

Book Reviews

Ecovillages: New Frontiers for Sustainability

By Jonathan Dawson

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Reviewed by Dr Ian Donnachie, Reader, Open University and author of *Robert Owen - Social Visionary*

It may be trite to say so at the outset, but, small though it is, this is an important book and as number 12 in the series marks an important milestone for the Schumacher Briefings. The Schumacher Society, as many will know, was established in 1978 after the death of E F Schumacher, author of seminal books such as *Small is Beautiful*, *Good Work*, and *A Guide for the Perplexed*. He explained that the scale of modern economic and technological systems diminishes the welfare of individuals and communities and damages the environment. His work has significantly influenced the thinking of our time – and, of course, touches many aspects of co-operation, some of which come down to us from the very early co-operators and visionaries like Robert Owen who promoted his Village Scheme as a solution to problems of poverty and unemployment.

An ecovillage can be succinctly defined as a human scale settlement, harmlessly integrated into the environment in a way that supports its inhabitants in a sustainable way with the potential to continue doing so into the indefinite future. The ecovillage movement originated with the historic idea of intentional communal living linked to the burgeoning green movement of the 1960s and 1970s. It grew up at a time when Thatcher-Regan-style policies were rolling back the frontiers of the state, the environment relegated to the fringes of debate, and the problems of the socially marginalised were to be addressed through trickle-down growth. Dawson identifies two significant developments: the co-housing movement and the more radical initiative for radical sustainable communities supported by the Gaia Trust.

Developer-led eco-communities are seen here as a first step on the road to ecovillages, conventional housing projects promoted by business but designed to be as ecologically benign as possible. Residents, self-select or are selected through the housing market, but

have little say in the design or construction of the settlement. The co-housing model may also have a central developer (but many do not), though the residents have an important say in design and there is a much stronger emphasis on the social and the community. So in co-housing, co-operators familiar with the Owenite communities of the early nineteenth century will recognise the presence of a community house for shared meals and other social functions. The dwellings are self-contained, but residents can choose the level of participation they feel appropriate to them. Unlike developer-led eco-settlements residents manage the community the basis of consensus. Finally the ecovillage model presents settlements that are often built by the members, many of whom work in the community, with some participating (and again reflecting Owen's plan) in income-sharing. Interestingly, ecovillages also tend to see themselves serving a wider cause, strengthening community, nurturing the local economy, and engaged in educational or demonstration activities.

A huge range of issues of interest to co-operators are packed into this volume. How can eco-developers harness up what can be learned from the best in traditional and indigenous cultures? How can the alternative economy, notably community banks and currencies, linked to voluntary simplicity of living be applied more widely in a global economy? Is it possible to design with nature in mind, using permaculture design, eco-building, small-scale energy generation, waste management, low-impact transport systems, etc? Is there an enhanced role for organic, locally-based food production and processing? What is the scope for reviving and extending small-scale participatory governance, conflict resolution, social inclusion and an active inter-generational community? Can eco-settlements create a culture of peace and the holistic, as well as

whole person education (echoes of Owen and his character formation?) All of which might suggest a utopia, but clearly from the numerous examples cited, existing ecovillages have gone some way to resolving many of these questions.

Numerous case-studies highlight the diversity of ecovillages internationally and show how thinking has moved well beyond the politics of protest to face the challenges of sustainability and community. Some example, such as Findhorn (moved well beyond 'New Age' and where Dawson himself has played a major role as educator), will be familiar but the majority of the international cases show how different and often complex problems have to be solved in Third World ecovillage promotion. Finally, rather than the routine bibliography, Dawson provides an enormously useful 'resources' tool-kit covering a great

variety of sources, publications, websites, videos and details of relevant organisations that enable the reader to follow up many of the initiatives and ideas he discusses in the book. It is also possible using the numerous websites listed to have a look at some of the ecovillages for oneself.

Ecovillages clearly derive much from co-operative traditions with the added dimension of showing us how to live in a more ecologically sound and sustainable way. The ecovillage movement, as Caroline Lucas, Green Party MEP, observes, is becoming more externally focused, engaging more and trying to export its ideas and sustainable solutions to a wider world. Much of this fits well with the co-operative ethos and co-operators can surely contribute to this movement. This book, in short compass, shows how.

