

Introduction: Principal Problems and General Development of Cooperative Enterprise

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INTRODUCTION

How important are cooperatives in our society and economy? Are they a vanishing form of enterprise useful only in developing countries and imperfect markets? Or are they a resilient form of enterprise that parallels investor-oriented firms? We'd like to start with these questions because the main aim of this book is to offer answers to them by surveying the evolution of cooperatives (co-ops) all over the world in the last sixty years.

At first glance, the questions seem to be answered by the United Nations' declaration of the year 2012 as the "International Year of Co-operatives." This is a remarkable development, apparently establishing co-ops firmly back on the agenda of economists, politicians, and ordinary people throughout the world. The UN's declaration of the International Year of Co-operatives is particularly remarkable because the twenty to thirty years preceding 2012 seem to have been decades of stagnant progress for co-ops in many countries. Recently, however, co-ops did a remarkable job of withstanding the financial crisis that started in 2008. That alone would seem to justify a careful look at cooperatives and at their important role in the world economy.

The cooperative sector is certainly large: the world's three hundred largest co-ops do an annual business of \$1.1 trillion (in U.S. dollars), which is roughly equal to Spain's gross national product (GNP).¹ In Sweden and Switzerland, co-ops provide about 20 percent of the country's GNP. In addition, a recent statistical report comparing cooperative and conventional business ownership worldwide shows that there are 328 million people who own shares, compared to 1 billion who are member-owners of cooperative enterprises.² These figures suggest that, yes, co-ops matter!

¹ For more information, go to www.global300.co-op (accessed January 12, 2012).

² Ed Mayo, ed., *Global Business Ownership 2012, Members and Shareholders across the World* (Manchester: The Cooperative Union, 2012). See Appendix II for a synthetic view of these new figures.

Thus, we believe, it is worthwhile to take a closer look into this special form of enterprise. However, the preceding questions also include many underlying issues that should be considered in analyzing the role played by cooperatives in today's economy and society. Have co-ops changed through time? Does a universal model of co-ops exist? What can explain deviations from it? Are the model and its deviations efficient forms of enterprise?

WHAT IS A CO-OP?

The idea of cooperative enterprise is very old; in Europe it became strong in the Middle Ages. The guilds and the trade association of the Hanseatic League were built on the idea of cooperation,³ and the many European towns that became politically independent from aristocracy or clergy did so on the basis of this principle. It was and is today the core idea of the Swiss nation; relics of medieval commons are to be found in today's European forest cooperatives.

Although cooperative efforts of various sorts have existed since the beginning of civilization, the modern movement began primarily as a response to industrial capitalism. Then, those concerned about the problems created by industry looked to a variety of private and public efforts to provide greater security and equity to those whose lives were being shaped and reshaped by powerful economic changes.

On the one hand, the co-ops were enterprises for making money, while on the other hand they were socially oriented. Co-ops were different from investor-owned businesses (IOBs) and also different from organizations established for the benefit of the general public, such as charities or foundations. However, in some countries, co-ops and nonprofit organizations were grouped together under the definition of social economy⁴ or civic economy.⁵ Following the

³ Hugo van Driel and Greta Devos, "Path Dependence in Ports: The Persistence of Co-operative Forms," *Business History Review* 81, no. 4 (2007), pp. 681–708.

⁴ The definition of social economy dates back to Georges Fauquet who in *Le secteur co-opérative* (1935) suggested cooperative enterprises as a third sector in the modern economy between public enterprises and investor-oriented firms. This concept has enjoyed a revival since the 1970s, when the definitions of *third sector* and *social economy* were widened to include other organizations. Today's definition of social economy includes "private companies that . . . provide goods, services, insurance or finance, in which the distribution of surpluses and the decision-making processes are not directly linked to the share of capital of each member . . . and those economic agents whose main function is to produce services not intended for sale, for particular groups of households, financed by the voluntary contributions of families." J. Barea Tejeiro, "Concepts y agentes de la economía social," *Ciriec Espana, Revista de economía publica, social y cooperativa* 8 (1990), pp. 109–17, as translated by J. L. Monzon Campos in 'Contribution of the Social Economy to the General Interest,' *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 68 (1997), pp. 397–408.

