

Co-operation - And Universities and Colleges

PRESENT CONDITIONS AND PROSPECTS

by

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As an early member of the Society for Co-operative Studies and its current Chairman, it gives me great pleasure to write this article on the problems and possibilities of promoting closer relationships between the Movement and Universities and Colleges.

Before considering this subject in detail it may be helpful if I briefly look back at the road travelled and assess the current position because in my experience "bridges" into the future are usually built on past and present experience.

Looking Back

Over the years distinguished academics such as Professor G. D. H. Cole have taken an interest in the Movement, and we can identify people whose studies introduced them to the history and philosophy of Co-operation and led to a personal involvement in the Movement or whose parents awakened an interest in things Co-operative which developed further in adult life. At no time has a University provided "intra-mural" formal courses of study on Co-operative subjects although certain Universities have provided "day release" facilities, again usually due to the interest of one academic in the department. It could be argued that this is not the fault of Universities or

Colleges, but because the Movement had its own College for training, study and research to which, until recent years, Co-operative students were automatically sent, if of course, they were sent anywhere. I do not wish to develop a case for or against the establishment of a specialist Co-operative College as distinct from a University Department, except to mention a not too well known fact that in the late 1950's attempts were made to establish a Chair of Co-operation at Leeds University. The University responded positively to the proposal but unfortunately sufficient funds could not be obtained to support the venture for 7 years, following which it would have become an established department within the University and financed accordingly. Sufficient to say that the past and present position suggests that closer collaboration between Co-operation and Universities and Colleges in the future will still largely be determined by the interest and commitment of certain individuals in both the Movement and the academic world. It is unlikely that the philosophy and principles of Co-operation will ever be recognised as a normal self-contained curriculum subject within higher seats of learning although the inclusion of general information on the beliefs, history and organisation of the Co-operative Movement will no doubt continue to be included in certain courses covering industrial, social and economic history, etc.

Current Position

Today we have the situation whereby at certain Universities and Colleges individual lecturers have an interest in various aspects of Co-operation from ideology and ethics to Co-operative management training. (It has been my good fortune as part of my personal education within the Movement to attend Co-operative courses organised by the Extra-Mural departments of three Universities - Sheffield, Leeds and Manchester - and to have as my tutors an existing President of the Society, Professor S. Pollard, a

former Chairman of the Society Dr A. Wilson and a regular contributor to the Bulletin T. E. Stephenson. This was additional to being a full-time student at the Co-operative College in the heyday of Marshall, Bonner, Young and Davies, even if I am not old enough to count Professor Hall and W. A. Watkins as my tutors.)

The strength of the present day position is that possibly more academics are interested in the Movement than ever before and if my basic premise is correct that future involvement will very much depend on the interest of individuals "on both sides of the fence" then this should argue well for the future.

Good Future Prospects

As I have indicated in my opinion, progress in the future will depend, as it has always depended, upon the interest and commitment of individual academics and co-operators both management and lay. There are, however, certain factors which suggest that the soil is more fertile today than previously and that this is a good time to take stock and plan for the future. This view is based upon -

- (1) The establishment of the Co-operative Development Agency which should focus Government attention more directly upon Co-operation as an alternative form of business organisation to private enterprise and state ownership. Assuming that the C.D.A. does develop, even under a Conservative Government, then Co-operation will be officially recognised as a "third way" for new businesses and voluntary organisations to develop. This should encourage certain Universities and Colleges or more correctly the interested academics within to examine in greater detail than previously, the philosophy of this "third way" merely because it is now a more

"recognised" way, provided of course, a number of new Co-operatives are established in various forms and prove successful.

