

Book Reviews

New Views of Society: Robert Owen for the 21st Century

Edited by Richard Bickle and Molly Scott Cato

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Reviewed by Chris Hart

This book considers the ideas and legacies of nineteenth century visionary, philanthropist, businessman and social reformer Robert Owen, and their relevance to the present day. It does this through contributions from ten writers who each consider a different aspect of Owen's work. These ten contributions are split into three categories: Practical Utopia, concerned with the physical organisation of everyday life to create more wholesome environments for human flourishing; Economic Justice, which explores Owen's ideas on the value of labour and work, relations within the workplace and the political paradigm; and finally Education, Management and Organisation, considering the need for whole person and system development.

Like many of the great visionaries of history one is struck in reading this book by both the breadth of influence of Owen's ideas and just how radical they must have been in his time. Perhaps more than other men of ideas, Owen was focused on practical implementation rather than just theoretical observation. In a quote from *A New View of Society* (written between 1813 and 1816) Owen says "[I am] no idle visionary who thinks in his closet and never acts in world." How many of us could claim as much?

In the first section of the book on economic justice the issues of food, banking and co-operative living are considered. It is immediately striking how Owen's concern for unadulterated wholesome food and the production of food by local suppliers mirrors so much of the present-day call for farmers' markets and fair trade. It also reminds in striking fashion how relevant the basic tenets of the Co-operative Wholesale Society are to the ecological agenda today. Owen's concern with savings banks and the need to provide secure lending provision on a local scale is mirrored by the steady growth of credit unions today. Recent moves to extend the scope of these banks through government support responds to Owen's original concepts that

these saving schemes should be for all. In this time of unrestricted global finance the wisdom of secure mutual savings schemes has perhaps never been more clear. Finally in this section the relevance of the planned communities that Owen and his followers set up in Britain and America is considered. While the writer of this section is somewhat scathing of their paternalistic nature I think it is perhaps better to see them in a larger frame of reference and to observe how these ideas of mutual support have become more normalised in society — today nearly everyone has the type of basic living conditions that Owen wanted to see.

The second section on economic justice starts by considering Owen's ideas for the abolition of the money system and its replacement with a monetary exchange based on labour value. This is considered in modern terms to equate to the plethora of time banks and local currency proposals. Next up for consideration is Owen's role in the union movement and the rise and fall of Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. The author explains how the defeat of the Tolpuddle Martyrs led to the collapse of Owen's influence in the movement in the face of political and economic realities. His legacy today can be viewed as being mainstreamed by the emergence of healthcare and education for all people, which in Owen's time was just a dream. Finally in this section the difficult relationship between Owen's ideas for social progress by the working person and those like Marx and Engels who considered his ideas to lack political understanding which they dismissed as "small experiments doomed to failure". The same arguments continue today and can be seen in the discussion as to whether the development of social enterprises represents mainstreaming towards radicalism or a degeneration of social and co-operative ideals.

The final section on Education and Management looks firstly at the how Owen's

attempts to democratise the workplace and provide the basic resources and necessities for education at the start of the Industrial Revolution can perhaps be compared to the open commons of the internet, with educational and participative tools such as Wikipedia now being available to many of those in the poorest parts of the world. This open source potential can radicalise the whole concept of learning and education. With regard to management, the ideal of the co-operative approach and its ethics are seen as extremely relevant to today's value-based techniques of management and participative engagement. Owen's emphasis on education as a vital means of building character is explored and it is suggested that this is more important than ever in today's individualistic society. Owen's 'whole person' approach to education is extended with a positive account given of the impression formed by those who visited the New Lanark Cotton Mills. The present-day introduction of citizenship into the national curriculum is perhaps a corollary of the Owenite ideal. Finally Owen's possibly

most encompassing vision of a co-operative society in contrast to the brutish individualism of the society he lived in is discussed: his ideal retains the power to provide a solution to the ills of the world.

