

# Johnston Birchall — An Appreciation

Ed Mayo

Johnston Birchall was the greatest and most insightful co-operative researcher of our day. I mean no disrespect to others in the field, because the field of co-operation has attracted many brilliant minds, as it has creative characters. The resurgence of the Research Committee of the International Co-operative Alliance at global and European levels in recent years has helped to build a dialogue and recognition for the vital role of the research community in the development of the sector, even if all of this remains at the same time pushed to the margins of a world defined by the logics of financial return and investor ownership.

My work with Johnston spanned many years. I commissioned a report from him on mutual options for water and rail when CEO of the New Economics Foundation before 2000 and he contributed to a seminal report we completed for David Rodgers at CDS Co-operative. Around 2005, when I was running the National Consumer Council, Johnston and Richard Simmons co-authored a wonderfully influential report we published on public participation in public services, *User Power*. When applying for a role at Co-operatives UK in 2009, Johnston was the first person I approached for advice.

As I see it, the question ‘how should we work together?’ was the golden thread that connected Johnston’s research and teaching over time.

Our lives are a journey to understand ourselves and to relate to others. Why then spend our time and money in settings that follow the cold logics of status and of separation? Take a look instead, Johnston asked, at the experience and the possibilities of co-operative action. In the 1980s, for example, housing co-operatives turned residents from passive tenants into active members.

In the foreword to Johnston’s book, *Building Communities*, the great social entrepreneur, Lord Young of Dartington commented that “if Johnston Birchall had been the Minister of Housing in 1945 (or still better in 1919) perhaps Britain would have housed and re-housed itself. It is just possible that we might have had, not Robert Owen’s co-operative villages, but Birchall’s co-operative neighbourhoods” (1988, p. ix)

While small co-operative stores waxed and waned, there was a history of innovation which was at risk of being lost. “When I first started researching co-operation” Johnston wrote to me “my task was to recover the lost history — first of the British co-operative movement, then of the international one. The books I was using were all from the 1940s and 1950s ....”

The next phase was to create, with others, a new set of institutions for learning on co-operation. And from academic respectability, the University of Brunel and Stirling University, Johnston and colleagues began to meet the need for good academic research on the subject, becoming in a relatively short time a leading international researcher in the field. Drawing on this, in September 2005, Johnston was a keynote speaker to the Congress of the International Co-operative Alliance in Cartagena on the state of co-operative principles worldwide.<sup>1</sup>

The Director General of the International Co-operative Alliance, Bruce Thorardson commented in the foreword to Johnston’s 1997 book, that “not since Will Watkins at the beginning of the 1970s has an author attempted and succeeded in the daunting task of describing, explaining and analysing the international co-operative movement” (p. vii).

*Co-op, the people’s business* is Johnston’s most loved publication, and is on shelves around the world. Through writing and illustration, Johnston traced the story of co-operative enterprise from the early ideas of Robert Owen, and others, and the early action of the Rochdale Pioneers, and others. The list of his publications is a long one, including books on history, mutuality, public

services, banking, development, post-crisis recovery and governance. The publishers were distinguished — Routledge, Palgrave, the ILO, many written in collaboration, many priced for an academic audience, but others free for activists and practitioners.

Why do people overlook co-operatives in economic and social development, he asked? Is it co-operative blindness, or reservations based on distortions in the model, such as during times of state-sponsorship? As a result, he commented, “when a conventional investor-owned company fails, people ask why it failed. When a co-operative fails, people ask whether co-operatives can ever be made to work”.

Or is confusion a natural reflection of the sheer variety of labels and forms that emerge from the diverse practices and cultures of association? Particularly in later years, Johnston sought to put his arms around this kaleidoscope of practice by applying a clear-eyed rigour of theory. The concept of member ownership — customer-ownership in banking — opened the field of institutional economics to co-operatives and mutuals. The concept of member-centrality, an idea that Johnston learned from the Indian economist Tushaar Shah, opened up a framework to understand and improve co-operative governance and performance. Successful co-operatives become an ‘expanding presence’ in creating opportunities for their members.

Researching what it is that encourages people to become members, Johnston co-developed a way of understanding behaviour in a social setting. Alongside the framework of personal incentives that is central to so much of contemporary economics, came the recognition of mutual incentives — a theory of participation. Applied to the setting of volunteers in public services, for example, he found that while people participate for a variety of reasons, over time their motivation becomes more mutual. In short, if the market makes us consumers, association makes us citizens.

A course for students at the University of Stirling, where Johnston had become a Professor, reflected this open and enquiring approach, setting the study of co-operatives within a larger framework of human co-operation, connecting among others with the work of Elinor Ostrom, Nobel Prize winner for economics, whose own interests focused latterly on institutional forms for co-operation.

Not all of these ideas won the engagement of the co-operative sector. His key work on member participation at The Co-op, for example, was never repeated, when doing so would have been of real value and could have informed a more effective approach to member engagement. Part of the reason perhaps has been a cultural resistance in the sector to the contribution of researchers and to the value of knowledge and ideas. Despite the efforts of the Society for Co-operative Studies, a home from home for Johnston, the memorable phrase of Fritz Schumacher arguably holds true for the wider sector: an ounce of practice is worth a tonne of theory. Johnston himself put some of this anti-intellectualism down to a wrong turn in the critical field of co-operative education, in which for quite a number of years, consumer retail co-operatives madly refused to appoint graduates to management roles, believing instead in the sole strategy of developing talent from within. Weak member engagement, poor quality governance, and unskilled leadership have arguably been the three great failings of the retail co-operative sector. They are features of insularity, whereas being open to new ideas can be a practical source of renewal when the context for the old is gone.

And Johnston’s big ideas? On a walk out in 2019 from Glendevon where he lived, his mind clear and the promise of his energies returning after treatment, Johnston talked me through his thoughts for a grand theory of co-operation — and ways to use the history of co-operatives as an empirical test of the same.

These ideas will continue to echo. From a history of forms of housing co-operatives, for example published in 2003 by the New Economics Foundation and CDS Co-operatives, a new model of sustainable community action emerged, exemplified by the award-winning, Leeds-based, low-carbon, eco-build co-operative, Lilac.<sup>2</sup>

In his own words, “we contribute to a kind of collective consciousness that continues even though our names are quickly forgotten. That is our real achievement”.

To have known Johnston is to have known his ideas. His love of jazz — and he was an accomplished musician — was emblematic of co-operation; his stories — unpublished — for the grandchildren were emblematic of his skills as a narrator and observer of the world. His interest in stoicism was tested, as stoicism is wont to be, and yet he was open always to the claim that while we can’t change everything ... we can in time change capitalism.

In person and in professional life, aligned to a multi-generational co-operative field of practice, arguably the longest running social movement of our day, we can see a larger story. This is one that we are all potentially part of. It is a story of how we learn and relearn to work together and to renew the bonds of social solidarity.

## The Author

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## Notes

1. This keynote presentation was published as Co-operative Principles: Ten years on in the *Review of International Co-operation*, 2005.
2. Lilac co-housing community, Leeds, UK — <https://www.lilac.coop/>

## References

- Birchall, J. (1988). *Building Communities the co-operative way*. Routledge.
- Birchall, J. (1997). *The international co-operative movement*. Manchester University Press.