



## **Mainstreaming Co-operation: An Alternative for the Twenty-First Century? Edited by Anthony Webster, Linda Shaw and Rachael Vorberg-Rugh .**

Amanda Benson

How to cite this article:

Benson, A. (2016). Mainstreaming Co-operation: An Alternative for the Twenty-First Century? Edited by Anthony Webster, Linda Shaw and Rachael Vorberg-Rugh [Book review]. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 49(2), 55-57.

# Mainstreaming Co-operation: An Alternative for the Twenty-First Century?

Edited by Anthony Webster, Linda Shaw and Rachael Vorberg-Rugh  
Manchester University Press. 2016. ISBN: 978-0-7190-9959-5.

This book comes about as a result of the major international conference entitled *Mainstreaming Co-operation*, held by the Co-operative College in Manchester in the summer of 2012.

The principal aim of the conference was to highlight how the co-operative movement could reposition itself as a central and lead player in current economic, social and political thinking. This book takes stock of a number of the papers presented at the conference; it focuses on a variety of both historical and contemporary examples where co-operation has provided an alternative solution to the issues of the day and also discusses how it needs to develop to capture the support of the mainstream.

The introduction highlights the events and changes in political climate which led to co-operatives falling out of favour in the latter half of the twentieth century, and also of 'fading' from the mainstream of business and economics. It goes on to discuss how the failings of the international capitalist system, namely the greater divide between the 'haves' and 'have nots', has the potential to lead to a breakdown in social order and a distrust of mainstream politics. It charts the ideological shift that occurred in the post-2008 economic crisis, where the failings of the private sector banks and public services led to a renewed emphasis on the ability of third sector organisations such as co-operatives, mutuals, social enterprises and charities to encourage greater participation in society and democracy. The events of recent years have shown how relevant and how timely this publication is.

The editors note that the conference itself and subsequent planned publication aimed to demonstrate, and learn from, the ways in which the co-operative movement has historically succeeded in breaking down barriers. In addition, these ideas would be further developed by showcasing contemporary examples of how co-operatives were once again gaining ground. They stress that the central themes of the book do not concentrate on exhorting replicable models, but rather on the wider question of mainstreaming co-operation through "winning wider intellectual, legal and political acceptance of co-operation across the world".

The first part of the book (chapters 2-9) primarily examines perspectives of what co-operatives can learn from past triumphs and shortcomings; the second part of the book (chapters 9-15) highlights a number of modern examples where co-operatives are breaking new ground and demonstrating their deserved place as part of the mainstream. However, there is acknowledgement that to leave out an examination of post-conference events surrounding the crisis in the British consumer co-operative movement, notably the near-failure of the Co-operative Bank and the Co-operative Group, would have rendered the book quickly obsolete, and so the publication date was delayed so as to include a chapter on this subject (chapter 16).

Many of the chapters in the book talk of advocating co-operative ideas as a serious alternative to the accepted neo-liberal establishment, such as in Sanchez Bajo and Roelents' *Mainstreaming co-operatives after the global financial crisis* (chapter 2). In this they emphasise that mainstreaming the key features of co-operatives and mutuals needs to be part of a plural and inclusive approach allowing people "more qualitative control over their lives and opportunities". In chapter 3, *Our agencies: persuasion and the value of a concept to mainstreaming co-operation*, Grant argues that there needs to be a better synchronised

approach to bringing co-operative thinking to the fore through developing active and autonomous networks capable of generating the required determination and drive to seat co-operative ideas in the mainstream. Yeo's chapter (4), *G J Holyoake: a resource for a journey of hope?* asserts that there is a thirst for the kind of ethical argument presented by Holyoake on the benefits of co-operation as an alternative to the inherent self-interest of neoliberal theory, and that this has the potential to galvanise people who are seeking change. In chapter 5's *History, citizenship and co-operative education, c1895-1930*, Keith Vernon focuses on the important role played by the co-operative movement in ensuring its syllabus of historical education offered an alternative to that which was offered in mainstream institutions.

In chapter 6, *The unit of the co-operative movement ... is a woman: gender and the development of the co-operative business model in Britain*, Vorberg-Rugh discusses how British consumer co-operatives have traditionally failed to address the disparity between the fact that although the bulk of co-operative customers were women, the majority of members were men. The chapter focuses on how gender norms influenced, and also restricted, the development of the co-operative movement, and how being dependent on women as consumers did not convert into either a large amount of female members or their participation in governance. The chapter highlights how, whilst being a primarily historical perspective, the challenge still exists in today's co-operatives, and points to Rawlings and Shaw's *A continuing challenge: women and leadership in co-operatives* (chapter 7) and their discussion of enduring inequality in the co-operative movement. In this chapter, they discuss how structural barriers and societal norms often prevent women from taking on leadership roles in all sectors, a situation not confined to the co-operative movement. There is recognition that whilst women may gain many advantages from co-operative membership, they remain poorly represented in leadership roles. They suggest increased training and education to promote the development of women leaders alongside a more in-depth programme of gender-disaggregated data collection.