For the uninitiated this book provides a readable introduction to the ideas of Robert Owen and neither romanticises nor too critically dissects the man and his ideals. For those well versed in Owenite lore it is perhaps a good opportunity to celebrate being a disciple. My one criticism is that on occasion the writers of the articles seem to lapse into a description of their own particular interest, somewhat obscuring the connection with Robert Owen and I was left at times searching for a tenuous thread. However, with the burgeoning and of the Transition Town movement, calls for co-operatively produced home-grown supplies and the fall from grace of the global finance system, Owen's Transitional Charter of 1842 seems to be returning again in a modern form. Perhaps Robert Owen was 160 years before his time.

Integrating Diversities within a Complex Heritage: Essays in the Field of Cooperative Studies

Edited by Ian MacPherson and Erin McLaughlin-Jenkins

Published by New Rochdale Press, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

(<http://socialeconomynetwork.ca/catalog>)

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Reviewed by Len Arthur

This book is the second volume in a series of three books on co-operative studies. It is composed of a collection of papers presented at a conference held at Victoria University in May 2003. A number of the papers have been updated and, despite the five years since the original conference, all the papers represent such a depth of scholarly work and erudition, they have and will stand the test of time. *Integrating Diversities* is a seminal work: by bringing together papers from most of the lead contributors to the field it draws a contemporary line in the sand covering the international thinking about co-operative studies. The scope is such that all the main issues and discourses to the date of the conference have been covered and nearly all the major previous work has been referenced. In terms of references alone the book provides a comprehensive bibliography of essential reading relating to co-operative studies.

This is an extensive work of over 400 pages divided into three sections. The first section called *Understanding Co-operatives* is composed of four chapters that draw upon research into the practical experience of co-operatives covering a number of countries and industrial sectors. The chapters move towards using the outcome of the research to propose some conclusions that have general relevance such as: a conceptual framework to aid the analysis of tensions and their management within co-operatives; the possible importance of a collective and social entrepreneurship, as distinct from an individual understanding of the term; whether banks formed on a mutual basis are best placed to survive a financial crisis; and the difficulty agricultural co-operatives experience in relevantly using the notion of co-operative values in a market context.

The second section moves on to *Co-operatives and Co-operative Movements in Context* again drawing upon international contributors to produce chapters covering: the importance of co-operative education in

enabling co-operative leadership; the paternal role of colonialism in co-operative development; co-operatives' need to situate themselves within their local and wider co-operative community if they are to sustain themselves as social movements; related to this, the contribution that post-modernism and the consequent emphasis on discourse and ideas can potentially make to the same purpose; and finally, an important analysis of the historical richness of the idea of democracy and how this has a radical implication for the potential of co-operative democracy.

Section three of the book moves onto a number of chapters that suggest how co-operative studies can be taken forward. A case-study of the work of a university centre for co-operative studies is presented and this is followed by a review of the extent to which heterodox and largely institutional economics may, with difficulty, engage with co-operative studies; the next chapter argues that co-operative studies have sufficient theoretical underpinnings and distinctive action research processes, that they do not need to rely on the big battle of ideas for support; this is countered in the next chapter by a chapter strongly indicating how left political traditions and foundational sociologists are essential for providing a theoretical basis for co-operative renewal; and finally the boundaries of the field and a more special research agenda are outlined.

As suggested, this book draws a line in the sand up to the time of conference and is intended to kick start an important debate about the future of the field of co-operative studies. Let us start the debate with a few critical comments.

Since the publication of the book the world of neo-liberalism has imploded exposing most clearly for the first time in 40 years in the starkest global terms the limitations of de-regulated capitalism. Associated with this, as states and corporations protect their interests, there has been a growth in mergers and

monopolies and a return to state capitalism. Lack of reference to these recent events clearly cannot be a criticism of the book, but it does encourage a focus on the contributions that seek to propose a wider and more radical role for co-operatives. However, many of the contributions can be criticised for not being sufficiently specific in the form of wider social change or transgression that co-operatives could achieve. In one that does suggest this is possible Stephen Yeo states:

When we are thinking toward a discipline called 'Co-operative Studies', we are thinking about a set of practices which constitute a theory of the transition to a post-capitalist society.

A historic opportunity has now opened up for the field to explore how co-operatives can make such a contribution in relation to transitional demands and actions. Another example of a global issue that co-operatives could relate to in this way — the prospect of climate change — was certainly an issue in 2003, and is hardly mentioned in the book.

