

Some Personal Comment

AS IT SEEMS

A part of the interval since we last met here I have spent in Thailand, on a mission for the Ministry of Overseas Development. My main business was at Mae Jo near Chiang Mai in the north at the Institute of Agricultural Technology which is introducing a special degree course for particular service to Cooperative development. For me it was a happy experience which included reunions with former students from Stanford Hall now promoted to far and high places in Cooperative responsibility; and for the Institute it was, I hope, a modestly productive exchange. Of course, I was beset by many impressions and reflections quite distant from my central preoccupation with the degree course. One of these was reactivated by a recent headline in the Cooperative News hailing the establishment of the Cooperative Development Agency.

In Thailand, as so often in the developing countries, the thrust of general argument is:

- that for both economic and social reasons there should be a strong Cooperative movement.
- that the initiative and support of Government are essential.
- that this State support should be in the areas of economic planning, finance and promotion.
- that the State commitment, however, should accommodate what a Thai booklet called efforts "for enhancing the Cooperative spirit and autonomy of the Cooperative Movement".

And the transition envisaged in the last item from Government sponsorship towards Cooperative self-help and self-direction is different and delicate. It is an exercise in abdication of governmental power, which is rare in human affairs and seeks a balance between State action and voluntary responsibility not easy to reach and maintain.

The search is also difficult when it is undertaken from the opposite direction, when the process is to move from less to more governmental responsibility. That is part of the challenge in the C.D.A.. Essentially it is a mechanism for more governmental involvement in Cooperative development in this country and to keep that State function in proper equilibrium with the "classic" Cooperative self-direction will be a delicate business. For instance, while the C.D.A. may not itself, under present terms, be a significant source of State funds for Cooperatives, it will help to define the ground rules for financing Cooperatives, and to secure State money for Cooperatives from other sources. As it does so, a crucial indicator in any Cooperative will be the balance achieved between working capital from members and capitalisation from other sources. This is one of the main lessons of the Mondragon industrial Cooperatives where in total about 20% of the capital comes from the members, about 20% from the State and 60% from the group savings bank. Remember Mondragon! It is unnecessary to offer this advice to the strong board now set up for the C.D.A.: and indeed impertinent since Geraldine Norman, who contributed to the Report* on Mondragon is a member of that board.

* Worker Owners : The Mondragon Achievement; published by the Anglo-German Foundation for the Study of Industrial Society.

"How Happy is he Born . . ."

Another memory of Thailand is the discovery of - I think - a happy man. The Institute is engaged in extra-mural work to the north of Chiang Mai in an area which has had a long tradition of poppy-growing and is seeking especially to extend diversification of the crops. Our journey there was by helicopter and at the end was a village of about 200 men, women and children. In my uncertain perspective of comparative social history it looked much as I would have expected to find an eighteenth century village in the highlands of Scotland - remote, poor, proud, fierce-looking and generous and all these qualities dressed in a "tartan" of distinctive colours, worn particularly (and attractively) by the women-folk.

Our host and guide was the deputy headman of the village, young, married and with two children; owner of a small plot quite remote from his home; obviously shrewd and intelligent and as we made our way round the village, consulted with obvious confidence by his fellows. At the end, as we talked more generally I asked if he was not tempted to make for Chiang Mai or Bangkok where his qualities would have ensured a richer and easier career. His answer was immediate: "Never. I am happy here". And indeed in his conjunction of self-reliance and significance to the community he seemed to be.

Any Cooperative connection? Well - it was an illustration of the "organic combination of personal interests of the members . . . with the interests of society as a whole" which A. Klinov was defining as an essential feature of a Cooperative plan in the Review of Industrial Cooperation Vol. 63 No. 5.

Anyhow there was a happy man - and my admiration and good wishes go to him.

Henry Ford and Queen Victoria

I am writing on the exact anniversary of my retirement from the Education Department and College, and a passing reflection is that I have discovered more truth than I expected in the comment of Henry Ford - "History is bunk".

It has been interesting in the year to see the explanations given of decisions and events for which I had some responsibility, to find how these accounts can be misleading and indeed to conclude how difficult it is for them to be right.

I am not thinking of misinterpretations for positive and identifiable reasons. Sometimes these come out of generosity and are flattering - fine, "as long as you don't inhale". Sometimes the misconstructions may be prompted by the self-interest or self-aggrandizement of their authors. I am not referring to such particular instances and motivations. I think rather of a more general obstacle against getting a man's history right - that other people can hardly read him fully. He himself can see the circumstances in which this or that deed was done, this or that decision taken. He can recall the perplexities, uncertainties, even torments out of which action issued. Other people can see with certainty only the simple and undeniable act itself. Even with understanding and imagination they have difficulty in seeing the full matrix which produced that act and which alone can explain it.

As Queen Victoria confided to her diary: "I had long thought that history was not an account of what actually happened but what people generally thought had happened".

So be careful of the version of my history others present to you. And, equally, of course, of my history of them!

A Footnote

Finally, to this sequence of odd notes an epilogue which is both a lament and an appeal.

Early in the summer I was trebly favoured as a guest of the International Cooperative Alliance, the Swedish Movement and the Central Cooperative Federation V.d.K. of East Germany to present a report on the question of an International Cooperative Studies and Research Institute to the I.C.A.'s Advisory Group on the International Training of Cooperators. It was an occasion supported by excellent organisation and enlivened by thoughtful generosity from our hosts.

I have, for the moment, no comments to enter of high economic, political, social or Cooperative significance. But I have a comparison which bothers me a bit. In East Germany, immaculate and universal public tidiness: in Britain, in journeys which happened to take me far and wide a landscape too often assaulted and insulted often in the most sensitive places by litter of tins, bottles, and cartons. Why do we do it? Can I find any explanation which would offer some comfort? I have tried. I have argued to myself that the wayward, heedless degradation is but another aspect of the same quality which accounts more creditably for British tolerance, scepticism towards authority and freedom of expression. That it is but a fair sun's unhappy shadow.

I am not persuaded. But can you do better?

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