⁵ The civic economy encompasses a diverse variety of organizations: public-private partnerships, socially responsible companies, community enterprises, cooperatives, foundations, charities, voluntary bodies, ethical investment funds, credit unions, community, banks, the informal sector (the ethical part), and nongovernment organizations. These organizations aim to serve the interests of all stakeholders involved: customers, the local community, the organization's staff, and the providers of capital.

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International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), the world's top organization of all co-ops,⁶ we define *co-op* as an autonomous organization of persons who meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs by voluntarily forming a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

Thus, we have a combination of several characteristics that in some quarters are said to be contradictory, such as democracy and management, or ownership and democratic control. Co-ops are exclusive. They are membership organizations, often exclusively serving their members. Membership entails investing a defined minimum sum and obtaining a voting right. In contrast to IOBs, a larger investment does not lead to more voting rights; the one and only voting right is bound to the membership, regardless of the economic weight of the respective member.⁷ Thus, co-ops have applied the idea of democratic voting and democratic control to their form of enterprise: co-ops are by definition democratic firms.

Co-ops differ from nonprofit organizations because of the different attitude toward surpluses. In cooperative enterprises, surpluses may be paid to members in the form of patronage returns proportional to the business done by each member of the cooperative. Nonprofit organizations, of course, are precluded from distributing any surplus to members.

At the same time, co-ops and nonprofit organizations share in common the ideal of collaboration among citizens for the improvement of the standard of living of the whole community, or at least a significant portion of it. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in many Western countries co-ops were a vehicle for the “have-nots” to improve their lives or standards of living through organized self-aid. The same could be said today for co-ops in low-income countries. That is why in some quarters co-ops and other kinds of nonprofit organizations are linked together in the definition of social economy.

Quoting Fay (1908), we can say that “Co-operation is to charity as prevention is to cure.”⁸ Co-ops are only a small part of the social economy, but still they are important. For instance, in 2009 there were registered in Germany 600,000 societies for self-aid (e.g., sports clubs), 14,000 associations for self-aid, but only 5,500 co-ops; thus the number of co-ops represented less than 1 percent of nonprofit organizations in that country. In 2010, in the United States there were 1,617,301 nonprofit organizations and around 30,000 co-ops, less than 2 percent. The picture is quite different in other countries: in Italy there are more than 70,000 co-ops and 236,000 nonprofit organizations; the former are almost 30 percent of the latter.

In conclusion, the core that makes an enterprise a co-op is a merger of economic activities and democratic governance. The financial engagement of members and their support or use of the respective enterprise are as important as democratic voting and control of the firm. This is called the “dual nature” of co-ops.

⁶ The ICA, founded in 1895, has the goal of representing co-ops worldwide.

⁷ In some countries, for instance, Italy, exceptions to the general rule have been introduced, and by law some cooperative shares can generate more than one voting right.

⁸ Charles R. Fay, *Co-operation at Home and Abroad* (1908), p. 8.

ORIGINS AND TYPES OF CO-OPS

Although all co-ops share some characteristics, numerous types of these enterprises exist. Generally the cooperative model of enterprise can be applied to any business activity. And indeed, co-ops have existed in many fields of economic activity, including agriculture, retailing, housing, financial services, public utilities, and the production of goods. After the Second World War even more varieties of activities chose this form of organization: health and child care, tourism, car-sharing, and even philharmonic orchestras adopted the co-op form. For instance, in Italy up to 50 percent of all social services are provided by co-ops; in the United States health care through co-ops is important; in France more than 4 million children are educated in school co-ops. Consequently, we have small co-ops, sometimes just one shop, but most are medium-sized enterprises. A good example is the many cooperatives in wine-making (check your next wine bottle!), in which private growers have pooled their vinification and marketing. There are also a few very large ones, such as Co-op City in New York with more than 15,000 residential units all in one place. The world's largest co-op is, however, the Spanish Mondragon, which in 2010 employed 85,000 persons and is a transnational enterprise with production units in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America.

