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How to cite this article:

Ridley-Duff, R. (2022). New cooperativism seminar series – Review. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 55(3), 78-83. <https://doi.org/10.61869/NGEK6011>

New Cooperativism Seminar Series – Review

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In 2021, the UK Society for Co-operative Studies (UKSCS) formed an editorial board with the European Research Institute for Cooperative and Social Enterprise (EURICSE), the EMES International Research Network (EMES), and Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) to organise a seminar series on “new cooperativism”. Each seminar followed a strict research protocol to elicit narratives from experts in the field. An experienced facilitator introduced and interviewed panellists before dividing seminar participants into breakout groups. Members of each breakout group reported on their discussions and debates before panellists gave closing statements. In this article, I review videos and transcripts of the seminars. These not only reveal how new cooperativism was framed by the editorial board during the seminar series, but also presents findings that suggest a new consensus amongst practitioners and researchers. By rejecting neoliberal doctrine, grassroots movements are fostering a culture of mutuality that supports co-operative development and accounting practices aligned to sustainable development.

<https://doi.org/10.61869/NGEK6011>

Introduction

The word ‘new’ as a prefix in Anglo-American culture is often interpreted to signify a shift rightward in socio-economic and political values. The advent of New Labour, and its record in government, represented a shift away from communitarian traditions in the co-operative movement towards a new market-based ideology (Smith & Morton, 2006; Teasdale, 2012). It is sensible, therefore, to start by problematising the use of ‘new’ in the framing of a seminar series on new cooperativism.

The series started with a pre-recorded video by Marcelo Vieta in which he reviewed his decade of research on new cooperativism and its links to ‘commons thinking’. He argued that the new cooperativism “takes co-ops back to their radical roots” by drawing attention to contemporary social movements in South America and Italy which are “against and beyond capitalism and its inherent crises” (Vieta, Seminar 1). Indeed, in Vieta’s work (see Vieta, 2010, 2019) it is crises in neoliberalism that generate grassroots co-operation which, in turn, leads to the formation of new co-operatives. This is the backdrop against which theories of new cooperativism have developed. As such, the word ‘new’ does not denote alignment with movements like New Labour: it represents its antithesis. Vieta is not alone in framing new cooperativism as opposition to neoliberalism. When it was imported into the UK context, it was used primarily to describe a global trend towards solidarity co-operatives (Ridley-Duff, 2015; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2019), and active resistance to social enterprise initiatives that undermine recognition of worker co-operatives by favouring charitable trading and social business (see Ridley-Duff, 2019).

As already discussed in this *Journal* (Ridley-Duff, 2020), there is a paradox in calling something ‘new’ that takes co-operatives back to their radical roots. This tension is not just highlighted in the first seminar by Vieta, but also during the second seminar when panellist Sonja Novkovic commented:

... I’m happy to see that Marcelo is pulling us back into more radical roots ... [but] how new is new? And, what is new about [new cooperativism] is what we need to ponder a little bit more Is it new only in some cultural contexts? Is it where consumer co-ops have dominated and ... single member type co-ops have dominated, that this is becoming ‘new’, you know? In many contexts, multi-stakeholdership is alive and well. It has been as long as co-ops have been around ... (Novkovic, Seminar 2).

Novkovic argued that what should be ‘new’ is sector-specific and co-operative type-specific values and principles that build on those agreed by the ICA. As an illustration, she cited the ten

principles for worker co-operation established in the Spanish Basque town of Mondragon. New cooperativism, therefore, may be 'new' in the sense of revealing and stimulating changes in the contemporary framing of co-operative development in only some cultural and industry contexts.

In the next section, I briefly summarise themes covered by the seminar series and the way some echoed across multiple seminars. Following this, I highlight two specific contributions that stimulated my imagination whilst producing transcripts. In the final section, I summarise issues and comment on the role that outputs from the seminar series can play in supporting further study of new cooperativism.

The Seminar and Data Collection Process

A series of nine seminars took place between June and November 2021 (see Appendix). Each seminar related to a proposed theme in a call for papers issued by the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* for a special issue on new cooperativism. All the seminars were recorded and transcribed by the FairShares Institute for Co-operative Social Entrepreneurship at Sheffield Hallam University where formal ethical approval for participant recruitment and data processing procedures was secured.

