

# Guest Editorial

## New Cooperativism

Welcome to this special issue of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* which seeks to expand our knowledge of new cooperativism. A call for papers prepared by the UK Society for Co-operative Studies (UKSCS), with input from the EMES International Research Network (EMES) and European Research Institute for Cooperative and Social Enterprise (EURICSE), was sent out in late 2020. In 2021, UKSCS worked with EMES and EURICSE to support this special issue with a seminar series. As a result, we had a good response to the call. This issue includes six of the submissions plus a review article on the seminar series.

Below, we outline the rationale for the special issue. In particular, we draw attention to two waves of co-operative development starting in the early 1970s and late 1990s that underpin an emerging theory of new cooperativism. The first formal articulation of the theory appeared in a special issue of *Affinities* edited by Marcelo Vieta in 2010. From 2014, references were made to this in articles published in the UK discussing innovations in co-operative development taking place outside the established structures of the UK's consumer retail co-operatives (see Ridley-Duff, 2015). Below, we briefly introduce how new cooperativism was understood at the time of the call for papers, then contextualise how each article relates to emerging theory.

Before we start, however, we want to clarify the editorial choice we have made on use of the hyphen in 'co-operative'. In this issue, we follow the Anglo-American preference for inserting a hyphen when authors refer to the international movement as a whole (e.g., the co-operative movement), as well as when they refer to a group of co-operatives (such as platform co-operatives) or a single co-operative enterprise. However, 'new cooperativism' — at the current time — describes a mode of thought evolving both within and beyond the formal boundaries of the global movement. It is increasingly used to discuss and refer to practices within informal networks of co-operation as well as innovations in co-operative development. When referring to this mode of thought and practice, we do not use a hyphen.

## Why 'New Cooperativism'? Why now?

Members of an editorial board convened for this special issue have noticed a more open, more inclusive trend in co-operative movements in their research findings. Some of these are internet-based projects that promote software mediated forms of co-operation (Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2020; Vieta, 2010, 2018). There are various points in history theorised as significant to the development of this new cooperativism, including: the social co-operatives of Italy that developed in the 1970s and led to new co-operative laws in 1991 (Restakis, 2010); the subsequent rise of social and community co-operatives (Borzaga & Depredi, 2014; Vieta et al., 2017); a 'multi-stakeholder turn' combined with renewed emphasis on worker co-operatives throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, starting with key institutions in the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation based in Spain and culminating in formal support for solidarity and union co-operatives across North America, France, Italy and other territories (Conaty et al., 2018; Lund, 2011; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2019).

One South American movement triggered considerable academic interest (see Vieta, 2010; 2018). From 2001 onwards, a movement of 'recovered companies' in Argentina received international attention and became the subject of study (see Howarth, 2007; Ruggeri & Vieta, 2015; Vieta, 2020). When co-operative scholars considered the evolution of worker, social and solidarity co-operatives across multiple territories, it led to further work on the economic justification for new co-operatives. Sacchetti and Birchall (2018), then Sacchetti and Borzaga (2020), exposed the economic costs of social exclusion, strengthening the case for multi-stakeholder governance to balance levels of member and public benefit.

We see two waves of the new cooperativism. The first (dating from the mid-1970s to early 2000s) arises out of a desire for: solidarity between producers and consumers; more egalitarian organising principles; labour and community solidarity; a renewed community development orientation and a greater concern for sustainable development (Ridley-Duff, 2015; Vieta, 2010). The second wave has its origins in the way the internet revolution in the late 1990s enabled the digital spread ideas and intellectual property through networks like the P2P Foundation, Commons Transition Network and FairShares Association (Ridley-Duff, 2020). This second wave emphasises peer-to-peer production in networks and the production of 'commons' for mutual benefit (see Bauwens & Pantazis, 2018; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2020; Vieta, 2016). New co-operative forms such as distributed and platform co-operatives (Scholz, 2017) use the internet to experiment with crowd-based financial institutions that foster alternative co-operative development pathways (see Conaty et al., 2018; Lehner & Nicholls, 2014; Nogales, 2017).

Lastly, studies continue to find that women are under-represented as co-operative members, hold a lower status and participate less than men in making business decisions (Miller, 2012). Recent research points to how 'diversity regimes' focusing on employee participation and diversity management open up ways to investigate how the workplace democracy of worker and solidarity co-operatives can be understood, and how gender and minority inequalities can both be addressed (Meyers & Vallas, 2016; Sobering, 2016).

## **How New is 'New Cooperativism'?**

In the new cooperativism of the first decade of the 2000s, there were both defensive and proactive solutions to socio-economic crises. These responses mostly stemmed from the worst effects of austerity and neoliberal agendas on local communities (Vieta, 2010). Rooted tightly in local needs and broader social movements, Vieta (2018, pp. 59-60) identified six features of the new cooperativism: (1) it espouses values and practices of subsidiarity and community-led development; (2) it directly responds to crises; (3) it is ethical and sustainable; (4) it is inclusive; (5) it is horizontal, democratic, and co-managed; and (6) it emphasises collective ownership, stewardship and equitable distribution of social wealth.

Responding to Vieta's work in this journal, Ridley-Duff (2020) reviewed the way a new open cooperativism was being framed by members of the P2P Foundation, Commons Transition Movement and FairShares Association. Building on Vieta's theory, he highlights three further features: (1) active calls for multi-stakeholder ownership and governance; (2) an emergent focus on 'commoning' and the production of commons resources; (3) a renewed emphasis on enfranchising labour members.