There are vast variations. Usually three different typologies of co-ops can be identified: customer-owned co-ops, worker co-ops, and producer-owned co-ops. Their origins are from different European countries, mainly from the UK, Germany, France, and Denmark.

One of the most important modern co-ops was the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, a consumer co-op (in our taxonomy, a customer-owned co-op), founded in 1844 in the UK. In that year a band of Rochdale weavers set up a shop where their families could buy good-quality, basic food at reasonable prices. A couple of other customer-owned co-ops existed before: in the UK (e.g., the Fenwick Weaver's Society founded in 1761), in France (the Co-operative Grocery Store of Lyon set up in 1831), and in the United States (the Philadelphia Contributorship for the Insurance of Homes from Loss by Fire dating back to 1752). What made Rochdale different was (a) its long-term success and (b) its written principles, which, with a few changes, still provide the basic ideology of all co-ops worldwide (as you can see from the ICA principles described below). From the UK, consumer co-ops spread to Switzerland (first consumer co-op in 1851), Germany (1852), Italy (1854), Japan (1879), Brazil (1887), South Africa (1892), and so on.

Another important source of co-op development was in Germany, where Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch and Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen launched a movement for credit co-ops. Independent of each other, they founded institutions to provide small credits to their members. Schulze-Delitzsch, a shoemaker, started a co-op for fellow shoemakers that enabled the group to buy leather in bulk (in our taxonomy, a second kind of customer-owned co-op). Raiffeisen, a burgomaster,

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built a credit co-op for the support of small farmers. According to the World Council of Credit Unions, in 2010 there were 49,000 credit unions with 184 million members in 97 countries.⁹ Today this tradition is carried forward in the movement for microfinance in Central Asia, highlighted by the United Nations in 2005 as the International Year of Microcredit. While Schulze-Delitzsch's ideas spread among craftspeople, Raiffeisen's had much success with peasants, both in and outside Germany.

France has been the cradle of worker co-ops. In 1834, in Paris, four workers set up the Association chrétienne des bijoutiers en doré (The Christian Association of Jewelers), inspired by Philippe Buchez, a doctor following the Saint-Simon ideals. Another source was the socialist Louis Blanc, who in his book *L'organisation du travail* (1839) launched the idea of social workshops, worker-owned enterprises based on the principle of equal benefits for the members. According to Blanc, the government should finance co-ops in their early stages by purchasing productive equipment or giving public procurement and then withdrawing its support once they become viable. The first attempt to implement this project came with the 1848 Revolution, when the provisional government and Blanc himself created the National Workshops, laboratories in which unemployed urban workers were given employment in carrying out useful public works. However, the National Workshops were more state-owned enterprises than co-ops and were closed after a few months. Nevertheless, Blanc's idea of worker co-ops for the "have-nots" who could carry out public works became an important part of the nineteenth-century European cooperative movement.

Both in Europe and in the United States, dairy and cheese cooperatives had been organized since the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, modern producer-owned cooperatives were founded in Denmark, where cooperative dairies were set up in the 1880s. These enterprises were inspired by the Lutheran theologian and bishop Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, and similar co-ops for other commodities soon followed.¹⁰ Diffusion of Co-ops from Europe to the Rest of the World

From Europe cooperative ideas spread all over the world. They traveled to North America fast and spread quickly, and this was also true in Latin America, Japan, and South Africa, all of which were included in the movement before the end of the nineteenth century. The ideology of cooperation established surprisingly small roots in the rest of Asia and Africa, and generally speaking, the co-op ideas did not spread in the European colonies. This was true in spite of the fact that the British tried to promote co-ops in India and Eastern Africa, the French in Western Africa and Indochina, and the Belgians in Central Africa.¹¹ The reasons

⁹ Home page of WOCCU: <http://www.woccu.org> (accessed October 26, 2011).

