



---

## Guest Editorial

### Co-operation as a Response to Capitalist Permacrisis

Late-stage capitalism appears to have reached a point of permanent crisis: environmental catastrophe, war, and technological dystopias loom against a backdrop of accelerating inequality, right-wing populism, conspiracy theories, and racism. The political processes of liberal democracy, servicing capitalism and seemingly immutable, further collapsed as the post-war settlement gave way to austerity. The unresolvable tensions between capitalism and democracy laid bare, Western governments increasingly serve capital interests over political ones (Wolf, 2024). As we write, in early 2024, we are witnessing an ideological and literal (re) turn to totalitarianism and dictatorship. Amongst this, there has been a sustained attack on higher education and the erosion of education as a public good.

If existing economic, political, and social systems remain in play, capitalism will continue inexorably along apocalyptic lines. If we seek to move beyond or replace capitalism, we are faced with an urgent question: what can take the place of this exhausted and sterile paradigm (Fisher, 2022)? We believe this question can be answered because an established alternative to capitalism already exists, co-operation. The co-operative economic model may have its challenges, but the papers in this special issue remind us of how co-operative education can contribute towards delivering a different sort of future based on democracy and social justice.

### The Hidden Radicalism of Co-operation

Webster et al. (2011) explored the idea of co-operation as a 'hidden alternative' to capitalism — a viable but unacknowledged replacement for the capitalist system. Whilst able to operate as mainstream economic businesses, co-operatives are — or should be — social businesses, offering economic and social democracy through co-operative member participation, ownership, and governance. The broad economic, social, and political model of the Rochdale Pioneers aspired to be a radical alternative, part of an ecosystem owned and controlled by its members. Driven by values and principles, fundamentally democratic, co-operation was always designed as a complete alternative to a capitalism based on individualism, accumulation through exploitation, and private property. Crucially, education was central to the so-called Rochdale model, and for much of the twentieth century in the UK, the co-operative movement provided all types of education to its members as workers, consumers, producers, and citizens (Co-operative Union, 1960).

---

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 License, which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the Creative Commons website and the Journal of Co-operative Studies re-use guidelines.



According to co-operative principle number five:

Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the public — particularly young people and opinion leaders — about the nature and benefits of co-operation. (International Co-operative Alliance [ICA], 2015, p. 105)

Education and training improve accountability and participation. In Kenya, co-operative education and training has played a key role in the development of co-operatives. In 1952, co-operative education and training was started in a joint venture between the three east African countries: Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. In 1967, the three countries separated and in Kenya, the Co-operative College of Kenya was started in a small centre. In 1971, the new Co-operative College was established and the same grew to an institution of training for the government and the co-operative movement. In 2011, the College was elevated to a University College and started offering degree programmes in co-operative studies and related fields. In 2016, the University College was chartered as the Co-operative University of Kenya, and developed masters and PhD programmes in co-operative management and associated areas. Apart from the academic programmes, the university offers short programmes which are tailored to meet the needs of the co-operative movement. Furthermore, co-operative education is offered by the co-operative organisations themselves, providing relevant education, training, and information to their members and ensuring they provide a budget for the same. Today there is much concentration on technology, as many co-operatives have digitised their operations. Responding to heavy youth involvement in platform co-operatives, the Co-operative University in Kenya is scheduled to host the 2024 Platform Cooperativism conference in November (<https://cuk.ac.ke/cuk-pcc-conference-2024/>).

Elsewhere, theories of the Black Social Economy describe radical co-operative legacies which, until recently, were also hidden but which have made a major contribution to the global co-operative movement (Hosseini, 2021). Those that champion the co-operative alternative globally, point to the universality of a model that simultaneously meets the needs and aspirations of both individual self-help and collectivist mutuality (Mayo, 2017). Claims made about the success of co-operation globally draw upon examples of a relatively resilient economic model in the neoliberal period (Billiet et al., 2021; Webster et al., 2011) and there is no doubt that the co-operative movement is overlooked as a viable alternative model by economists and other commentators. Although the GDP accounted for by co-operatives and mutuals globally is relatively modest, and, according to a report prepared for the United Nations by Dave Grace & Associates (2014, p. 1), notoriously difficult to measure, numerically the movement is huge, claiming over one billion co-operators associated with three million co-operatives worldwide (ICA, 2024).

