?

Without a word, Geena gets up and leaves him.

MAN (off): In a free cooperation, the >price< of the cooperation being split up, coming to an end, somebody going away, the cooperation becoming looser or being not fully working, is similar (and bearable) for all members of the cooperation. Only under this condition, withdrawing one's cooperative activity is not blackmailing the others. Only under this condition, all members of the cooperation have the same bargaining power. That means: each member can actually leave the cooperation, without paying too high a price; and the leaving of each member will have an actual effect on the others, will be experienced by them as some price they are paying, so that this negative prospect may trigger new negotiations. Because you do not only wish to be allowed to do this or that; you also want to make others do this or that, or do this or that not. For this, you need equal bargaining power. Without bargaining power, they will just let you drown.

(The Time Machine) Weena and George are sitting on the stairs.

GEORGE: I did it to save your life. That doesn't seem to mean much to you or anybody else around here.

WEENA: It doesn't.

GEORGE: Do you realize there were about 20 of your friends watching you drown, not one of them so much as lifting a finger to save you? Ain't that a curious attitude? Very curious world. Aren't you the least bit interested in who I am? Where I'm from?

WEENA Should I? Getting bargaining power usually means getting organized, too. Without the solidarity of others, you cannot level bargaining powers in many cases. In a free cooperation, there has to be a constant re-arrangement of rules, individual appropriation and solidarities to keep bargaining power equal between the members of the cooperation. Making bargaining power equal -- through changing rules, individual appropriation, solidarity -- is the core business of any emancipatory politics, and the basic definition of what is left politics. It is also the core definition of being someone, of being amongst others who really recognize you.

(The Time Machine) George comes from the rotten books and addresses the sitting Eloi.

GEORGE You! All of you! I'm going back to my own time. I won't bother to tell anybody about the useless struggle, the hopeless future. But at least I can die among men! You ... ah! He runs out.

WOMAN (off): Doing free cooperation means no less than taking off the mask, and demanding the others to bear that. Because most cooperations look okay as long as you are wearing the mask that was designed for you; as long as you fit into what others think is appropriate for you; as long as you do what others want you to do. But you only see what a cooperation is worth when there is conflict, when you demand change, when you take off the mask.

(Queen of Outer Space) A spacewoman with a mask on her face and an earthman are sitting on a couch.

SPACEWOMAN: You'll have to suffer the consequences for your planned attack.

EARTHMAN: There is no plan of attack!

She goes to a monitor and turns it on.
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Queen of Outer Space, Courtesy Allied Artists

SPACEWOMAN: Let me show you what happens to those who oppose. Look, Captain! The disintegrator.

EARTHMAN: This is what destroyed the space station!

SPACEWOMAN: And it will destroy the Earth, too.

EARTHMAN: The people! The lives of those countless billions! I admit that men on earth have been ... quarrelsome and foolish in the past. But we're no harm to your work! I swear! (He takes her at her shoulders.)

I understand you better than you do yourself. You're denying man's love, for that hatred and for that monstrous power you have.

SPACEWOMAN: Monstrous?

EARTHMAN: You're not only a queen, you're a woman, too. And a woman needs a man's love. Let me see your face!

(He takes off her mask.)
I'm sorry. I didn't understand!

SPACEWOMAN: Radiation burns. Men did that to me. Men with their wars. You told me that women need love. Now that you know, would you give me that love?

She offers him a kiss. He turns away.

EARTHMAN: I -- I didn't realize.

SPACEWOMAN: You didn't realize! - Guards!

The (female) guards enter and take the earthman with them.