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A Few Drops of Plurality: New Cooperativism Beyond Categorisation

Christian Franklin Svensson

Co-operativism comprises a diversity of stakeholders and motivations that often overlap and that are sometimes contradictory. These pluralist practices are difficult to place within typologies and registration models, which invites a discussion of the nature of 'new cooperativism', and a potential expansion of frameworks. It is prudent to discuss how we may achieve more nuanced understandings of new cooperativism to shed light on its ambiguities and possibilities. The question is, then, how alternative and pluralist practices in the ever-changing landscape of civil society and co-operativism can — or should — be framed or defined.

Introduction

New cooperativism embraces diverse and ambiguous spaces that are betwixt and between traditional classifications (Turner, 1967), and everyday practice is far more variegated than the discourses inherent in policies and categorisations suggest. These spaces are where new practices and subject positions take shape as a constant fluid state of being. Continuing from Vieta's (2019) six features of new cooperativism (community-led development, response to crises, ethical sustainability, inclusion, democracy, equitable distribution of social wealth) and Ridley-Duff's (2020) additional three features (multi-stakeholder governance, commons resources, enfranchising labour), I argue that *plurality* is yet to become a feature of new cooperativism. If co-operativism is to experience continuous revitalisation, then awareness of framing is essential.

The United Nations (UN) 2030 agenda for sustainable development (UN, 2021) calls for global social change with co-operativism as a specific feature, which raises issues pertaining to whether political expectations and semi-legal registrations risk overshadowing alternative forms of engagement and economic practice. The example of Copenhagen Food Cooperative (CFC) is indicative of this dilemma and is included here as an example of values and ambitions in new cooperativism.

Through continuous discussions and negotiations, the members of CFC are enacting new cooperativism as ambiguous and at times contradictory practices of engagement. They continuously develop new identities, and they represent opposing logics of egalitarianism and sometimes more individualistic and economic motivations for being active. In addition, the members are slightly disorganised for the simple fact that they consist of autonomy-oriented individuals (Svensson, 2022), which in itself nurtures plurality. Nevertheless, mutual civic engagement combined with space for individual independence is a characteristic of CFC and new cooperativism; for example, by opposing the principles of political representativeness from a belief that it creates hierarchical positions and authoritarianism. New cooperativism is thus difficult to constructively place within definitions and registration models as these do not take account of the plurality of identities, opinions, and activities.

This paper continues a tradition of welfare research to analyse processes of change, taking a critical view on managerialism and economic rationalism as the only tools for solving social challenges (Dean & Larsson, 2021; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Lungaard Andersen et al., 2016). In the first section, an outline of the fieldwork's methods is provided including an introduction to CFC. This leads to a framing of new cooperativism as pluralist practice enacted through continuous negotiation. Plurality and rigid definition are mutual discrepancies in the everyday enactment of cooperativism, and in the latter sections, I argue that co-operative organisations like CFC are not well-served by attempting to squeeze them into categorisations and registrations framed by non-pluralist interpretations. Some guidelines for social change can

be necessary, but if the aims of social innovation are spelled out in too much detail, they risk reproducing the old order, and they are then merely based on what we currently think we know.

An Example of New Cooperativism — Copenhagen Food Co-operative

During eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in CFC with a particular focus on practices, complexities, and contradictions (Jørgensen & Sievers, 2015), thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted. In addition, observation of committee meetings and workgroups combined with informal conversations while, for example, eating together or packing goods were essential parts of the data generation. Moreover, a range of policy documents from the organisation contributed to the empirical data. Ethnography is a way to gain insight into everyday formalised and informal practices. A sense of meaning, then, is something that is produced in social interaction (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Langmead, 2016; Svensson, 2016), which resonates with analyses that seek to move beyond apparent categorisations and solutions to social problems (Teasdale et al., 2013).

