



Book Review

A useable past: A history of association, co-operation, and un-statist socialism in 19th and early 20th century Britain

Volume 3: Class conflict and co-operation in 19th and 20th century Britain. Education for association: Re-membering for a new moral world

By Stephen Yeo

Edward Everett Root Publishers, 2024. ISBN (hbk): 978111204619, 406pp.

Lately

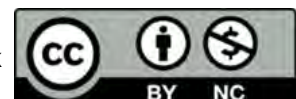
By Stephen Yeo

The Endless Bookcase, 2023. ISBN: 9781914151767, 98pp.

This volume of *A Useable Past* completes a trilogy of works by Stephen Yeo that map out a remarkable social and spiritual history of the development of co-operation in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He is in an almost unique position to be able to do so. Professor Stephen Yeo is an innovative social historian developing deep insights into issues of association, co-operation, and labour movements, together with religious and voluntary organisations. He explored these topics whilst teaching for twenty-five years at the University of Sussex, then utilised them as Principle of Ruskin College Oxford, then latterly as chair of the Co-operative College and the Co-operative Heritage Trust.

His unique contribution has been to blend a profound ethical, indeed religious, element into his exploration of the development of co-operation, giving it the depth and reach of a genuinely independent stand-alone ideological position. This separates it from being a minor tributary of Labourism to being an ideology capable of standing alone whilst developing a genuinely social socialism.

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Yeo's work carries with it a profound spirituality about what it means to be human without slipping into religiosity. This I think comes from his membership of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) which has taught him to see, in the words of George Fox, "that of God in every one" (Quakers, 1994, para 19.32).

His first volume in this series was a revelatory study of the life and work of George Jacob Holyoake (Yeo, 2017a), and it was for me the first time I came to realise why Holyoake was so revered in his day. Today he is best remembered as the last man to be tried for blasphemy in a public speech, whilst modern co-operative audiences perhaps see him as a mere propagandist for the Rochdale Pioneers. Yet in Yeo's hands he becomes a huge figure making the moral case for equality and democracy in every area of life. In the second volume, Yeo (2017b) makes the case that socialism in Britain was a moral crusade. By differentiating the strands that made up British socialism from associationism, statism and collectivism, he thereby elevates associationism as a route to socialism in its own right.

In the final volume of this remarkable trilogy, Yeo looks at ways of seeing the lives and times of different types of associations as forms of cultural creativity, or as he imaginatively puts it, "rival clusters of social potential" (p.10). Summed up and explored very neatly, this first chapter sees co-operation and association as "labour's own capital" (p. 10) opposed to, and by, capitalists and state formations alike. In the second chapter, he uses this lens to overview class conflict and conscious struggle between state, class and associational forms in Britain since the 1850s. He explores some key ideas in this chapter about the nature of terms like class. As he says, "As a means of understanding social relations which constitute it, 'class' can be used to change those relations" (p. 26).

Chapter three highlights an aspect of this three-way struggle with an overview of the conflict between Friendly Societies and private insurance companies over the form National Insurance was to take in 1911. Yeo argues that George Bernard Shaw would have been best placed to have written this chapter, and I admit I could see a *doctor's dilemma* in the pre-welfare state arguments, but Stephen Yeo does a pretty good job in exploring them.

Chapter four is a reworking of his previously published monograph on J. T. W. Mitchell (Yeo, 1995). Mitchell was described by Beatrice Webb as the working class 'business-genius'. It was Mitchell, previously secretary of the Rochdale Pioneers Society and then chair of the CWS, who proved Rochdale Principles could be operated at scale. Mitchell had a very modest lifestyle for the chair of, what had become on his watch, one of the nation's very largest businesses. Yeo points out he never adopted the bourgeoisie lifestyle his position would indicate. He had an almost ascetic way of life remaining culturally working class despite his elevated position.

All the chapters in this volume have been published before but they are no worse for being brought together in one volume. When I was chair of Co-operatives UK, I had seen busts of Mitchell in many co-operative settings. There are at least a couple in Holyoake House and it was thanks to Yeo's (1995) monograph on Mitchell that I understood his significance. As Yeo says in the current volume, "Mitchell's most famous maxim. *Never Despise the Store!*, was a rebuke to Robert Owen, who of course did just that" (p. 92).

As Yeo himself admits, the volume changes register with chapter 5 on the idea of a co-operative university. The key idea of what constitutes a genuinely co-operative society and the role Principle Five plays in this process is an important topic. He shares his experience of Ruskin College and its governance as part of his thinking about developing a new institutional model. Given the state of the current model a rethink is surely in order.

Chapter 6 comes from an address Yeo made in British Columbia at the invitation of Ian MacPherson, that late doyen of co-operative thinking. In it he explores contemporary concerns of a democratic deficit in modern societies and posits the idea that if a greater contribution to the economic life of our societies was assigned to co-operative and mutual enterprises, as well as producing more equitable growth it would contribute to a democratic culture. He argues

“the most appropriate place to address the democratic deficit in modern times is the point of consumption” (p. 222). Those of us reading this *Journal* would, I expect, wholeheartedly agree.

Chapter 7 is an attempt at theorising what are the key questions we raise when we do co-operative studies. He argues that we need to be more confident about the value of our work. As he himself says the title is ambitious. But he makes a very important point that should not be understated, “Co-operative Studies in the twenty first century needs to be confident rather than diffident when exploring ideas” (p. 234).

The final chapter was originally published in this *Journal* (Yeo, 2009) and has worn rather well. Indeed, it is even more important to make the case for genuinely co-operative politics today, thus rescuing the Owenites to use E. P. Thomson’s phrase the “from the enormous condescension of posterity” (Thompson, 1963, p. 13).

Today with Labour again in government we can see that statist methods to repair the damage neo-liberalism has done to our society are distinctly limited. It is well worth asking what we can learn from the sheer scale and achievement of the independent co-operative movement before the rise of Labour. Whilst Mrs Thatcher’s children were immune to associationist solutions, taking small bribes to demutualise building societies, their grandchildren, who are locked out of good jobs and decent housing, are more amenable.

If these volumes are Yeo’s final contribution to co-operative studies, they are of huge value to those coming after. As a historian and educator his work is in the first rank.

Yeo being an all-round renaissance man, I cannot let this review pass without mentioning the poetry collection he published in 2023. *Lately* is an intellectually stimulating collection of wide-ranging poems. They cover his life and concerns they are both touching and witty but never avoiding the challenges of his faith. His world is one of constant dialogue between man and nature and in his own way with the divine.

The Reviewer

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