One strength of the seminar series lies in its international coverage. Thirty people with practical and research experience of co-operatives acted as seminar facilitators and panellists. Facilitators hailed from Canada, England, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, and the USA. Panellists were based in Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, England, Italy, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Scotland, Spain, and Turkey. Additional participants came not only from the above countries but also from Peru, Kenya, and South Africa. In total, 115 participants from 19 countries registered for the seminar series, with 10 to 25 attending individual events. All registered participants received a written briefing on research protocols, and Zoom meetings were held to brief facilitators and panellists in advance of each event.

Each seminar followed a similar format. Panellists made a 3 to 5-minute opening statement on the seminar theme, followed by a 15-minute period during which the facilitator interviewed the panellists using questions raised in the call for papers. Next, participants were randomly assigned to breakout groups. Seminar facilitators and panellists formed one of the groups (which was recorded). All other breakout groups remained private to promote open discussion free from moderation. In the penultimate phase, the facilitator elicited comments and stimulated conversation amongst members of the breakout groups in a plenary session. Lastly, panellists were given a few minutes to respond to the plenary discussion. In total, each seminar lasted 90 minutes.

After the seminar series, videos were edited to remove conversations unrelated to the content of the seminar series (e.g. when participants entered/exited the Zoom session and inquired about their breakout rooms). Audio files were generated from the videos and transcribed using Otter (see <https://otter.ai>). The results were manually edited by comparing transcriptions to the audio files to improve their accuracy. Each transcript (with its video source) was also sent to the relevant seminar facilitators and panellists for checking, before a final check was made by members of UKSCS.

Seminar Structure

The series followed a broad arc of related topics. Seminar 1 and 2 focused on co-operative values and principles, particularly the way these interact with — and potentially support — sustainable development. Seminars 3 and 4 focused on legal and financial innovations that support new cooperativism, quickly followed by Seminars 5 and 6 on the social and physical spaces in which these innovations develop. Seminar 5 shed light on educational spaces, whilst Seminar 6 looked at spaces for policy development. Seminar 7 opened up a conversation about

the nature of (and reporting of) 'wealth', and this fed into Seminar 8 (on platform co-operatives and digital spaces for new cooperativism), and Seminar 9 (on the potential of the digital world on communications and co-operative publishing).

The first two seminars consistently highlighted the value of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework for reporting on the value of individual co-operatives and the co-operative economy. This was reinforced during Seminar 8 when Daphne Rixon (Saint Mary's University) spoke on conceptions of (co-operative) wealth. She described the ongoing joint project reviewed previously in this *Journal* involving both Canadian and English academics (see Adderley et al., 2021). Led by CEARC (Centre of Excellence in Accounting and Reporting for Co-operatives), it seeks to create a co-operative Statement of Recommended Practice (SORP). In this seminar, Rixon detailed the way that co-operators in the study identified links between co-operative principles and SDGs, and how to report on those important to their co-operatives.

Seminars 3 and 4 highlighted a number of innovations in use of the law to support solidarity co-operatives alongside discussion of technologies and financial instruments that assist the initiation and conversion of co-operative enterprises. These issues were relevant to the discussions in Seminars 8 and 9 on platform co-operatives, communications and publishing. The diversity of co-operatives, and the fact that different legal frameworks are used internationally for their creation, was seen as one of the ways the co-operative movement becomes fragmented. Nevertheless, as Novkovic highlighted in Seminar 2, this diversity is partly overcome by accepting recent work on the classifications of co-operatives for international comparison work. This identified four basic types: producer; worker; user/consumer; multi-stakeholder (see Bouchard, 2020).

Consolidation of co-operative law could — in the future — provide for recognition of these four basic types, and — as highlighted in Seminars 2 and 6 — also clarify that each of these types can be created for a 'general purpose' (rather than specific purposes such as banking, housing, agriculture, or social care). This normative impulse towards multi-stakeholder co-operatives for 'general purposes' (providing multiple services to distinct communities) is a feature of conversations in Seminars 4, 6, 7, and 8.