¹⁰ Johnson Birchall, *The International Co-operative Movement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Patrick Develtere, Ignace Pollet, and Fredrick Wanyama, eds., *L'Afrique solidaire et entrepreneuriale. La renaissance du mouvement co-opératif africain* (Ilo, 2009); Vishwar Satgar and Michelle Williams, eds., *The Passion of the People: Successful Cooperative Experiences in Africa* (Copac, 2008).

are quite simple: there were no democratic traditions, nor well-defined property rights, nor indigenous movements supporting cooperative ideals. In America and Japan, where such deficits did not exist, co-ops were developed from the bottom up. In most African countries and India, the colonial rulers tried, rather unsuccessfully, to employ a top-down approach.

Because co-ops functioned well in raising living standards of the poor in Europe and America, however, after World War II they were thought to be the vehicles of choice for developing countries as well. Especially after 1960, the year most African countries became independent, the UN, the cooperative branch of the International Labour Organization (ILO), as well as the ICA tried to promote this form of enterprise for small farmers and others in Africa and Asia. Unfortunately these trials failed dismally with some important exceptions: for instance, India (Appendix II). Generally the governments of the decolonized countries strengthened the top-down approach of the former colonial powers and strictly connected co-ops to special government departments. In some cases, such as Tanzania, co-ops were nationalized. The impact of these developments figures prominently among the reasons why even today co-ops are unevenly distributed over the globe.

Nevertheless, since the 1990s, after the disruption of many co-ops that were unable to face the challenge of economic liberalization, a new phase in the history of African co-ops started. Many old co-ops were reorganized, the governments' influence was reduced, and the ICA cooperative principles became a reference point for a new generation of co-op laws.

Despite all that, today the diffusion of co-ops in this continent is relatively wide, and some African countries surpass Europe in numbers. However, the co-ops tend to be smaller and include a smaller percentage of the population (see Appendix II).

The former Asian and African colonies were not the only part of the world in which a strong and dangerous link between co-ops and the central state emerged. Indeed, after the transformation of the Russia Empire into the Soviet Union, in 1917 this new government created an anomalous type of co-op. The Soviet Union organized most agricultural production in co-ops called *kolkhozes*. After the Second World War, the other socialist European states, except Poland, followed the same policy. Eastern Europe in the 1950s and 1960s witnessed the speedy growth of state-centric cooperatives. Consequently, the number of socialist co-ops surmounted the number of all others. However, the majority of these co-ops were not set up voluntarily, and after the collapse of the USSR, their members preferred other forms of enterprise. The link between communism and co-ops left a bitter intellectual heritage: even twenty years later, peasants in the former socialist countries chose not to explore the advantages of this form of enterprise and insisted on other, in many cases less appropriate, types of organization. Therefore, the 1950s and 1960s development was followed by an equally rapid decline of co-ops after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the other socialist states in 1990–1.

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Jewish settlers in Israel have developed yet another extreme form of co-op called a *kibbutz*. Buttressed by a powerful national and religious ideology, they not only work together, but they share their products, and, in some cases, even private life, equally. In other cases, cooperation coexists with private ownership. Because of the special role of religion connected to the *kibbutzim*, it is not clear if these organizations still can be called co-ops. But what is clear is the fact that most of them are economically successful even though they violate one of the Rochdale Principles: religious neutrality.

To complete the world history of co-ops we should come back to Western Europe, to the cradle of cooperative enterprises. After the Second World War two basic patterns of change emerged. In Northern Europe, in Germany and Belgium, cooperative undertakings were very successful for at least three decades; then, after the oil crises of the 1970s, co-ops entered a new phase dominated by stagnation or decline. In Mediterranean Europe, Switzerland and Austria, by contrast, the number of cooperatives has kept growing since the end of World War II. To summarize, over the last decades co-ops in the European countries seem to have shared only one single characteristic: an increase in the number of members per enterprise.

VARIATIONS IN PURPOSE

Over the decades co-ops have changed some of their ideal inspirations. In the modern age, when merchants or harbor workers set up the first cooperatives, their aim was to organize their businesses or jobs in a better way. During the second half of the nineteenth century, when the European cooperative movement spread, a new set of ideals, inspirations, and goals emerged. For instance, consumer co-ops were thought to improve the standard of living of the poor, credit unions and Raiffeisen banks were developed to stimulate small enterprises' investments in both rural and urban contexts, while worker co-ops were set up to escape from unemployment. Frequently, in Europe, there was a strong cultural link with the worker movement on the one hand and with the Catholic world on the other.