In some co-operative sectors, such as consumer, financial services, energy, producer, food, and agriculture, and amongst the global majority, co-operatives constitute a serious critical mass touching incalculable numbers of lives, families, and communities. In addition to a significant social and economic presence in much of the Global South, there are powerful examples of successful co-operatives in heartland capitalist economies such as that of the United States. Here, for example, it is claimed that electric co-operatives account for more than 33% of the US electric utility sector powering over 18 million homes and businesses (National Cooperative Business Association, n.d.). According to Carini et al. (2024, p. 20), the top 300 co-operatives and mutuals (the largest all to be found in the Global North) have a turnover of more than US \$2,409 billion.

Yet despite these apparent successes, co-operation faces significant challenges in offering an actionable, radical alternative to capitalism. These range from how co-operatives struggle to balance their social and economic goals (Novkovic, 2012/2019), the question of scalability (Martins Rodrigues & Schneider, 2021), and how to protect democratic control and member engagement with scale. When this happens accountability and governance become problematic, co-operatives can fail, values, principles, and democracy become strained, and

power sits in fewer and fewer hands (Ghauri, 2021; Verhees et al., 2015). Whilst the smaller worker co-operatives can maintain greater democracy and accountability through their collective decision making and commitment to workers' ownership, they too face many tensions and challenges both culturally, and in their ability to scale up (Langmead, 2016; Zaunseder, 2022).

Our view is that whilst co-operation has had a powerful impact both socially and economically, a need for accommodation within the capitalist system to ensure survival makes it in many ways indistinguishable from the claims made for an ethical capitalism (Richer, 2019). Large co-operatives do exist, but the 'Rochdale' vision of a model framed unwaveringly by radical democratic practice, and which challenges existing power relations and capitalism in its totality, has not been realised.

Yet we are not disheartened by this situation because we remain convinced that being a co-operator is itself a radical position and one that is full of oppositional, if hidden, potential. This is because, as the examples and discussions collected in this special issue suggest, whilst the challenges of reconstituting a future, more equitable co-operative economic model remain formidable, co-operative education is a radical project. The way co-operative education takes place, collectively and through association, as well as its content, focusing on social justice, equality, and co-operative ownership and member control, points to a very different model to capitalism, even if it can be hard to precisely pin down. What unites the contributors to this edition of the *Journal* is a consensus and a belief that an alternative way of living in the world and organising it is possible, and that co-operative education is critical to the co-operative project.

Learning how to be a co-operator and how to co-operate should be emancipatory and radical, as members learn in ways which are fundamentally at odds with capitalist individualism. Co-operative learning, then, involves learning collectively, alongside other co-operators, through association. This process is well-articulated by MacPherson (2002, p. 90) who describes co-operative learning as "a special kind of knowing that emerges when people work together effectively ... [making] collective behaviour more economically rewarding, socially beneficial and personally satisfying". Praxis, which results from learning based on reciprocity, mutuality, association, and the search for equity, is what makes the co-operative education project truly radical.

## **Where is Co-operative Education Now?**

This special issue of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* began as a workshop held online in September 2023. Special issues focused on education have been a regular feature of the *Journal*, however the most recent was in 2018<sup>1</sup>. We arranged this event with the intention of considering co-operative education in a broad sense, and asking: where is co-operative education now? The articles which follow offer a series of different ways to answer this question. Such a question, and its answers, will always be at least partly historical, and Tom Woodin offers a short contextualisation of co-operative education, not least noting how co-operation has always involved learning. Simply by being co-operators a whole raft of skills are, and have been, required. Three further possible answers follow with theoretical explorations of co-operative learning. Jorge Sousa argues for the usefulness of signature pedagogies for co-operative education, noting how "our pedagogy is a reflection of our association and the principles and values we share" (p. 24). Stacey Salt, Ali Longden, and Amanda Benson offer a practitioner perspective using the metaphor of parfum in their exploration of co-operative learning at the Co-operative College in Manchester, considering how learning can be thought of in terms of distillation: as ethics frame top notes, connection heart notes, and how transcendence through experiences and development offer powerful base notes. Finally, Julian Manley offers a psycho-social perspective on co-operative education, showing the difference between capitalist and co-operative undertakings, and considering how learning functions in less hierarchical contexts.

