



Book Review

Cooperative Enterprises

By Piero Ammirato

Routledge, 2024. ISBN (pbk): 9781032216829, 354pp.

The anticipation for a book of this nature cannot be understated and there has long been a clear gap in the market for a higher education textbook dedicated solely to co-operative enterprise. The co-operative world has frequently complained of the scant attention it receives in mainstream economic and political discourse, the movement is generally relegated to a footnote in corporate-focused business education, an outsider. As an educator, gathering together the academic evidence and data to support teaching programmes, in lieu of a comprehensive textbook on co-operative business, has previously required extensive and labour-intensive research.

The author indicates that until recently there was a dearth of cross-sector information and data on the significance, potential, opportunities, and limitations of the modern co-operative movement. He further notes that the evolution and development of the business model has been well documented in historical terms, but that a joined-up evaluation of both the development of the movement and an overview of its current status has been lacking. I cannot help but agree with this assertion; as such, this book has very high expectations riding on it, particularly in light of the current masters modules the Co-operative College (UK) is developing in partnership with the University of Dundee.

The first notable feature of the book is that it breaks down an enormous amount of both historical and current information into digestible sections, and uses co-operative examples that are cross-referenced and contrasted with parallel developments across the global co-operative movement. It situates these alongside other political, social, and economic developments to establish the contexts in which these developments occurred. I could add here that at certain moments this can lead to information overload and some confusing presentation of facts, particularly for those coming afresh to co-operatives, but this minor quibble is far outweighed by the overall merit of such a comprehensive and ambitious overview. It would be difficult to go into much greater detail on the quantity of information that is covered without the book becoming unwieldy, and so this 'helicopter view' works in the sense that enables the reader to get a sense of all the competing factors influencing co-operative development.

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There is a focus on how co-operatives have contended with, and responded to, the political, economic, and social environments over time. It does not shy away from exposing developments to co-operative structures that may not be considered to be 'truly' co-operative, such as where democratic member control is weakened and co-operative identity threatened. It highlights issues such as problematic wage differentials in larger co-operatives. It argues that, despite co-operatives generally being perceived as better at wealth distribution than private enterprises, co-operatives may in some instances potentially increase wealth inequalities.

The book does offer a 'warts and all' look at the co-operative movement that puts a spotlight on the aspects of co-operatives where they deviate away from the values and principles and move dangerously close to being co-operatives only in name. The author identifies to what extent a range of different co-operative types comply with the co-operative principles, and the findings are eye-opening. He also highlights the movement's many self-inflicted barriers, such as its lack of ability to successfully communicate a coherent vision of the benefits of co-operatives to the economy and wider society, including an almost blanket absence of educational opportunities and examples of governance failings.

In some places I felt like the information could have benefited from more nuance and clarity, if not in the main body of the text, then certainly in the endnotes for each chapter. One instance is when giving examples of the development of social co-operatives and their structures, it refers to the Community Interest Company (CIC) legal form in the UK and suggests that they are the UK equivalent of a social co-operative. While it's true that this legal form can be used for a co-operative, it's not the case that all CICs are co-operatives, and I would have liked to see this distinction better explained. This example is perhaps more obvious to me, as the UK co-operative movement is my area of expertise, but it did make me wonder if there were other instances where further clarification was required that I was not so aware of due to their being outside of my particular wheelhouse.

The book lays bare not just the factors exerting influence from outside of the movement, but also details the plurality of competing ideologies and ambitions within the movement itself. It raises questions as to why there are comparatively so few co-operatives despite evidence of their success, longevity, and resilience, as well as the many benefits they have enabled both their members and wider society to enjoy. In this way it is possible to gain a greater understanding of the idiosyncrasies of the global co-operative movement and why it has been difficult to mount more of a challenge against the prevailing economic system. It uses good-practice examples and makes suggestions as to how the co-operative enterprise model, within a unified global movement, has the potential to work within a pluralist economy to create a fairer world.

Each chapter is very clearly structured with an opening introduction, a description of the learning aims, and a comprehensive summary of central themes to aid and reinforce learning. The key questions at the end of each chapter provide valuable points of reflection to extend and stretch the learning for students, as well as to support educators in developing complementary learning activities. Extensive endnotes and references enhance the text throughout and provide valuable signposting for further study and research. This means that each chapter has the useful feature of being a self-contained 'unit' or combined with others. I can see that this book will become a core text for us here at the College for a full range of activities, not just as a teaching support, but also for our staff development, research activities, and our campaigning work.

The Reviewer

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