During the first half of the twentieth century and in some Western countries until the 1970s, most European co-ops continued to be enterprises for the "have-nots" and maintained a strong connection with the worker movement.

However, the deep transformation of society and economy that has characterized Western countries since the 1970s has affected co-ops in many different ways. In some countries, a strong decline of the cooperative ideals has occurred. For instance, in Germany, during the 1950s and 1960s, co-ops were still perceived as a morally superior form of business, but nothing more than a supplement to IOBs. Later, after various scandals in and about co-ops, the public began to doubt the moral aspect of the cooperative movement. Today, the movement is perceived by many as a defensive reaction, a means of protecting certain groups, such as labor, from the harshest aspects of capitalistic change.

In other Western countries, a deep change involving the redefinition of ideals, governance, and organizational models was undertaken. For instance, in Italy a new generation of members took the lead and little by little introduced both new ideals and merit-based organizational models, while the link with the worker movement waned.¹² The emergence of an affluent society changed the needs of many co-op members. Young members assigned new tasks to their co-ops, emphasizing the acquisition of an entrepreneurial attitude, a chance for upward mobility, and so on.

IDEOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY OF CO-OPS

Though Western Europe represents the cradle of cooperative enterprise, already on this continent a multitude of models emerged. The variety of ideological contexts was great as well. E. Furlough and C. Strikwerda in 1999 defined it as the ideological flexibility of cooperatives.¹³

That is why in some countries co-ops have received political support from both left and right circles, while in others from neither. How is this possible? The answer is that both the definition and nature of cooperatives have differed in different societies at different times. As a result, various movements have found their way to co-ops, from the working class to the religious minded, from liberal to anti-corporation-oriented movements. The pattern of movements having supported cooperative ideals is quite different across countries.

Nevertheless, throughout Western Europe, working-class organizations played a crucial role in co-ops, at least until the last decades of the twentieth century. So, too, did various forms of Christianity (usually Catholic inspired in Italy and Spain, Protestant oriented in Denmark and Central Europe). In the United States, different sorts of anticorporate movements arose, including most prominently, those in agriculture.

Most of these movements have had certain characteristics in common: they usually focused on the “small people” owning little or nothing, in order to raise them from poverty through organized self-aid. The attention to the “have-nots” created a strong connection between co-ops and workers’ movements in response to the first and second industrial revolutions. On the European continent, workers’ movements involved four pillars: the socialist party, trade unions, organizations for recreation (e.g., sports or singing), and the co-ops. Leaders of these movements were usually convinced that co-ops were not only better institutions in a moral sense but also economically superior to any form of privately owned enterprise. Consequently, co-ops would one day finally simply

¹² This aspect has been studied in some depth for the Italian cooperatives. P. Battilani, *Il gruppo Co. ind 1961–2011: Storia di un co-packer* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2011), pp. 263–88; P. Battilani and V. Zamagni, *The Managerial Transformation of Italian Co-operative Enterprises: 1946–2010*, Business History, forthcoming.

¹³ Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda, eds., *Consumer Against Capitalism? Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America and Japan 1840–1990* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), p. 3.

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outgrow the private economic sector – a peaceful way to some kind of socialism. However, the idea of co-ops also attracted other, more well-to-do circles, which soon learned of the advantages of buying or selling in large quantities. For instance, in the United States, founders of the cooperative movement chose theoretical approaches that were consistent with American ideologies of liberal individualism. Later, cooperative theory became increasingly conservative, especially in the early twentieth century.

Also, political approaches that did not believe in the long-term survival of cooperatives have occasionally supported them. An important part of the political left understood co-ops as a short- or medium-term solution to what in the long run the state should do: run the economy. Some part of the political right supported co-ops as a short- or medium-term solution to what in the long run the market should do (but had not yet achieved).