Lastly, Seminar 5 stood alone as a detailed conversation about programmes of co-operative education in schools, colleges, and entrepreneurial networks. Largely absent from the UK until a decade ago, but already well developed in Spain and Germany, school co-operatives provide a host of learning opportunities. Their importance was emphasised again in Seminar 9 by Ana Aguirre, who works with Mondragon University on platform co-operatives. She emphasised the words of Fr Arizmendiarietta (co-founder of the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation) about following an education pathway of "first people, then companies for cooperativists, and then co-operatives" (Aguirre, Seminar 9). This generates the culture of mutual care and co-operation that sits behind community-wide co-operative activity.

Seminar Series Highlight

For me, Seminar 6 on Policy Initiatives and Spaces for New Cooperativism captured my imagination. Not only did it have more to say about linkages between traditional and contemporary co-operative movements, it located co-operative development in the context of its relationship to social movements. A conversation evolved from the exchanges between Simon Teasdale and EURICSE's Gianluca Salvatori on whether new cooperativism was itself a social movement, or thrived through interactions with social movement "radical actors" who "dream the impossible so that others can stretch the boundaries of what is possible" (Teasdale, Seminar 6).

Salvatori's response to Teasdale set out a critique, in defence of traditional co-operative movements, citing their role in recent innovations in Italy. Setting the scene, he argued that — after COVID — it was necessary "to confront the illusion that the state ... returned to the centre stage". To illustrate, he described the "spontaneous phenomenon" of new cooperativism in two contexts:

We do have new co-operatives ... multiple multi-sector co-operatives. [In] one co-operative you find all the different elements necessary for local living where you have people managing the only shop providing certain public services, like postal services or ... health consultancies. ... But it's just one co-operative — multi-sector. And from the governance point of view, of course, it is a multi-stakeholder co-operative because you have all the different stakeholders involved (Salvatori, Seminar 6).

Eschewing part of Vieta's framing of new cooperativism (see Vieta and Lionais in this issue), Salvatori insisted that "the old co-operative movement can help a lot in transmitting values and providing a framework, a conceptual framework" but also argued that new cooperativism thrives when established co-operatives engage with the "circulation of innovation" created by new ones. He illustrated this by setting out how multi-stakeholder, multi-sector, co-operatives are emerging in both fragile rural (and island) communities as well as urban settings where abandoned buildings are part of regeneration efforts.

The spontaneous, grassroots nature of (new) cooperativism, however, was seen as something that evolves out of a mature culture of mutual support. In Italy, it occurred in the 1970s with social co-operatives. Other seminar participants backed up this view. Describing a 100+ year old Gaelic sporting community in Ireland, Mary O'Shaughnessy commented that:

On this night ... when I went over to the football pitch — and it's a tiny football pitch in a very peripheral area — there were under-14 boys, there were under-16 girls training, there were men training — football and hurling. And there were about 10 women in a walking club just around the larger perimeter. And I was ... looking at this small community-owned field, basically, which has been in existence over 100 years, with a gym, and one masseuse in the gym To see that that can be in existence for over 100 years ... and it's in every community right across the country, north and south (O'Shaughnessy, Seminar 6).

The point of the contribution was to alert us that not just an entire community, but entire fields of activity, can be heavily engaged in grassroots co-operative action through a multitude of clubs and associations. Only a few may be registered as part of the 'official' co-operative movement. It serves as an example of Vieta's (2010) arguments about grassroots co-operative activity spurred by community needs. However, as it depends neither on market mechanisms (prices determined by supply and demand) nor state-funding (via grants), the result is a lack of recognition. This quotation describes the deeply-rooted impulse toward mutuality on which a co-operative economy depends — ably described by Polanyi (1944) in his seminal text on economic systems — but it does not register as an official part of the co-operative movement. It was the lens of new cooperativism that prompted this discussion, a view from which something "in every community right across the country, north and south" can be viewed as a rich pool from which co-operative action can build persons first, then companies for co-operativists, and then co-operatives.

