



Book Review

Cooperatives at Work

By George Cheney, Matt Noyes, Emi Do, Marcelo Vieta, Joseba Azkarraga, and Charlie Michel

Emerald Publishing Limited, 2023. ISBN (pbk): 9781838678289, 265pp.

Although written by six authors from across two continents, this is a seamless and free flowing book. When writing the Martin Beck novels, Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö used the simple trick of writing alternate chapters. How the authors have integrated their writing here I've no idea, but it has worked really well. This is a fully referenced, thought provoking, academic publication, but it is also an easy and engaging read.

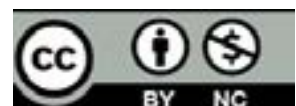
Under six chapter headings (crises and opportunities, democracy equity and justice, innovation to transformation, community to solidarity, co-operative ecology, and co-operative education), they range across every aspect imaginable of the worker co-operative movement. In truth, this is a veritable smorgasbord of everything you wanted to know about worker co-operatives but were too afraid to ask.

In the first chapter, they look at how the world's commitment to capitalism, addiction to growth, and often violent expressions of identity make disasters more likely, and what solutions worker co-operatives might provide.

In the second, they look at how democracy as 'the least worst option', to paraphrase Churchill, can be made to work for us. The authors look at the merits of direct democracy, sociocracy, delegation, subsidiarity, and various hierarchical systems. They touch on where it can go wrong, and I'm always pleased to see Jo Freeman's (1972) pithy analysis "tyranny of structurelessness" get a mention.

In the third chapter, the authors ask whether worker co-operatives are revolutionary. They quote Joxe Azurmendi, the Basque philosopher, summing up Jose Maria Arizmendi's view 'nothing is untouchable, everything should be subject to revision, new and better formulas must always be sought ... "to live is to renew oneself"' (p. 107). They propose the view that worker co-operatives are revolutionary, even if they don't intend to be, or recognise that they are.

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Chapter four considers how co-operatives can lead in the struggles to create and maintain communities of all kinds and build solidarity between and within those communities. They range from initiatives of the Japan Workers Co-operative Union, the ICA, the empresas recuperadas of Argentina to the Via Campesina's worldwide campaigning, and many more.

In chapter five they look at ecology, examining how worker co-operatives can and do fight climate change, and support a just transition. However, they don't address what to me is the essential co-operative advantage; that co-operatives are the only form of business that are sustainable at zero growth. The extraction of profit in capitalist businesses would diminish their capital over time if they didn't grow by at least the level of extraction, and the world can't cope with more growth, we just need fair distribution.

In the final chapter, they address co-operative education, looking at it very much in terms of the need for and the how, rather than the what and where. They look at the importance of education to the development of Mondragon, and its development of schools, a university, and a management training centre, Otalora. They also look at co-operatives that are themselves education projects and consider the barriers to learning of language and culture.

Because of the Spanish and North American background of the writers, the UK and Commonwealth countries (other than Canada) get only an occasional mention, and in the education chapter, the Co-operative College doesn't feature at all. However, it must be said the range of subjects and projects covered in the book is enormous, the research is impeccable, and the fact that some co-operative projects are omitted is yet another reminder of the size and scale of our movement. I learned a lot from the book, and I enjoyed it.

The Reviewer

Alex Bird has over 50 years of management, board, and practitioner level experience in commercial and co-operative business, social enterprise, and the public and voluntary sectors, together with 20 years as a freelance business advisor specialising in co-operatives and social enterprises. He is now retired from offering business advice but continues as an independent co-operative researcher and activist.

Reference

Freeman, J. (1972). The tyranny of structurelessness. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 17, 151-164. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41035187>