The result has been a multitude of explanations and motivations for co-ops' development all over the world. In the end, co-ops everywhere changed their organizational structures as they adapted to the needs they were designed to satisfy, including their social goals. Besides, the distribution of numbers suggests that co-ops seem particularly well suited for the agricultural and service sectors. Finally, like business, they seem to have their own product cycle.¹⁴

In Western Europe and partly in the United States, co-ops for the “have-nots” flourished for more than 180 years, until the “golden years” of growth from 1948–73 generated a decent standard of living for a very high percentage of the population. Since that time, demand for co-ops has deeply changed in those countries. People who were well-to-do needed new motivations to cooperate. The organizational structures of co-ops changed and hybrid forms of the enterprise emerged. At the same time, in developing countries there was still room for “cooperation of the poor.” There is thus a special kind of cooperative product cycle shaped by the changing needs of the co-ops' members as economic development proceeds.

VARIATIONS ON THE EUROPEAN MODEL

Because cooperatives have always been a world of variations in place and in time, since the 1930s the international cooperative movement has tried to outline a sort of universal model by defining a set of cooperative principles. These principles were published in 1937. However, they have a much older origin because they represented the extension of the 1844 Rochdale Pioneer bylaws.

The Rochdale Principles called for (1) open membership, (2) democratic control (one person, one vote), (3) distribution of surplus in proportion to trade, (4) payment of limited interest on capital, (5) political and religious

¹⁴ Vernon suggested a life cycle for products from start, over maturity, and to aging, an idea that was transferred to other issues such as ideas, organizations, and so on. Raymond Vernon, “The Product Cycle Hypothesis in a New Environment,” in *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics* 41 (1979), pp. 255–67.

neutrality, (6) cash trading (no credit extended), and (7) promotion of education. These basic rules were designed to meet the needs of their time and place and were suited above all to consumer co-ops. The rules to provide no credit and the distribution in proportion to trade were designed, for instance, to educate member-customers. Since that time, credit unions and other forms of financial co-ops have become important institutions that share the culture and many of the practices of other cooperatives.

In 1937, when the ICA for the first time provided a set of co-op principles, the Rochdale statute became the basis for this formulation. Since then ICA has accepted small revisions in 1965 and 1995, and today the following rules are considered to be the basic ones: (1) voluntary and open membership; (2) democratic member control; (3) member economic participation; (4) autonomy and independence; (5) education, training, and information; (6) cooperation among cooperatives; and (7) concern for community. Rules 4, 6, and 7 are especially worth mentioning. Autonomy and independence of the co-op was no issue in Rochdale, as it was considered to be natural, but what was considered “natural” in the nineteenth-century UK is not so in other parts of the world today. Co-ops struggle to maintain their independence and develop their democratic potential. Cooperation among different co-ops was not an important idea in 1844, but it is an important goal today. Concern for the community has also been added. Today in many countries co-ops are strong and widespread enough to play a major social role, not only for their members, but for society as a whole. During the last decades, the principles have led directly to some important issues for the movement; the most important of which are addressed in this volume: degeneration (demutualization), variation, mutual trust (also over borders), and law.

Co-ops are enterprises, and enterprises can fail and go bankrupt. Co-ops have another possibility of failure: *degeneration*. Since the beginning of theoretical reflection on co-ops, this was, and today is more than ever, a major issue. Degeneration involves deviation from the social purposes of co-ops. One of the first systematic studies of worker cooperatives¹⁵ used the concept of degeneration to describe the process that could lead worker cooperatives to lose their democratic characteristics. Through this process, co-ops can become similar to or the same as investor-owned enterprises. This process can be internally controlled when co-ops decide to change their character (see the contribution on demutualization in this volume), or uncontrolled when democratic voting just gradually disappears. Indeed, democratic engagement has emerged as the Achilles’ heel of many co-ops. In many cases members were content and did not bother to vote. This is, of course, an open invitation to management to do what it wants. In several cases managers decided to demutualize the respective co-op, and during the process acquire through their insider-knowledge the best pieces for themselves as private property. Lack of democratic practice is a long-term threat to all co-ops.

¹⁵ Beatrice Webb (Potter), *The Cooperative Movement in Great Britain* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, and New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1891).