Serving the People - Co-operative Party History from Fred Perry to Gordon Brown

By Greg Rosen

Published by The Co-operative Party, 77 Weston Street. London SE1 3SD, 100pp, £6.99.
ISBN 978 0 954916 14 5

and

The Co-operative Movement in Greater Nottingham: a Journey Towards Political Representation

Written and published by Christopher Richardson, christopherrichardson@hotmail.com, 48pp, price £3.50 including postage

Reviewed by Jim Craigen, former Labour & Co-operative MP and one-time Chair of the Co-operative Party Parliamentary Group

The Co-operative Party is a one-off among Britain's political parties. Whilst offspring of the co-operative movement on which it is reliant for funding and its public recognition, it is inseparable from the Labour Party on which it is dependent for political representation. At the last general election 29 candidates sponsored by the Co-operative Party returned to Westminster. All stood as Labour and Co-operative and were Co-operative Party nominees chosen through Labour Party selection procedures.

The Co-operative Party celebrated a ninetieth anniversary in 2007. But why did it come into being? Christopher Richardson a local historian and co-operator trawled through records available on 14 co-operative societies in Greater Nottingham (the largest being Mansfield, Nottingham and Long Eaton) and produced a gem of a pamphlet which better describes the birth than some tomes.

The co-operative movement's entry into politics towards the end of the First World War was a reaction by a self-confident mass consumer movement then representing over 3.5 million members to being ignored by Government in wartime conditions and unfairly treated in favour of private trade. His story bristles with the indignation felt by co-operators over shortages, unfair food allocations, taxation on excess profits in a time of rampant inflation when the money could have gone to extra dividend on members' purchases, and the general high-handedness of wartime authorities which hurt co-operative societies more than private traders.

The author instances where one local Food Controller wanted to commandeer a society's premises for the sale of margarine by a private dairy competitor! It must have seemed the last straw when the Co-operative Union was snubbed by the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George and led to the movement in 1917 at last

cutting the sentimental Gordian Knot of entanglement and rapport with the Liberal Party.

The electorate was also about to double in 1918 with an extension of the franchise to include some six million women and another two million men. The trade union minded Labour Party made provision for Women's Sections in its new Constitution. The co-operative movement already had those formidable organisation abilities of the Co-operative Women's Guild: women would, and have played, a substantial role in Co-operative Party affairs, most obviously at local level.

Greg Rosen a political columnist who edited *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (Politicos Publishing 2001) was asked by the Co-operative Party this year to produce a history for its ninetieth anniversary. Given the short time scrambled egg might have been served, but Rosen prepared for the reader a soufflé which rises to the occasion. *Serving the People* may not be the most apt title, but his is an engaging account of the Co-operative Party's nine decades. Starting with Sam Perry the first Party Secretary – and father of a more famous three-times Wimbledon Tennis Champion, Fred Perry – he examines early relations with Labour. Any prospect of a New Democratic or People's Party in conjunction with Labour was gone by 1921.

Co-operative MPs were included in the first minority Labour Government in 1924. The 1927 Cheltenham Agreement simply faced facts. Where Co-operative and Labour candidates stood against each other the result was a double knock-out. Thereafter the Co-operative Party became the lesser partner in an Alliance with Labour and its candidates stood as Co-operative and Labour.

1945 saw 23 Co-operative & Labour MPs elected. A V Alexander the most prominent would become the first Defence Secretary

having served as First Lord at the Admiralty in Churchill's wartime Coalition. Alf Barnes became Transport Minister. The Co-operative Party Parliamentary Group's more collegiate character meant there was never a Leader as such with whom the public at large might identify.

The chapter on the People's Industry deals with controversies on nationalisation and growing unease amongst co-operators who saw collective ownership as inclusive of co-operative, mutual, and municipal enterprise while some on Labour's Left would have nationalised anything that moved. Matters came to a head over proposals to nationalise insurance businesses as the Co-operative Insurance Society was fourth largest. Plans were dropped much to the continuing chagrin of some on the Left. Apart from Co-operative opposition there was Labour's thin Parliamentary majority after 1950 and diminishing electoral appetite for the bureaucratic Morrisonian model of public ownership.

The 1950s produced other tensions. Labour remained out of power longer than expected. Gaitskell worried about Labour unity saw dangers in a 'Party within a Party'. The Wilson Commission on Labour Party Organisation would have had the Co-operative Party directly affiliate like the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society had done. Damaged egos of several trade union sponsored officials who had lost to co-operative nominees at Parliamentary selection conferences hardly improved matters. In 1957 Labour suddenly terminated the existing agreement and decided to seek a new basis for its relations with the Co-operative Party. The 1958 Agreement limited the number of Co-operative Party candidates to 30 and included marginal and hopeless seats. Henceforth candidates would stand as Labour and Co-operative.