When entering CFC immediately before opening hours, one is met by small groups of members engaged in a variety of tasks. Some are busy weighing and packaging fruits and vegetables in pre-ordered bags; others are opening the shop, setting up weights, or writing on the chalkboard the weekly range of products and prices. The shopkeepers make a virtue of organising the shop in a welcoming manner so that people can easily see the special offers. Next to the shop hangs a large information board containing news about activity in the working groups, upcoming events, and calls for volunteer jobs. In the adjacent kitchen, one group are preparing meals, while another group are busy at a computer desk getting ready to expedite new orders and membership registrations.

The members refer to CFC as a “voluntary association”, a “food community”, or simply as a “co-operative”. Some of them affably refer to the organisation as a “consumer co-operative version 2.0” as it is rooted in a long civil society tradition, but with an emphasis on autonomy and plurality as the additional elements. They strive to introduce organic and biodynamic products at a fair price to contribute to the development of an environmentally and economically sustainable society (CFC, 2021). Fruit, vegetables and other agricultural produce such as flour, juice, eggs, and honey are purchased directly from local small-scale farmers and sold to the members. In return, members pay a small membership fee of DKR 200 (approximately 25 euro) and donate a minimum of three labour hours per month, which may consist of boxing and ordering deliveries, driving, arranging meetings, or working on the website.

CFC was founded in 2008, and in 2009 the first bags of vegetables from a nearby organic farm were packed and sold. Anders, who has been an active member since the very beginning, reflects:

We called on people to package 30 bags of vegetables, which would be an easy task. But it was chaos with no weights, no bags, no system at all. Nonetheless, there was a lot of positive energy and a lot of excitement to build on, so within the next few weeks we developed some basic routines and set up Excel documents to keep track of orders, and from then on it just sort of grew.

Things developed quickly after the initial stages. The story of people voluntarily coming together to organise and buy and sell organic goods outside the established wholesale market was popular and new members started joining each week. CFC now has 9 local branches in different neighbourhoods of Copenhagen with a weekly distribution totalling more than 5 tonnes.

The Human Dimension of New Cooperativism

In a space usually reserved for the cafeteria, members come together in the weekly “people’s kitchen” to dine and socialise. Prepared by the kitchen group, the meal is highly praised, and several members express their enthusiasm by articulating how “hyggelig” [a Scandinavian

term roughly equivalent to cosy] they find the arrangement. Hyggelig is not the only positive connotation among the members; CFC also represents an ongoing tangible attempt to create “another world” where notions of private profit do not determine progress. Thus, CFC membership is meant to be active rather than passive. As Ulrik says:

Someone has got to show stakeholders and others [in fields of cooperativism], who are skimming the cream, that getting 15% in return simply will not do.

For Freja, CFC represents an opportunity to actively counteract discourses of development that she perceives as not working:

I think of CFC as a place where people engage in community, which offers some sort of resistance to a society that is running in the wrong direction.

Torben continues this train of thought:

We are not just saying “we want another world”. We are doing it right here, and we can show people that locally, at least, we are in this together to take joint responsibility and to practise another kind of reciprocity, where we are all volunteers.

By emphasising human elements of inclusion and community the members are exploring social and pluralist practices. The mission of CFC is to create environmental value and a sustainable economy, and in the process the members are becoming active community-oriented citizens. Working with others, who share these motivations, is an essential element for developing relational mechanisms. Based on a sense of similarity and spontaneity (Turner, 1967), they are enacting a politics of the present (Gibson-Graham, 2006) to create community and solidarity (Finlayson & Roy, 2019; Svensson & Nielsen, 2020).

The International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) emphasises that co-operatives are based on a sense of community:

They are set up by the people to meet their common economic needs within communities for buying quality food and services at an affordable price, marketing local produce and creating local jobs, obtaining credit and insurance and other services. In this sense, co-operatives are an effective tool for the sustainable social development of the communities in which they work. (ICA, 2015, p. 88).

CFC represents such a community of self-governing people with an idea of achieving “the good society” through inspired action. This mirrors a confidence in human potential, where, if the relational spheres become too broad and anonymous, social cohesion disappears together with the mutual understanding of an intrinsic co-operative behaviour. The members imagine ideal states reflecting human values obtained through a collective work process as opposed to production with origins in exploitation and accumulation. In CFC, participation and identities are constantly being reformulated and enacted through everyday practices like packing and distributing goods, and by debating and trying out new forms of activity. The human dimension occurs when they are working together towards a common goal and embodying complex processes of participation which mirror a development of a culture of collectivism and community (Langmead, 2016; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2021).

