

Deepening co-operativism

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This paper is a response to Ratner (2007). Whilst sympathetic with many points made in that paper, it argues that the concept of deep co-operativism it expounds is problematic in certain respects and is only one of many possible ways forward for the co-operative movement. A number of alternatives to deep co-operativism are presented, such as participatory economics, social ecology and a more orthodox co-operativism. The paper concludes that there are problems with all these approaches but this is not a reason to reject any of them in our search for a genuinely more co-operative society.

In a recent issue of this Journal, Carl Ratner (2007) unveiled what he called a 'Co-operative Manifesto', based on a conceptual foundation of 'co-operativism'. Whilst sharing Ratner's aims and agreeing with much of what he says (particularly his criticisms of consumer co-operatives – see Somerville, 2007), I want to argue that his version of co-operativism is only one of many possible ways forward for the co-operative movement.

For Ratner, co-operativism is 'a systematic social philosophy, economics, and psychology' (p15). It is achieved through what he calls 'concrete' or 'specific' co-operation (p14). This is distinguished from modern everyday and contractual coordination of human action, which he calls 'general' co-operation. He argues that concrete or specific co-operation develops on three, progressively deepening, levels, corresponding to different degrees of contribution to a common pool – from one-off items (level 1) to contributions of substantial value (level 2) to comprehensive collectivisation (level 3).

The relationship between concrete or specific co-operation and other kinds of co-operation, however, is not entirely clear. Ratner argues, for example, that simple commodity exchange works against co-operative behaviour, whereas in fact it seems to be just co-operative behaviour of a different kind from his 'concrete' co-operation – it is not clear to me, for example, why going to my local chip shop should prevent me from becoming friendly with the shop owner. On the contrary, many simple commodity exchanges, if repeated on a regular basis, can generate sociability, which seems to be what Ratner wants to see here (p16). Admittedly, generalised commodity production (which Ratner incorrectly calls 'capitalist' commodity production – both simple and generalised commodity production are capitalist) seems a better candidate for working against concrete co-operation but here it could be argued that it

actually produces solidarity (concrete co-operation?) among workers, so the position is not as clear-cut as Ratner suggests. Also, workers have to co-operate with their employers to a greater or lesser extent, and this often goes beyond 'general' co-operation, despite the exploitation involved.

For Ratner, forms of co-operation such as mutual aid, sharing a public space, pooling funds for bulk buying, etc, do not even reach the first level of co-operativism. This is because he seems to think that the pursuit of an individual interest is incompatible with the pursuit of a common interest. If this were true, however, capitalism would be impossible, since it depends precisely on people pursuing their individual interests and finding that, by so doing, the common interest is promoted, even though the extent of this common interest is limited by the divisive character of capitalist social relations. Progress through the three levels then involves deepening co-operativism, that is, the deepening of the common interest pool, with individual interests (epitomised by private ownership) being increasingly subordinated to the common good. Yet Ratner argues that this process of progressive collectivisation enhances individuality (pp21-2). This quasi-Maoist, and indeed Orwellian, argument is unconvincing because, to put it in simple terms, the more an individual contributes to the collective, the more power the collective has to dictate to that individual. It is true, as Ratner points out, that the free market can also be destructive of individuality but he does not show that his deep co-operativism would be any less so. In certain circumstances, such as the farmers that he talks about, deepening co-operation may well be beneficial and desirable, but this is not a reason for advocating it as **the** way forward for the co-operative movement.

There do exist alternatives to Ratner's vision of broadening and deepening co-operativism,

which can be compatible with it as well as with one another. Ratner refers to one of these, participatory economics (p24), but dismisses it without argument. Participatory economics (or 'parecon') is the brainchild of Michael Albert (2003) and Robin Hahnel (2005). It involves a combination of self-managing workplace and consumer councils, remuneration based on effort and sacrifice, balanced job complexes, and participatory planning. Parecon effectively abolishes capitalism by fixing wages and prices and transforming capitalist enterprises into co-operatives but, unlike deep co-operativism, it retains a significant element of individual ownership. Another alternative is social ecology, whose key idea is that of a confederal network of popular assemblies, which make all the major economic decisions (see, for example, Staudenmaier, 2003). Ratner seems to dismiss this in his complaint that: "People can decide anything they want under democratic decision making" (p24), but this is of course the whole point of democracy as a co-operative undertaking. A further alternative is simply that of a progressive expansion of co-operative enterprise throughout the economy and society, ie co-operativism in its commonly understood sense as involving the substitution of:

a bottom-up and democratic organisational style for the top-down bureaucratic and

paternalistic approach typical of the first sector, and a not-for-profit entrepreneurial economic system for the self-interested profit maximisation of the second sector. (Levi, 2007: 43)

Needless to say, perhaps, there are problems with all of these alternatives. In all cases, there is a lack of linkage between the economic and the political. For example, evidence suggests that there is no spillover from co-operative enterprise to political change (Carter, 2006), though no doubt this reflects, in part, the current weakness of the co-operative movement. Direct participation in larger collectives is impracticable, so parecon's notion of participatory planning is problematic, even leaving aside its questionable ethics of remuneration (what if some people are just capable of making more effort than others? Shouldn't people be rewarded on the basis of output as well as input?). And social ecology just doesn't seem to connect with the real world of governments and corporations. All these alternatives, however, including deep co-operativism, are worth considering as ways of transforming the current neoliberal hegemony into something more just, more humane and globally sustainable. There is an important role for co-operatives and co-operativism to play within this transformation, but they are by no means the whole story.

References

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