Other answers draw on cases studies and detailed examples. Given the skills gaps many co-operators find when it comes to business and planning work, much co-operative development work will, by its very nature, be of an educational character, something Matias Bertranou Dammert explores in relation to Chilean co-operative development work. Another area of co-operation which has a strong educational dimension is work with young people. Alexandrine Lapoutte reflects on her work on Youth Service Co-operatives in France and the role of education in supporting young people, using metaphors of twine and strings to unravel the power of such learning spaces. Touching across all these ways of answering the question is an interview with John Mulangeni. John places his own experiences in Malawi in historical context from colonial rule through to the present, offering some ways of looking at co-operative education quite generally, and reflecting on the current situation for co-operative education in Malawi specifically. We are pleased to include all these perspectives, and hope that they provide food for further thought.

## Experimenting with a Co-operative Peer Review Process

Peer review itself might stand in as an excellent microcosm of the problems in the neoliberal academy in the Global North, as various factors converge to put the process under such strain that many consider it broken. Pressure to publish, heavy workloads, and precarious employment all conspire to leave many editors struggling to find reviewers (Flaherty, 2022; Petrescu & Krishen, 2022). And whatever sympathy one might have for scholarly editors, it is hard to argue that individuals should give unpaid labour to large, profitable journals run by wealthy transnational corporations. A recent spate of whole editorial board resignations in the face of pressure to accept more articles to boost journal revenues is perhaps the most public face to these tensions (Fazackerley, 2023; Kincaid, 2024; Mackenzie, 2023; Upton, 2023a, 2023b). This is all particularly urgent in the face of AI-generated and supported articles increasing the workload for reviewers with spurious papers (Ahmed et al., 2023; Lindebaum, 2024). All the same, peer review remains an important part of the quality process in academic publishing: generous comments help make for much better papers, beyond any quality control function (Kelly et al., 2014).

In the context of the online workshop and pre-circulation papers, with a high proportion of interested parties in a small field attending the event, we anticipated the impossibility of ensuring double-blind reviews: almost all potential reviewers had logged on to the sessions, or if not, might have seen the programme. Following agreement with the editor of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, we made two changes to the process. Firstly, we operated a collective approach to the first peer reviewer by collecting comments on the day and subsequently using a webform. Research articles were revised by authors in light of these comments, as well as comments from the guest editors. Those longer articles requiring peer review by the *Journal's* general policies were sent for a conventional blind peer review after expansion in light of the initial comments and feedback.

Secondly, we made some changes to the process and its framing, by prompts in the workshop, and by modifying the form used by the *Journal*, adding questions and comments designed to align with the statement on co-operative identity (ICA, 2015). Reviewers and participants were invited to frame comments in a way which was supportive, modelled as something akin to inter-co-operation. We made three changes to the review form, shown in Table 1, designed to encourage a process which was more co-operative in character. None of these solved problems of time and labour, but they did appear to encourage some useful and directed comments which we hope helped make for a more co-operative process. For a journal such as this one, the opportunity to invite comments explicitly aligning with the values seems a useful one. Much more work needs to be done to develop the co-operative peer review process, but those that did engage with this small experiment, found it useful.