In the political advocacy of consumer rights co-operative vision looked obscured by co-operative trade image. Marks and Spencer was held up as patron saint and emerging supermarket chains were taking more share of trade at the tills. Co-operative trade share fell by one-third between 1957 and 1970. Rosen reminds us the Co-operative Party 'prompted' a then President of the Board of Trade to push through Retail Price Maintenance legislation. An own goal in a way for co-operative societies it proved a political disaster for the Conservatives. Edward Heath came to realise he had lost the

votes of many loyal small shopkeepers. A wafer thin Labour majority in 1964 was the result.

The introduction of Selective employment Tax in 1966 was another instance where co-operative MPs were put on the defensive under a Labour Government. This innovative tax devised by a Cambridge economist might have been clever but hit labour intensive sectors like retailing and co-operative societies hard. Concessions were achieved though ironically it would be Heath as Prime Minister who abolished SET when introducing VAT.

By the 1970s the Co-operative Party won commitments from Labour on establishing a Consumer Affairs Ministry, Co-operative Housing and a Co-operative Development Agency. These came to pass after Labour returned to office in 1974. The CDA was axed by Mrs Thatcher's Government and short-lived.

The final chapter on A New Mutualism makes seminal reading. At general elections in 1997, 2001 and 2005 the Co-operative Party scaled dizzy heights with 28, 30 and 29 MPs. Peter Clarke as Party Secretary got that limit on candidates removed in 1996. Gordon Brown who wrote a brief introduction to this paperback is the first Prime Minister to become a Co-operative Party member although not sponsored. There is even a Minister for the Office of the Third Sector.

The Party Secretary is now a General Secretary. Peter Hunt established Mutuo – a co-operative think-tank – financed from grant-aid which might otherwise have been cut in CWS economies. The idea is Mutuo will work out co-operative policy issues, not civil servants. In the end political representation must respond to its constituency.

The Co-operative Party has earned 'Dividend' over the years for the Movement. The coming decade will be decisive for a Co-operative Party in an era when 'co-operative' conveys different things. Now terms such as Third Sector or Social Enterprise or Third Way appear dearer to policy works.

A great aunt of mine died only three months short of her hundredth birthday. She had outlived three husbands. Her third once said to me we are biblically on borrowed time after three score and ten. Genes too are a factor and political parties with their policies, members and representatives all have them. Greg Rosen has given us a lively account. Taking the optimistic view he might timeously be engaged for that Centennial History.

Good and Bad Power: the Ideals and Betrayals of Government

By G Mulgan

Published by Allen Lane, 2006, price £20.00

ISBN 0 713 99883 3

Reviewed by Peter Somerville, Professor of Social Policy and Head of the Policy Studies Research Centre at the University of Lincoln

This is an important book for all of us who are concerned about the future for co-operative ways of working. It will also be of interest to those familiar with a strand of co-operative literature which could be labelled 'Co-operation and the State' and to those who have recognised that co-operative movements have long constituted an important element in the Third Way. The author is currently director of The Young Foundation and used to be director of the think-tank Demos, then head of strategy in the Prime Minister's Office, and used to write some of Tony Blair's speeches. Like Machiavelli, therefore, he has a strong insider's knowledge of how governments work but is also capable of reflecting on his experience in that role.

The book contains a sophisticated theory of state power. It describes how modern nation-state in particular have been created by a huge variety of historical factors, including war, wealth accumulation, and the expansion of hierarchical (as opposed to co-operative) organisations. It argues that states are driven by a search for what Mulgan calls 'cognitive coherence', ie 'a logic that connects their account of the world, the legitimacy of their power, and the virtuous nature of their actions' (p102). States try to shape the world according to this logic, developing technologies for ordering society and how it thinks, forging identities both of themselves and their citizens. The result of this activity is the creation of a relationship of mutual dependence between states and their citizens, which Mulgan constructs as one of mutual service: states earn legitimacy by serving their citizens well (by providing – or enabling – protection, welfare, justice and truth), and citizens earn honour and respect by serving their state and one another. State (or state-sponsored) protection, welfare, justice and truth 'cannot be carried out without the participation of citizens willing to serve in armies, to pay taxes and give to charity, to sit

on juries or to educate their children' (p240).

For Mulgan, the problem with states is that in practice they do not serve all their citizens equally but are 'captured' by sectional interests, eg the military, property owners, financiers, media moguls, powerful lobbyists, and by their own administrative machinery. This in itself tends to reinforce the wider inequality of power that gives rise to state capture in the first place. One consequence of this is that considerable activity has been undertaken over the years to secure the compliance of citizens to state rule. More importantly, this involves the cultivation of an identification between citizens and political leaders, eg through nationalism.