But have co-operatives not always addressed these themes? Is this really a new era for co-operatives? It raises the question of how 'new' the new cooperativism is. Is it a process of innovation and discovery, or of re-discovery? Is 'new cooperativism' mainly a political provocation to 'old' co-operativism, a critique of perceived over-reliance on consumer co-operatives to advance the global movement?

## **The Special Issue Articles**

This special issue opens with a paper by Vieta and Lionais on 'New Cooperativism, the Commons, and the Post-Capitalist Imaginary' that gives an optimistic assessment of new cooperativism as a 'transformative vision' for post-capitalist thought and practice. In their work, there is recognition of the 'radical heritage' on which new cooperativism is founded, and the ways in which 'commons' and 'cooperativism' can be reunited for a post-capitalist alternative. Through careful study of the recovered companies in Argentina, they map out revisions to the theory of new cooperativism developed over a decade earlier.

The second paper by Kasparian and Rebón on 'The Production of Change' is also based on careful study of the recovered companies of Argentina. It represents a more cautious

assessment of their potential. Through a comparative analysis of ten cases, the capacity of recovered companies to deliver social empowerment is appraised. Whilst optimistic about changes in workers' social power in enterprise governance, the authors suggest that internal measures to counter capitalist exploitation within the enterprises does not prevent power imbalances with other market actors: suppliers, banks, retailers and public utilities.

These first two papers focus on South America at the end of the first wave of new cooperativism. They increase our knowledge of the 4th, 5th and 6th elements of Vieta's (2018) theory (inclusivity, horizontal co-managed workplaces, and collective stewardship). These papers also speak to the 2nd element (their roots in crises). However, Kasparian and Rebón question the 1st element by highlighting the (relatively) low level of involvement of community members and consumers in the governance of recovered companies.

In the third paper by Svensson on 'A Few Drops of Plurality', he examines his experiences in a food co-operative based in Copenhagen to argue that 'plurality' is an unrecognised but vital ingredient for new cooperativism if the goal is the 'continuous revitalisation' of economies and wider society. The food co-operative, studied using ethnographic methods, is presented as an example of the practices of new cooperativism. The commitment of members to humanistic values and environmental sustainability are brought into sharp focus through descriptions of the practices of collectivism.

The fourth paper, 'Practising Sustainability Beyond Growth in Eco-social Entrepreneurship' by Kovanen and Umantseva, also relied on an ethnographic approach. Their study moves beyond the boundaries of a single enterprise to include both co-operative and non co-operative social enterprises. They found that "caring and respectful production practices" were "most ambitious and heterogeneous in large co-operatives in less peripheral locations with more initial resources" (p.44).

The third and fourth papers, taken together, add to knowledge of Vieta's 1st, 3rd and 4th elements in the second wave of new cooperativism (community-led development, ethics, sustainability and inclusivity). Svensson's paper also adds to our knowledge of the 5th and 6th elements (co-management and collective stewardship) through investigations of peer-to-peer production, a focus on sustainability and the creation of commons resources.

The fifth paper, by de Peuter, Dreyer, Sandoval and Szaflarska on 'Cooperativism in the Cultural and Tech Sectors' is based on a survey of creative industry co-operatives. The survey examines working conditions, diversity and equity as well as the appeal, culture, and challenges of (new) cooperativism. One fifth of the survey sample were found to be 'union co-operatives' – products of an innovation in co-operative development combining worker ownership with trade union representation in governance. This model, forged in the USA in partnership with the Basque Mondragon co-operatives, is gaining tangible support.

The sixth paper, by Michele Bianchi is titled 'Italian Community Co-operatives and their Agency Role in Sustainable Community Development'. This describes recent developments leading to the 2022 debate in the Italian parliament for a law on 'general purpose' co-operatives. The point of interest, in the context of new cooperativism, is community involvement in co-operative governance and the development of community economies. This aligns with both the multi-stakeholder and commons orientation in Ridley-Duff (2020).

The fifth and sixth papers, therefore, have a firm focus on the second wave of new cooperativism prompted by technologies and stronger commitments to multi-stakeholder design principles. Taken together, they provide insights into the way new cooperativism can spread to new industrial and cultural contexts.

Lastly, Rory Ridley-Duff reviews the videos and transcripts of the nine seminars organised to support this special issue ('New Cooperativism Seminar Series Review'). This article includes a review of a question raised earlier in this editorial ("What is new in new cooperativism?"). Citing a video contribution by Vieta in Seminar 1, and comments by Sonja Novkovic in Seminar 2,

he argues that the word ‘new’ should not be confused with the use of ‘New’ in phrases like ‘New Labour’. It is not a political shift to the right because new cooperativism actively seeks to overturn thought styles and social practices of neoliberalism. You will find URLs to all the new cooperativism seminars in the Appendix of the final article.

We hope you enjoy this special issue and will be inspired to study the topic. We look forward to responses to the above articles. If you have a paper that adds to the debate, please send it with a cover note to [editor@ukscs.coop](mailto:editor@ukscs.coop).

**Rory Ridley-Duff and Mary O’Shaughnessy**  
**Guest Editors**

## The Guest Editors

Rory Ridley-Duff is Emeritus Professor of Co-operative Social Entrepreneurship at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. He spent three decades working in, with and for, worker and solidarity co-operatives. His action research programme developing the FairShares Model as a framework for new cooperativism was submitted as an ‘Impact Case Study’ to the 2021 UK Research Excellence Framework. Dr Mary O’Shaughnessy is Head of the Department of Food Business and Development at Cork University Business School, University College Cork, Ireland. She is a former director at Micro Finance Ireland and director of EMES (International research network). She contributes to national and European policy on social enterprise and rural development.

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