Table 1: Three changes made to the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* peer review report form for this special issue

Change	New text
A prompt at the start of the section of the form which is passed to the author was this:	In preparing this report, we invite you to consider the co-operative values: “Co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others” (ICA, 2015, p. 105).
We added a question explicitly on co-operative values:	Does this paper move the co-operative identity and anti-capitalist agenda forward? If not, could changes be made to achieve this?
Under the section on improvements, we used a revised rubric:	Modelling teaching feedback rather than combative tradition peer review, we provide space here for additional suggestions to be made to help the author improve this article. For example, you might point to literature which is not included but which might help.

We are delighted to present a number of papers which go some way to answering in part the question: where is co-operative education now? These are partial, tentative answers, because by its nature, co-operative education will never achieve a state of fixity. Each co-operative classroom, or other space of learning, should be co-produced, and will function differently by virtue of the people participating and resources available. It is a topic which is relatively underexamined and underdetermined and requires continuous critical reflection as to purpose and impact in a changing world. However, commitment to a different type of world will always remain fundamental to emancipatory education and for the co-operator, whatever else changes, collective, associational, and radical approaches and practices will be what gives it values alignment and democratic intent.

## Esther Gicheru, Malcolm Noble, and Cilla Ross Guest Editors

### The Guest Editors

Esther Gicheru is an Associate Professor of Co-operative Management and Organisation Transformation, currently serving as the Deputy Vice Chancellor at the Co-operative University of Kenya. She is an ex long serving principal of the Co-operative College of Kenya. Malcolm Noble is a freelance historian and member of Leicester Vaughan College, a higher education co-operative. He has written widely on co-operative education with Cilla Ross, and is on the advisory board of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*. Cilla is ex Principal of the Co-operative College and has co-authored a number of publications with Malcolm Noble on co-operative higher education. Cilla sits on the advisory board of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*.

### Note

- 1 The special issue referred to was guest edited by Amanda Benson, Cilla Ross, and Sarah Alldred (<https://www.ukscs.coop/resources/journal-of-co-operative-studies-vol-51-no-2>). It was a Co-operative College special issue titled “Skills for co-operators in the 21st century — Learning to do, learning to be”.

### References

- Ahmed, A., Al-Khatib, A., Boum, Y., Debat, H., Gurmendi Dunkelberg, A., Hinchliffe, L. J., Jarrad, F., Mastroianni, A., Mineault, P., Pennington, C. R., & Pruszynski, J. A. (2023). The future of academic publishing. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7, 1021-1026. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01637-2>

