



The Active Co-operator: Member Participation

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The Active Co-operator: Member Participation

The following articles focus on aspects that continue to exercise researchers and co-operators internationally. They appeared in the Society for Co-operative Studies Bulletin in 1968 and 1970 and focus on local and general retail societies. The 'Active Co-operator' reports on research undertaken in Staffordshire, UK and looks at the reasons why individuals join a retail co-operative and their engagement with co-operative philosophy and principles. The active co-operators referred to are "committee members, directors, delegates to regional and national bodies, and the leading enthusiasts of the auxiliaries" seen as key components of co-operative democracy. The second paper, "Guidelines of member participation" — brings in a wider consumer focus. Both are of their time but with contemporary resonance.

The Active Co-operator

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The Society for Co-operative Studies has rightly chosen to emphasise two concerns. Research into topics likely to be of fairly direct benefit to co-operative management and business organisation is one. The other is the further training and specialised education of managers and employees. But there is also a third concern, which, though perhaps not of such direct importance, should be recognised as having a secure place in co-operative studies. The co-operative movement is a unique social phenomenon, important both for its principles and for its practice. It would be regrettable if neglect of this aspect of the movement came about by default. Many co-operators still display concern for and about the principles of the movement; debate about the relevance of the co-operative philosophy is continuing. Reference to this aspect is necessary to a full understanding of the movement.

In comparison with the Labour Party and the trades unions, the co-operative movement has been neglected as an object of study. Such study as there has been, has concentrated on the history and the economic growth of the movement. Reference to co-operative philosophy and democratic institutions has appeared rather more incidental. A number of studies have been primarily concerned with the latter aspects. As an historical part of the labour movement the co-operative movement can be proud of its claim to a prominent place in social history.

The democratic aspect of co-operation is also of immediate relevance. Debate about regionalisation has prompted discussion of the forms to be taken by democratic control in the new retail societies. Information about the nature of participation in the democratic government of present-day retail societies can contribute to that discussion. This contribution also has a general interest. The expansion of sociological studies is in part a consequence of a growing realisation that the ways in which society works are often very complicated. Interest in this field is increasing. Just as the co-operative movement deserves a substantial part in historical studies, so it must press its claim in sociological studies. The immediate utility of such studies may not be persistently apparent, but their value is not therefore to be lightly dismissed.

As a contribution to the establishment of the suggested claim, this brief article will concentrate on one aspect of the co-operative movement and indicate its position in sociological studies. It is hoped that co-operators may feel prompted to comment from the basis of their personal experience, and the sociologists will both criticise and also further examine the sociology of retail co-operation. Some results from a small survey investigation of the Burslem and District Industrial Co-operative Society Ltd., carried out at Keele University will be included to illustrate certain points. Such results refer only to that retail society.

The Co-operative Activist

The co-operators who personally participate in the democratic institutions of their retail societies are clearly individuals important to co-operative democracy. Among their number are committee members, directors, delegates to regional and national bodies, and the leading enthusiasts of the auxiliaries. They also provide co-operative representation, either formally or informally, in many other social institutions. Two principal aspects of these phenomena are important. Firstly, participation in co-operative democratic institutions

begins for some activists a process of socialisation. As participants, new activists are in situations where new ideas legitimate new patterns of action. It is into these values and institutions that the activist becomes socialised. Secondly, continued active participation can be analysed partly in terms of how the member views society as a whole, their own position in it, and the evaluation s/he gives each. In other words, participation is to be taken to serve some function in the activist's life as a whole. This function may be uncomplicated, such as that of providing opportunities for social contact. Alternatively, it may be an expression of the interaction of social ideals and changing or static social position and relationships.

These two aspects clearly may interact. The latter may variously reinforce different stages of the former, or the progress of the former may produce changes in the latter.

Socialisation

The process of socialisation can be divided schematically into three aspects: recruitment, ideology, and institutional. The latter two are concurrent aspects of all activist behaviour: the first is a special part of both. For socialisation recruitment is necessary. This implies that new activists attend sufficient co-operative functions to become fairly well acquainted with co-operative ideals and practice. Recruitment thus involves more than a simple visit to a guild or members' meeting. A single visit can have the same proximate cause as a visit intended to be the first of a series of experimental attendances: for example, the casual invitation of a friend. Recruitment so defined permits the new activist to acquaint himself with the principal aspects of a new organisational milieu. If socialisation is to continue from this stage, then the new activist must have been persuaded that co-operation has something to offer him. It may often be the case that after a short period of participations, the activist reverts to being an ordinary member.

In the study of the Burslem Society it was found that, among the activists at the time of the study two different patterns of attendance occurred. During the period 1960-1966 the Society held twenty-eight quarterly meetings. Two-fifths of the activists had attended at least three-quarters of these meetings. The remainder had all attended fewer than half and most, fewer than a third of the quarterly meetings. This grouping was not found to be associated with any factors likely to give it a special explanation. It seems probable that the Society successfully holds the interest of only a small proportion of those who ever attend its business meetings. A variety of causes for such reversion can be identified. Among them are the lack of developed ideas about the aim of co-operation, the lack of opportunity for the activist to immediately and directly participate in important decisions and the, often unattractive, nature of members' business meetings. Many co-operators are aware of possible remedies.

Co-operative Ideology

Co-operative ideology refers properly to the philosophy and basic legitimating values of the co-operative movement. No value judgement is implied. Co-operative ideology has several useful functions. It links the activist's personal situation and aims to an institution. It serves centrally in passing on a pattern of action to new recruits. It also offers the value of local co-operative auxiliary activity.