Closing Comments

In summary, the seminar series framed new cooperativism as a radical impulse at a grassroots level that stimulates co-operative development linked to commons thinking. In its ideal form, it stimulates new co-operatives that form to serve multiple sectors, and which are governed by multiple stakeholders. As Vieta (2010) identified, one underlying motivation is to address crises triggered by the rise of neoliberalism. However, as Novkovic states, new cooperativism is not wholly progressive as it evolved both from rediscovering 'radical roots' within the traditional movement alongside a growing recognition of alternatives to consumer co-operation. As they are integrated into existing and emerging co-operative networks, the result may manifest through legally constituted co-operative enterprises or informal cultures of mutuality in local associations. According to Salvatori (Seminar 6), the integration of 'old' and 'new' creates a 'circulation of innovation'. It is this spirit of innovation that prompts experimental use of new funding mechanisms, digital technologies and social innovations.

The process of sharing, analysing and developing knowledge of new cooperativism from the seminar series is only just beginning. Once transcripts have been checked by facilitators

and panellists, they will be shared with the 115 participants who registered for the seminar series. The 90,000 words transcribed from the nine seminars represents a rich record of the complexities and paradoxes of new cooperativism, as well as numerous examples of its latent potential to stimulate co-operative activity and enterprises in the future. The collection of transcripts (and the videos that generated them) could become a highly valuable data source for researchers and student activists who want to learn and write about new cooperativism. If you want copies of the transcripts for your own studies, they will be available as downloads from the YouTube videos listed in the Appendix (or directly from UKSCS) in 2023.

The Author

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Appendix — YouTube Videos of Each Seminar

All videos are listed together in a playlist at: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=UBFqZu9Gf7w&list=P L2XuD9SPEtM3d1VXNdT1u75hDDzP7e77B>

You can open each seminar individually using the URLs below.

Seminar 1 — New Cooperativism and Sustainable Development — 21st June 2021

<https://youtu.be/UBFqZu9Gf7w>

Facilitators — Mary O'Shaughnessy, Guilia Galera

Panel Speakers — Marcelo Vieta, Michele Bianchi, Sara Capuzzo

Seminar 2 — Updating Co-operative Values and Principles — 21st June 2021

https://youtu.be/AF_btmNjxBQ

Facilitators — Jan Myers, Rory Ridley-Duff

Panel Speakers — Sonja Novkovic, Guilia Galera

Seminar 3 — Legal Innovations for Multi-Stakeholder Governance — 14th July 2021

https://youtu.be/u_KFCzwmtqk

Facilitator — Silvia Sacchetti

Panel Speakers — Ian Adderley, Rory Ridley-Duff

Seminar 4 — Funding and Incentives for New Cooperativism — 14th July 2021

https://youtu.be/-h7gCeJ_h7w

Facilitator — Elizavet Mantzari

Panel Speakers — Dave Boyle, Steve Gill

Seminar 5 — Learning for New Cooperativism — 16th September 2021

<https://youtu.be/XS-4bMnj2j4>

Facilitators — Nicole Goler Von Ravensberg, Marcelo Vieta

Panel Speakers — Joanna Brzozowska-Wabik, Sara Vicari, Christian Wolf

Seminar 6 — Policy Initiatives and Spaces for New Cooperativism — 17th Sept 2021

<https://youtu.be/X3SqE0icRqs>

Facilitators — Mary O'Shaughnessy, Marcelo Vieta

Panel Speakers — Simon Teasdale, Gianluca Salvatori

Seminar 7 — Conceptions of (Co-operative) Wealth — 11th October 2021

<https://youtu.be/5LOyPrgM3j8>

Facilitators — Maureen McCulloch, Nicole Goler Van Ravensberg

Panel Speakers — Graham Boyd, Daphne Rixon

Seminar 8 — Digital and Platform Co-operatives — 8th November 2021

<https://youtu.be/DdIPF1rmfM8>

Facilitator — Rocio Nogales

Panel Speakers — Ana Aguirre, Ali Ercan Ozgur

Seminar 9 — Co-operative Communications and Publishing — 8th November 2021

https://youtu.be/2Ynf8LI_Ays

Facilitators — Rebecca Harvey, Nathan Schneider

Panel Speakers — Olivia Henry, Javier Borelli