The members of CFC describe and justify their reactions to social challenges as an addition to the state-welfare. Like food co-operatives, food banks, recycling services, and micro-libraries, these examples attempt to create new stakeholder positions and tentatively social change. New cooperativism has potential for emancipatory resourcefulness. As such, new cooperativism contains a call to liberate one’s own and others’ lives in opposition to the capitalocentrism of profit-orientation and governance issues related to non-inclusion and top-down management (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020). New cooperativism represents an insistence on human potential enacted through everyday community and a shared identity of resilience. It addresses concerns about social exclusion, inequality, and unrestricted individualism. But pluralist activities can only be achieved by insisting on self-organisation, so what are the necessary elements of new cooperativism?

Autonomy in New Cooperativism

As a precondition for being innovative and implementing plurality, a perceived ideal situation for the members of CFC is to adopt an autonomous profile when enacting cooperativism. It is an imagined social arena that is enacted when the perceived right opportunities are present. Pluralist conceptualisations like solidarity economy, circular economy, and social economy denaturalise the homo economicus in order to embrace human interaction and relational practice in favour of self-organisation and autonomous decision-making (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Maldonado & Mezza-Garcia, 2016; Vieta, 2021).

All members have a say in the daily operation, and a monthly meeting open to all members is the place to attend if one has any new ideas or suggestions. The working groups have a high degree of autonomy as long as they stay within the overall principles agreed upon at the annual general assembly. In addition, there are many temporary project groups and initiatives that need active engagement, but when initiatives affect others, the groups are obliged to coordinate their activities.

A political discourse of solving the challenges facing the modern welfare state is linked to less public sector involvement combined with increased expectations toward civil society and individual responsibility (Salamon et al., 2017). Initiatives like food co-operatives seem to be gaining support due to increased initiatives for societal change involving self-organised notions of solidarity. Ideally, organisations of new cooperativism are dynamic with collective decision-making competence and room for members' autonomy, instead of being governed by external authority. This can be a messy and complex process, and the members of CFC are always wary of hierarchical and bureaucratic structures.

In CFC, members democratically control the co-operative based on self-organisation, democracy, and solidarity (ICA, 2015). The ICA emphasises a necessity for governance:

In many business sectors, particularly the financial sectors of banking, insurance and pensions, but also in other areas such as food production, distribution and safety, regulation by national state and international agencies will be inevitable. Compliance with these necessary and desirable regulatory regimes ought willingly to be accepted by co-operatives (ICA, 2015, p. 51).

This statement does not correlate well with either the members' views or the ICA's other emphasis on autonomy: "co-operative movements themselves are best able to define what is democratic in a given circumstance" (ICA, 2015, p. 16). The International Labour Organisation (2021) has a similar view:

The term "cooperative" means an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise (p. 6).

In an organisation of passionately independent participants, like CFC, leadership can become counter-productive because community-based production works best through mutualism in a system of autonomous and equality-based exchange (Proudhon, 1840/2009; Wren, 2020). It goes without saying, then, that managers must not have a definite say in matters of governance and strategic navigation, and one way of circumventing this is for members, through training, to receive the skills necessary to balance autonomy with the sometimes-necessary need for making swift decisions.

In order to function and to achieve the goals in new cooperativism, the members' activity and engagement is crucial. This is not created by signing a formal contract; it happens through co-operation and a sense of solidarity that respects the autonomy of each individual. This state of things can be cultivated in such a way that the institutionalised leadership becomes redundant, or at least not permanent, which may increase participation and engagement. Ideally, the less new cooperativism is affected by managerialism and external categorisation, the more effective and harmonious plurality and autonomy can become.