Attempts are made to pour a quart into the pint-pot as there is a tendency for the contributions to include any organisation called a co-operative into the field for study and extend the boundary beyond this, to mutuals

and social enterprises. In itself this is not a problem but it becomes one when projects or generalisations are suggested about all organisations with the co-operative name as important contradictions and trajectories are missed. For example, it is clear from a number of the cases cited that co-operatives are strongly influenced by their market context and may even find it a real struggle to find any relevance for the ICA values. Moreover, in this context the related discourse about degeneration is hardly mentioned. Co-operative studies could retain the scope of the field and more meaningfully talk about renewal as opposed to degeneration, if it was recognised that there is a very real contradiction in all co-operatives between surviving in a hostile context and their values and aims which are a potential transgressive challenge to that context. Again, some of the contributions recognise this, but it is not indicated as one of the key issues for the research agenda.

This short review has offered an opportunity to make a small contribution to the debate this book does and is intended to start. The book is a must for all involved in the field of co-operative studies and the authors, or perhaps the UKSCS, should start a blog so the debate can proceed from now.

Slaney's Act and the Christian Socialists: A Study of How the Industrial and Provident societies' Act 1852 was Passed

By David Lambourne

Published by the author and available from him at davidlambourne@tiscali.co.uk

Reviewed by Molly Scott Cato

The title of this short volume may seem rather dry but it is by no means an indication of the content of a useful and interestingly written history of the legislation that enabled the development of the co-operative movement in the UK. The importance of the law that was passed as a result of persistent lobbying by co-operators and the support of MP Robert Slaney is summed up in the closing quotation of this booklet:

The 1852 Act was one of a series that served to encourage the Victorian virtues of thrift and self-help, and that ensured that the social evolution of England was brought about in a peaceful manner. (p59)

Having established the significance of the plot for the history of co-operation we now move to the cast of characters, which is equally impressive.

I first came across the Christian Socialists during a recent Radio 4 *Moral Maze* exploring whether capitalism had finally expired during this past summer. The academic who represented the Christian Socialist position during the debate was one of very few to have been permitted to make a convincing case for the imminent demise of the predominant economic system in our national media. From David Lambourne's book I have learned that his antecedents go back to a group of 'intellectuals, Christians and, in a rather limited sense, Socialists' (p9), including Charles Kingsley, author of *The Water Babies* and Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Together they invested energy and money in supporting the cause of working-class entrepreneurs who wished to engage in what I have elsewhere defined as 'associative entrepreneurship'. They did this by lobbying the rather limited range of men who were found in parliament in the mid-nineteenth century to extend the Friendly Societies' Acts to cover the activity of co-operative associations, culminating in the passage of the Industrial and Provident Societies' Act in 1852.

The Christian Socialists assembled an

impressive range of advocates and witnesses including John Stuart Mill, the leading economist of the day, who objected on efficiency grounds to the blocks that the owners of capital placed in the way of

combinations among the workmen engaged in any particular branch of industry, for the purpose of carrying on that industry co-operatively, either with their own capital or with capital that they borrow. (Mill's evidence to the select committee cited at p27)

Mill made a case for the benefits of co-operation that remains valid today, stating that they:

serve to cut off the cost of the intermediate agency between producer and consumer, and thus tend to lower prices. (p28)

This evidence makes clear that the argument was won on the basis of the economic advantages for Britain of enabling enterprise by working people, a view of co-operation which is less familiar today, when our sector tends to make its case rather on the basis of better quality and ethical trading. In persuading his fellow MPs to support the Bill, Slaney argued that removing from working people the threat of unlimited liability would enable their "combination" and lead to "an increase of capital and wealth". (p33)

The Act came at an interesting time in the history of the co-operative movement, when it was moving from a utopian and visionary era — marked by the inspirational activities of Robert Owen, whose aim was the replacement of capitalism with socialism — to a more pragmatic stance of working within the capitalist economy. The success of working people within that system was impressive: by 1865 there were 651 registered societies with a total membership of well over 200,000. This book explains how the parliamentary process was used to facilitate that growth, and the foundation of many of the co-operations that we rely on today.