

Co-operation - And Universities and Colleges

SOME REFLECTIONS

by

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The editor has asked for a short article on a vast area - the points at which the interests and concerns of trading societies with a social purpose and an ideological inspiration overlap with those of institutions of higher education and research. All I can do in the small space and short time at my disposal is to offer some random comments to open up a debate.

At first sight there looks a lot in common between the two. Both are said to be committed to education in one way or another, both claim to be agents of social change and both rely upon public support for their continuance. There the similarity ends. Universities in Britain at any rate, are almost all dependent upon state financing, and open to all who can show evidence of ability to benefit from their particular (and limited) type of activity, must not be wedded to any one particular ideological viewpoint, and are not linked with any productive enterprise from which to draw their own funds. One doesn't need to spell out the differences with Co-operative societies. If the two are to engage usefully in any common enterprise quite a lot of adjustment has to be made, preceded by an honest statement of objectives and limitations.

Before writing down these reflections for Dr Marshall, I waited to take part in a day conference in the South West

of England sponsored by the Co-operative Development Agency and the area society. In many ways it was a most disappointing occasion - although for many the participants, I know it was a reassurance and a re-inforcement of their commitment to a worthwhile activity. I found it disappointing on three scores: 1) it was strongly reminiscent of the conferences and congresses I attended so often in the 1950s and re-asserted the objectives and potential of the movement without any updating of evidence or rhetoric; 2) it was intensely introspective and demanding of loyalty rather than self-critical assessment, and judging its possible involvement with such bodies as the Manpower Services Commission in the latter's programme against unemployment from the extent to which it helped "the Movement"; and 3) it still regarded "education" as consisting either of vocational training or of **polemic** advocacy of a political line. On the other hand I have attended many recent meetings of universities' social studies lecturers, researchers and students where the contribution of Co-operative Societies to the improvement of workers' living standards has been ignored or certainly under-played, where the societies' present activities have been sneered at or brushed aside or where turning an enterprise into a Co-operative has excited interest only as a half-interested formula for rescuing from collapse some economic enterprise which consumers have refused to support by their purchases.

If research and teaching as it is carried on in the universities is to have relevance to the present situation of Co-operatives, it needs to focus on two academic areas - economics and social studies, and it needs to have at its disposal good research data, up-to-date and verifiable from field observation, as well as a literature which commands respect in academic circles. Both, as far as I can see, are in lamentably short supply. Similarly if Co-operative societies are to work more closely with universities (of course, some do so already) they must expect that graduates

in economics, sociology, and social policy and administration are well-informed and can deal relevantly with their current careers and problems. The present output of universities would not reassure most co-operators in these respects.

Lines of Specific Action?

Is it possible to bring the two closer together, to their mutual advantage? I think it is, provided above all that Co-operatives accept that universities will not and should not merely be regarded as means of advertisement for their activities under the guise of education, or of affirmation of their ideological objectives.

Here is a first shopping list of things that might be done together:-

a) The production by a prominent scholar in economics or social policy of a new standard text on British Co-operation, which should be neither enthusiastic hagiography nor another internal family moan about "the decline of the Movement". The Co-operative Union might consider commissioning such a new book, destined primarily for the enrichment of university courses in relevant disciplines, but aimed also at a wider market.

b) The encouragement of bodies financing research (despite current cut-backs in SSRC grants) to invest funds in projects which focus on the influence of co-operatives in limited and defined areas, on the lives, and social participation of the people of the area. This has a great deal in common with local community studies, now much in evidence.

c) A series of short analytical studies of the membership of key decision-making bodies in Co-operative

societies which would form social profiles of the societies of today.

d) An increase in the studies by economists of the short-comings as well as successes of Co-operative enterprises in production and processing. The C.D.A. has some such work in mind, and I hope it will be done in conjunction with universities.

e) A number of locality studies analysing the extent (or lack) of co-operation with bodies such as Community Associations, tenants associations, councils of voluntary service - these should be made in universities or polytechnics, but might well be jointly sponsored with bodies like the National Council of Social Service.

f) Evaluation studies of the potential for further activity, in common with government agencies, in seeking to reduce unemployment, increase productive enterprises and distribute their material benefits more equitably - as well as offering training for young unemployed. What about an appeal to the Manpower Services Commission?

It may well be objected by some Co-operators that none of these six items is aimed at increasing sales of local societies nor of advancing the social gospel which most "activists" want to hear preached. The retort to such objections must be that societies will do these things from their own funds. If their membership see them, moreover, as a vehicle for a particular political view or of dramatic political change, they will also have to do it from their own efforts or in union with political allies.

But there is enough in common between the concerns of Co-operatives and universities to lead me to hope that my shopping list might be taken seriously. If it is not, then societies will continue without much serious

renovation which can be brought about by objective research and revaluation, and within universities the affairs of Co-operative societies will be largely ignored as social institutions by those often most influential in bringing about social and organisational change.