- Billiet, A., Dufays, F., Friedel, S., & Staessens, M. (2021). The resilience of the cooperative model: How do cooperatives deal with the COVID-19 crisis? *Strategic Change*, 30(2), 99-108. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jsc.2393>
- Carini, C., Eum, H., Cecchetti, M., Gao, C., Delvecchio, P., Gotz, I., Chen, G., & Degetto, P. (2024). *World Cooperative Monitor 2023: Exploring the cooperative economy*. ICA/EURICSE. <https://monitor.coop/en/media/library/research-and-reviews-world-cooperative-monitor/world-cooperative-monitor-2023>
- Co-operative Union. (1960). *Co-operative education: A handbook of practical guidance for co-operative educationists*. Co-operative Union Ltd.
- Dave Grace & Associates. (2014). Measuring the size and scope of the cooperative economy: Results of the 2014 global census on co-operatives. Report for the United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UN DESA). <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/2014/coopsegm/grace.pdf>
- Fazackerley, A. (2023, May 7). 'Too greedy': Mass walkout at global science journal over 'unethical' fees. *The Observer/The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2023/may/07/too-greedy-mass-walkout-at-global-science-journal-over-unethical-fees>
- Fisher, M. (2022). *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* Zer0 Books.
- Flaherty, C. (2022, June 12). The peer-review crisis. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/06/13/peer-review-crisis-creates-problems-journals-and-scholars>
- Ghuri, S., Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2021). Co-operative values and principles: Does the talk match the walk? *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 54(3), 7-22.
- Hossein, C. S. (2021). The legacy of cooperatives among the African Diaspora: The cases of Haiti and Grenada. *National Review of Black Politics*, 2(3-4), 171-194. <https://doi.org/10.1525/nrbp.2021.2.3-4.171>
- International Co-operative Alliance. (2015). *Guidance notes to the co-operative principles*. <https://ica.coop/en/media/library/the-guidance-notes-on-the-co-operative-principles>
- International Co-operative Alliance. (2024). *International cooperative alliance*. <https://ica.coop/en/about-us/international-cooperative-alliance>
- Kelly, J., Sadeghieh, T., & Adeli, K. (2014). Peer review in scientific publications: Benefits, critiques, & a survival guide. *EJIFCC — Journal of the International Federation of Clinical Chemistry and Laboratory Medicine*, 25(3), 227-243.
- Kincaid, E. (2024, January 22). Sociology journal's entire editorial board resigns after Springer Nature appointed new leadership. *Retraction Watch*. <https://retractionwatch.com/2024/01/22/sociology-journals-entire-editorial-board-resigns-after-springer-nature-appointed-new-leadership/>
- Langmead, K. (2016). Challenging the degeneration thesis: The role of democracy in worker co-operatives? *Journal of Entrepreneurial and Organisational Diversity*, 5(1), 79-98. <http://doi.org/10.5947/jeod.2016.005>
- Lindebaum, D. (2024). Is peer review ripe for a revise and resubmit? — Academics might be less the party answering that question. *Business History*, 1-5. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2024.2318464>
- Mackenzie, R. J. (2023, April 19). Mass resignation at leading neuroscience journals prompted by high article processing fees. *Technology Networks*. <http://www.technologynetworks.com/neuroscience/news/mass-resignation-at-leading-neuroscience-journals-prompted-by-high-article-processing-fees-372339>
- MacPherson, I. (2002). Encouraging associative intelligence: Co-operatives, shared learning and responsible citizenship. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 35(2), 86-98.
- Martins Rodrigues, J., & Schneider, N. (2021). Scaling co-operatives through a multi-stakeholder network: A case study in the Colorado Solar Energy Industry. *Journal of Entrepreneurial and Organizational Diversity*, 10(2), 29-53. <http://doi.org/10.5947/jeod.2021.008>
- Mayo, E. (2017). *A short history of co-operation and mutuality*. Co-operatives UK.
- National Cooperative Business Association. (n.d.). *Utility co-ops*. NCBA CLUSA. <https://ncbaclusa.coop/resources/co-op-sectors/utility-co-ops/>
- Novkovic, S. (2019). *The balancing act: Reconciling the economic and social goals of co-operatives* (Working paper 03/2019). Saint Mary's University International Centre for Co-operative Management. (Original work published 2012)
- Petrescu, M., & Krishen, A. S. (2022). The evolving crisis of the peer-review process. *Journal of Marketing Analytics*, 10(3), 185-186. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41270-022-00176-5>
- Richer, J. (2019). *The ethical capitalist: How to make business work better for society*. Random House.
- Upton, B. (2023a, July 15). Elsevier journal board follows through on mass resignation threat. *Times Higher Education*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/elsevier-journal-board-follows-through-mass-resignation-threat?cmp=1>
- Upton, B. (2023b, August 10). Wiley journal board resigns after monthlong strike. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/global/2023/08/10/wiley-journal-board-resigns-en-masse-after-monthlong-strike>

- Verhees, F. J. H. M., Sergaki, P., & van Dijk, G. (2015). Building up active membership in cooperatives. *New Medit: Mediterranean Journal of Economics, Agriculture, and Environment*, 14(1), 42-52.
- Webster, A., Brown, A., Stewart, D., Walton, J. K., & Shaw, L. (Eds.). (2011). *The hidden alternative: Co-operative values, past, present and future*. Manchester University Press. <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9780719086564/>
- Wolf, M. (2024). *The crisis of democratic capitalism*. Penguin.
- Zaunseder, A. (2022). Radical democratic citizenship at work in an adverse economic environment: The case of workers' co-operatives in Scotland. *Identities*, 29(1), 88-107.