- (2) Consumerism has been a growing force for a number of years with a Minister for Consumer Affairs appointed by both Socialist and Conservative Governments. More recently Michael Young and Marianne Rigge in their booklet "Mutual Aid in a Selfish Society" have argued the case for strengthening the Co-operative Movement even to a paragraph headed "A New Start". As they state "Producer Co-ops are having a new dawn, consumer Co-ops should also". Consumerism including the Co-operative contribution thereto lends itself to an examination by the appropriate departments of certain higher seats of learning - it is topical, lively and a growing social as well as an economic force.
- (3) The attention of the community is constantly being directed to the need to preserve and improve the environment, care for the less privileged and work together for the common good. The message of wage restraint was not only that uncontrolled inflation damages everyone, but that groups of workers with industrial muscle in the long run damage themselves as well as society if they act totally selfishly. Co-operatives have been preaching mutual self-help which incorporates respect for the needs of others for over 140 years and thus provide a "ready made" organisation for those University and College departments seeking to examine "caring and sharing" activities.

Given that my hypothesis so far is correct and that the time is opportune for developing closer ties with

Universities and Colleges then the next question emerges - the advantage and the best lines of action.

Possible Lines of Action

The Co-operative Movement is in many ways a world within a world. It takes a long period of time to understand its principles, history, organisation and day to day workings. It has a tendency to undertake regular internal examinations of itself which often result in changes in the structure. The main advantage of outside academic involvement and examination is that objective, as against so often, subjective analysis, will be undertaken. It is difficult for an "insider" when looking at a problem within the Movement not to allow his knowledge and experience of the Movement to "colour" his thinking rather than to examine the problem in absolute terms first, and then allow knowledge and experience of the Movement to determine the practicabilities of the situation. The involvement of higher seats of learning should provide this absolute diagnosis and also the wider context in which to set a Co-operative problem. They will also be able to provide greater resources and facilities than are available in a specialist Co-operative College to enable this objective view to be produced in depth.

Studies in Co-operation may be broadly analysed into three areas -

- (a) Historical
- (b) Future developments and changing patterns
- (c) Lessons from overseas

All three areas are worthy of examination, even historical, although the ground has been previously well

covered. Each generation needs to re-interpret the lessons of the past to suit the conditions of the present so there is room for a historical examination of the facts - the reasons for the facts - the development of Societies - the economic implications and the cause and effect of changes since, say 1844.

Future development is a wide field covering -

- (i) the Co-operative contribution to general retailing patterns and consumer interests
- (ii) productive Co-operatives and new emerging groups - C.D.A. activities
- (iii) changes in the economic environment and Co-operative activity
- (iv) political implications of Co-operative developments in a capitalist and socialist society.

The experience of Co-operators overseas is a less obvious area for collaboration and it may be that Stanford Hall is best suited to provide information for the Movement on this subject.

One area where I would particularly like to see the involvement of Colleges and Universities is in joint research to devise the best method of propagating the Co-operative message in an acceptable form to members, employees, schools and colleges and the public at large. The fundamental problem for the Movement today is adequately to explain and portray the essential differences of a Co-operative society as against a joint stock company. This is fairly simple with agricultural, producer and housing co-operatives, but it is very difficult in a retailing context in the present intensely competitive market situation.

The Practical Steps

The final question I want to consider is that of the practical steps to be taken and how the Society for Co-operative Studies can be of assistance. The following is a suggested answer:-

- (a) From the membership records of the Society and general knowledge the name and position of those academics whose past and present record shows that they are interested in Co-operation is available. This will include details of the faculty in which they are employed and thus they can be requested to undertake further study in that aspect of Co-operation most suited to their interest and facilities.
- (b) Attempts could be made by the College to encourage Ph.D. and B.Sc. (Econ) students to undertake a particular avenue of research even if a degree of financial assistance had to be provided.
- (c) The economic research units in certain Universities could be asked to suggest appropriate future management structures and management qualifications for retail Co-operative Societies in the light of increasing professionalism within the retail field.
- (d) The legal/social faculties could be asked to undertake research on democratic structures of, and for Co-operative enterprises with particular reference to the active involvement of the membership.

The above could be incorporated with the work of the CLEAR unit at the College and the whole directed by the Education Department of the Co-operative Union.

The role of the Society for Co-operative Studies would be to suggest useful areas of study and to maintain personal contact among friends and colleagues in both Universities and Co-operative Societies, which would exchange assistance within the collective experience of the Society's membership.