



Book Review

Everything For Everyone: The Radical Tradition that is Shaping the Next Economy

By Nathan Schneider

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I came late to this book but when I did, I was very glad to do so. Schneider is such great company on his tour of the past and potential future of co-operative enterprise. This, his third book, begins with his grandfather, who was born in Colorado, in 1916. He was the son of German speaking migrants from the Ukraine and he rose to be the Director of Liberty Hardware, a co-operative wholesaler to hardware stores across America. It wasn't researching his family history that put Schneider in search of co-operatives, however, but the activities of veterans of the Occupy Wall Street protests in the 2010s.

This triggered a search for new co-operative frontiers whilst simultaneously he began to see existing co-operatives all around him. Our paths crossed unknowingly as we both attended the 2016 International Summit of Co-operatives in Quebec. Quebec itself has a very rich density of co-operatives. The thing that strikes Schneider, however, is the disconnect between the existing co-operative sector and the new radical co-operatives who would not have known that a gathering like this was even possible.

Whilst at least in theory the old and the new co-operatives owe their identity to the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844 and the International Co-operative Alliance's (2015) statement of co-operative principles and values, Schneider suggests "the arteries and veins of the co-operative idea are participation and control. Those who use an enterprise should be those who own and govern it" (pp. 12-13). Schneider describes the principles in a way that is both easy to understand and also powerfully compelling. Take this description of the 5th co-operative principle on education:

This kind of responsibility calls for a lifetime of learning about the particulars of the business at hand, toward the wisdom that self-management requires. Co-ops are supposed to constantly equip their members with the knowledge and skills they need to be good stewards; they are also expected to broadcast their mission and model to the public beyond. (p. 13)

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The gulf between the generations that built much of the past and the newcomers who are trying to invent a new co-operative commonwealth is the space he explores in this book. He calls the first chapter “a prehistory”. Whilst not backward looking, he argues, “for those trying to imagine an economic future more equitably shared among all who inherit and contribute to it, some nostalgia has value. It can remind us of forgotten achievements, of capacities latent amongst us that may be of use once again” (p. 40).

In chapter two, he describes how the depression in the US was a great spur to co-operative development but that co-operatives are regularly being discovered and then forgotten almost as quickly. We seem to be forever on the verge of a breakthrough, and he demonstrates this with great examples from across the world.

The third chapter is largely about the attempt of co-operatives to rescue Detroit. The population of Detroit has shrunk by two thirds since its peak in the 1950s. It is the definition of a post-industrial society. Sadly that description now fits many places, and Schneider describes co-operators using shared ownership to try to bring hope. The “clock of the world” chapter title is a call to notice where we are and where we might go next.

Chapter four has worn less well than some of the others as it is an exploration of alternative models of banking, including the potential of crypto currencies. This is followed by a chapter called slow computing platforms, the slow computing metaphor comes from the slow food movement and the chapter explores platform co-operativism. The argument is that this technology opens up the possibility of a new type of “ownership design”. It has been more difficult than expected to build a co-operative Uber however. One story he reminds us of was his attempt to mutualise Twitter before its purchase by Elon Musk. No doubt that if that could have been made to work, we would now be in a different, better world.

The core of chapter five is the incredible success of the US electricity co-operatives, a New Deal initiative that has lasted and grown (75% of the US landmass gets its electricity from co-operatives). Operating mainly in rural America, the co-operatives have not escaped the polarisation of US politics. This has created the paradox that they “have become conservative institutions, carrying out the business of reliability while balancing their members’ interests with formidable inertia. But they are also poised to land a shift to a more renewable distributed energy grid” (p. 172). This paradox is played out against a backdrop of challenges between grassroots members and boards and the even more challenging racial politics of much of rural America.

The final chapter, Phase Transition — Commonwealth, is the most eclectic and in retrospect the saddest. Schneider attends a summit on co-operative development in Ecuador where he encounters Michael Bauwens of the Foundation for Peer to Peer Alternatives. Bauwens believes that “Co-ops are the event horizon. They’re bubbles of peer to peer potential that can persist within capitalism” (p. 213). Schneider sees that Bauwens is right, “that something world historical is going on here. But the outcome may not be an egalitarian commons of borderless, permissionless, peer to peer productivity” (p. 216).

There is no doubt we are now struggling with the monopolisation of the world’s main communications infrastructure. The development of AI and cloud computing have created a precariat and calls for a universal basic income are discussed. Together with the political challenges of widening the support for co-operatives, Schneider points out “if Italy’s Catholics and Communists could unite around the practical work of building a commonwealth perhaps, Democrats and Republicans could too” (p. 232). Making the important point that if states were to encourage, not just worker co-operatives, but agricultural, utility, purchasing, and credit co-operatives, they could see their political support become much wider.

Schneider’s conclusion, is one which I wholeheartedly recognise. He argues that the co-operative movement is divided by a generation gap, with the knowledge of the previous generations of co-operators lost, while “the new cooperators, confronting more nomadic forces act like they have to build the commonwealth, they need all on their own, starting from zero”

(p. 233). The challenge Schneider sets us is not insurmountable. He argues “A commonwealth must evolve — its technology of course, but also its cultures and its structures” (p. 233).

Wise words those of us in the movement would be foolish to ignore.

The Reviewer

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References

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