In her chapter entitled *The wasted years? The Co-operative Party during the 1930s* (chapter 8), Whitecross discusses how the relationship with the Labour Party has in some ways impeded the development of the Co-operative Party. It goes on to draw attention to the 'lost opportunity' of the Co-operative Party to influence the policies of the Labour Party in the interwar period due to its structural limitations and also a reluctance of members to engage with wider policies outside immediate business interests.

In Mills and Yeoman's *New models of ownership and governance* (chapter 9), they examine the current rise in interest in co-operation and mutuality in the UK following on from its decline in popularity in the latter half of the twentieth century. They discuss the benefits of sharing power in 'multi-constituency' mutuals, but clearly state that this cannot be imposed as a 'top down' exercise; it has to come from behaviour and cultural changes, both within the organisations themselves and the communities with a stake in those organisations.

In chapter 10, *Co-operatives in health care: global prospects for the development of co-operatives as instruments of consumer-centred health care*, Hughes argues that there is real potential for consumer co-operatives to fill the gap between the policy demands for consumer-centred health care and the current reality of a healthcare infrastructure based on provider centred delivery.

McCusker's paper (chapter 11) *Rising numbers of architectural co-operatives in an uncertain construction economy*, highlights how architectural co-operatives are undergoing a renaissance following on from high levels of redundancies resulting from the 2008 economic crisis. He draws attention to the fact that co-operatives may have suffered from an image crisis, perceived by some as being run by 'hippies', and that as a result there is a need to better promote co-operatives as a legitimate democratic and equitable business model, both in architecture and also more widely.

In chapter 12, Schröder and Walk's *Co-operatives and climate protection: housing co-operatives in Germany*, the authors focus on how climate change measures have globally yielded poor

results. They go on to discuss the real opportunity for housing co-operatives in Germany to better raise awareness of climate protection, through member participation and solidarity, and by providing a leading example of sustainable practices.

In Hannan's chapter entitled *The co-operative identity: good for poverty reduction?* (chapter 13) she underlines that co-operatives are not widely perceived as having an explicit mandate to reduce poverty. However, she uses a case study of a dairy co-operative in Kenya to demonstrate how being involved and engaging with the co-operative as members enabled people to become more resilient in their farming practices and also engage with wider poverty-reducing initiatives, thereby reducing poverty as an additional benefit.

In chapter 14, Pérotin highlights that worker's co-operatives are still, to some extent, an unknown, but that this is changing as more data becomes available about worker co-operatives; this data demonstrates that worker co-operatives are falsely represented in the popular consciousness as 'rather unlikely' businesses, whereas in reality they are a profitable, sustainable and locally accountable alternative to conventional businesses.

In *The impact of the co-operative ethos on the creation of shared value: a case study of Lincolnshire Co-operative Society* (chapter 15), Considine and Hingley examine how co-operative models have the potential to create shared value amongst their staff, members and also the wider community, which in turn strengthens their commercial performance. This is achieved through creating a sense of accountability to the local community, encouraging support for local businesses and promoting sustainability, an example from which much can be learned for the co-operative movement more broadly.

In the final chapter *Learning to swim against the tide: crises and co-operative credibility — some international and historical examples* (chapter 16), the authors discuss the recent crisis in the British consumer co-operative sector, and its damaging knock-on effect in the public perception of co-operatives more generally. Through drawing on a range of examples it teases out some common themes, negative issues and threats affecting co-operation as a model, and stresses that new approaches to overcoming these difficulties need to be enacted as a matter of urgency.

Overall this publication covers a broad spectrum of subjects, the significant theme being that there is an exciting new opportunity for co-operative and mutual types of organisation to move into the mainstream as a key player at a time when people are seeking an alternative to the current neoliberal model. However, the book also offers a cautionary note in emphasising that in order to fully maximise the benefits of this new era, the movement needs to learn from past experiences (both good and bad) as well as adapt, change and innovate to be responsive to ever-developing conditions.

## **The Author**

Amanda Benson holds a Masters in International Natural Resource Development, focusing on gender and agricultural development, particularly in relation to access to resources and preserving indigenous knowledge of both plants and growing systems. This led on to a PhD that used a multi-institutional perspective to examine women farmers' access to resources and gender sensitivity within the Indian agricultural extension system. More recently Amanda has worked in asset based community development in the UK voluntary sector, and is now part of the Co-operative College working on a variety of research projects.