Plurality Beyond Categorisation

New cooperativism is an amalgamation of economic, social, and environmental objectives, and something is at stake that cannot be grasped merely within a logic of supply and demand (Svensson, 2014). Adopting an independent profile is a precondition for being innovative in new cooperativism, which stresses a critical stance toward registration models. These spaces are not easily placed within neat typologies, which invites us to rethink and potentially expand existing frameworks. The members of CFC create and insist on a pluralist practice, and this invites us to perceive new cooperativism as complex spaces of possibilities.

A pluralist approach entails activity in a variety of forms in both formal and informal contexts. In the Danish context, organised co-operativism can be traced back to the farmers' associations, the folk high schools, and the labour unions in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this sense, it is nothing new; rather, the novelty consists in the political and scholarly attention that co-operativism has been given during the past 15-20 years. The ICA and initiatives like the United Nation's sustainable development goals promote stronger co-operatives, but such frameworks must allow for plurality in implementation. Whilst "democracy needs ... procedures and processes, such as formalised models of organisation and business management" (ICA, 2015, p. 15), and these approaches are well suited for some fields, when dealing with pluralist social arenas, they can become non-contextual and superfluous.

The pluralism of new cooperativism presents a challenge to established positions, and a significant risk is that they will conform to normative ideals. If applied without reflection, registration acts only serve mainstream initiatives, and thereby exclude pluralist practices. CFC's members view their practices as far more variegated than inherent in much typology and feel inhibited if they need to adhere to rigid categorisation. If new cooperativism is to maintain a continuous revitalisation, an awareness of unreflected reproduction of models is necessary.

Attempts to frame new co-operative activities and motivations are simplified to a degree that may exclude the organisations they are intended to portray. Rosa Luxemburg (1904/1934) criticises the notion of such pre-established strategy, because constructive navigation cannot be invented, but is the result of experiences in concrete situations. In addition, identities in any culture are socio-economically context-specific, and standardised models are not always constructively transferred between social arenas. This is not to say that there should be no categorisation at all, but the dimensions of plurality and autonomy must be included. This allows for the fact that co-operatives are social arenas that are ever-changing; they are fluid and they appear and disappear continuously and exist in endless connections across sectors, motivations and opportunities.

Concluding Remarks

New cooperativism enacts and constructs a plurality of identities, and the unique possibilities of such activities exist beyond categorisations and typologies. New cooperativism encompasses volunteers, individualism, egalitarianism, and solidarity — and sometimes more self-centred motivations for being active juxtaposed with solidarity and democratic participation. It encompasses heterogeneous identities pertaining to consumption, community and social change, enacted as tangible alternatives to a consumerist mantra of "growth, growth and growth", as described by a member of CFC. They are spaces where another world is perceived as possible to attain, achieved through the everyday practice of plurality and a rejection of private profit-oriented solutions to social problems.

New cooperativism advances social innovation and sustainable communities where understandings of welfare are being confronted. Together with the enactment of social relations, community and collective practices, they challenge dominant modes of governance and sets of categorisations, because due to the plurality, new cooperativism cannot *a priori* be perceived as a representation of one specific sort of organisation.

Typologies and regulations may contribute to dismantling forms of authority from previous eras, which are now only cultural deficits, but, on the other hand, if initiatives are worked out in too much detail, they risk becoming being similar to the old order, because it is based on what we know in the present. In such a setting, at best, registration acts are irrelevant.

In new cooperativism, spaces of possibilities, configurations, subject positions and social relations are tried out and take shape, and future research and practice insights may well focus on how new cooperativism can be better supported financially and governmentally in relation to cross-sectorial collaboration. Civil society initiatives can maintain active democracy, but if the relational spheres become too broad and anonymous, the intrinsic understanding of co-operative behaviour may disappear. Maintaining meaningful connections between members is important, which may involve future research on knowledge of local needs and human goals where members can navigate in pluralist practice to promote social change. Whether initiatives like CFC will succeed, and whether we should moderate or rethink categories to include new cooperativism in the ever-developing landscape of civil society presents an ongoing discussion that may contribute to continued insights into the complexity of new cooperativism's social innovation and capacity for social change.

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