There are clear difficulties to the empirical investigation of co-operative ideology. In the Burslem Society study connections between the activist member and the Society were examined so as to include an indication of the ideas and the knowledge of the Society itself involved.

The indices chosen for the limited examination of co-operative knowledge, etc., among activists were the following. The type of reason given for joining their co-operative society, the number of board members known by name, degree of acquaintance with co-operative publications and knowledge of two basic problems facing the co-operative movement. Reasons for joining their co-operative society could be conveniently grouped into four categories: references to family habit or parental example, specific mentioning of the dividend, financial advantage or commercial convenience, the employment of the respondent or a relative, and reference to the ideals, and principles of co-operation. The following table shows how the replies of three types of survey respondents fell into the various categories.

Table 1: Reasons for joining a retail co-operative

Type of member	Family %	Trading %	Employment %	Principle %	Don't know %
Activist Member	25	27.5	22.5	20	5
Guild Member	43	43	4	4	6
Ordinary Member	42.5	41	5.5	1	9

The extent to which these replies represent accurately the true reason for joining, or include subsequent colouration or learning is not clear. It probably varies between the groups of respondents.

Knowledge of board members and of problems facing the co-operative movement can be considered as evidence that activists are to a certain degree sufficiently informed to contribute to co-operative government. Such knowledge indicates the quality of the community of activist members around the society.

The activist members of the Burslem Society were found to be able to name on average 4 members of the board of directors.

The extent to which activists read co-operative publications was also investigated. *Platform* and *Co-operative News* were chosen. The *Sunday Citizen* was taken as a publication sympathetic to the co-operative movement, and consequently likely to carry a substantial amount of news about it.

Table 2: Active readership of co-operative publications

Publication	% readers
<i>Platform</i>	10
<i>Co-operative News</i>	80
[Regular readers of <i>Co-operative News</i>]	[60]
<i>Sunday Citizen</i>	30

Activists were asked whether they knew the attitude of the Co-operative Union to the then recently imposed SET [Selective Employment Tax]. Half the activists knew that the Co-operative Union opposed the imposition of SET. The second question used to determine the economic knowledge and awareness of the respondents was a request for a reason for the changeover to self-service in retail outlets, ("This change is now a general trend in this country. Can you give me an explanation of why it is happening?"). If a respondent gave a reason which could be taken to be a 'structured' reply in an economic sense, then that respondent was considered 'informed'. Only a quarter of the activists gave acceptable replies.

It has been possible here only to briefly indicate empirical findings about the socialisation with respect to recruitment and knowledge of the co-operative movement. However, it would be of interest if the experience of co-operators elsewhere could be made available.

The Author

At the time of writing the article, John Whitfield was a Research Officer in the Nuffield Research Unit in Statistical Sociology at the University of Keele.

Postscript

John Whitfield presented further research at the 1969 Society for Co-operative Studies annual general meeting at the University of Manchester: "Some considerations on democratic participation in retail co-operative government" (Whitfield, 1969) with a focus on institutional constraints, the embourgeoisement hypothesis, and ideology and where research has been carried out in two Staffordshire retail societies:

The research findings were discussed in terms of their implications for four principal topics. Desirable areas of further research suggested.

1. The limitations to participation. It was briefly suggested that there were maximum limits to participation by members, resulting from both external and internal constraints to retail society organisation.
2. The function of co-operative ideology as a determinant of participation was discussed. The distinction between co-operative philosophy and the relevant belief structures of members could be described as a consequence of institutional constraints.
3. The change in active co-operative participation as a consequence of large-scale changes in the attitudes of social classes and status groups. The continuation of participation longer than might be expected, and the cumulative effect of several factors.
4. Some possible consequences for the philosophy and principles of co-operation, if they were accurately to reflect and guide co-operative actions.

[... Discussion]

Following the presentation of the paper a number of points were raised in discussion:

- (a) It was pointed out that far too little information is available about "active Co-operator". What kind of members composed the active minority and what were the reasons which motivated them to participate? What, in fact, was the contemporary appeal of the Co-operative Movement and had the Movement an ideology relevant to the present day?
- (b) It was generally agreed that gradual movement from Co-operative inactivity to activity was characteristic only of a very small minority. What level or proportion of member-participation was desirable? Was one per cent of the total society membership too modest a figure to aim at?
- (c) The machinery for local democracy and the environmental pressures operating against member-participation were reviewed. It was asserted that Co-operative democracy should be based upon the local store and that there should be a pool of potential Directors within each Society.

References

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Notes

- The Burslem Co-operative Society was set up in 1901 with 200 members who paid a subscription of four shillings each and promised to make this into £1 as soon as convenient ... By 1932, the amount of share, loan, and penny bank capital of the Burslem & District Industrial Co-operative Society was £1,209,533. They had 50,000 members and 112 shops' (<http://www.thepotteries.org/co-operative.htm>). Along with other North Staffordshire societies, it became part of the Co-operative Group (<https://www.co-operative.coop/about-us/history>).
- The *Sunday Citizen* started life as the *Reynold's Weekly Newspaper* in 1850, and had changed its name to *Reynold's Illustrated News* by the time it was bought by the Co-operative Press in 1929. It closed in 1967. Copies of Reynold's newspaper are available online at the British Newspaper Archive.