Mulgan argues that the main reason why states have moved towards becoming servants as well as rulers of their citizens is the growth of democratic institutions, particularly contestable elections, divisions of power, the rule of law, and visibility, free media and free access to information. All of these developments temper arbitrary and partial rule and help to hold states to account for their actions. Potentially, democracy transforms the command of the state, putting the people's representatives in power, but such transformation can be undermined to the extent that those representatives are captured by sectional interests. Further democratisation then becomes necessary to ensure that the state fully serves its citizens. But what form should this take?

Mulgan suggests that the state itself needs to be transformed but at this point his argument becomes less clear. If, for example, the state's bureaucratic organisation is in some way incompatible with deepening democratisation, how is it to be reformed? Is he implying that the civil service needs to be run as a co-operative or group of co-operatives, for example, and if so, what difference is this likely to make? He argues strongly that, for a healthy democracy, the

people need to be organised outside of state institutions, and their action needs to be grounded within a wider movement. He does not discuss any particular social movement, nor the political party or parties that might formalise the movement within the political process. His general point, though, seems to be that a democratic civil society is a necessary condition for a more democratic politics. This can be interpreted as an argument that democracy in economic and social life is indispensable for deeper political democracy – which should be music to the ears of those in the Co-operative Movement.

Mulgan's final vision is of a society in which the people create structures, while the state provides infrastructures (pp246-50). The people retain their freedom and autonomy of action (so they are capable of bending the state to their will), and this is supported and indeed guaranteed by state provision. Although Mulgan does not use the term, this

is a form of 'co-governance' a 'Third Way' alternative to both hierarchy and self-governance. Arguably, however, the term 'people' here is too abstract and undifferentiated, glossing over the deep divisions in advanced capitalist societies. So long as citizens remain economically and socially unequal, the political exercise of their freedom and autonomy will also be unequal, resulting in continuing state bias. Mulgan's clear separation of state from society, with then, say mutual obligation, identifies him as very much a traditional liberal thinker, albeit with a radical edge (eg the idea of popular control of the economy). The idea that the state might be so transformed as to be indistinguishable from society (eg through a process of progressive devolution and diffusion of state power, combined with a democratisation of economic and social power) is conspicuous by its absence.

Co-operation and the State

By B J Youngjohns

Co-operative College, 1954, Co-operative College Paper No 1.

This, and some of the other Co-operative College Papers from this period appear on the National Co-operative Archive's website at <http://archive.co-op.ac.uk/collegepapers.htm>

Re-visited by Trevor Bottomley, former Chief of Education and Development at the International Co-operative Alliance.

The purpose of this paper was to examine how and why the British co-operative movement came to be directly involved in political action.

When considering it two facts should be kept in mind. First, the time it was written - between 1952 and 1954. For more than a decade Britain had been a highly interventionist state in which every facet of the economy and daily life was tightly controlled first in war and then in a sweeping 'socialist' reform of the economy and social services. The issue of whether there should be more or less state intervention was a central one of the time and a deeply divisive one. At a national level the co-operative movement had no doubt where it stood. This was in total support of the Labour Party, its programme and its brand of democratic socialism.

Second, the author, Bert Youngjohns, was an alumnus of the Co-operative College. Its students were men and women, bred and raised in co-operative families, and most would go on to a life-time career in co-operative service. Youngjohns was the son of an active Co-operative Women's Guild member in south Birmingham. In 1947 he secured a scholarship to the Co-operative College, and then the Hughes/Neale Scholarship for a place at Oriol College, Oxford, graduating with an Honours Degree. So his paper was written by and from the perspective of a co-operative scholar from a wholly co-operative background.

Time and the credentials of the author are two significant reference points when revisiting his paper, particularly when judging the accuracy of its evidence, the rigour of its argument, and the authority of its conclusions. We should keep in mind that it is a philosophical study of co-operative attitudes to the state up to 1915. It is not about co-operative relations to the state before or after that date.

To begin to understand Youngjohns' thesis it might ironically help to begin with his concluding paragraph:

When a man who has been used to doing things for himself is no longer capable of

doing so, he begins to command other people to do things for him. This is what political action means to a movement like co-operation. It is a sign of senility, of impotence. The movement in 1915 was senile and impotent!

On what evidence did Youngjohns come to such a dramatic conclusion? More to the point, can it be validated? First, we need to be clear about what he was saying. He was not saying that, as a people's business/economic enterprise, the movement was senile and impotent. He was saying, however, that the leadership of the movement had lost faith and belief in the potential and efficacy of 'classical co-operation' as a "credible theory of social reform and regeneration" as well as in themselves, turning as a result to state socialist solutions:

There had always been a messianic element in co-operation but as long as co-operatives believed in the ability of their own movement to advance to Utopia by its own efforts there was no desire for association with State Socialism. It was when that faith declined that co-operation attached itself to an as yet untried (and therefore implausible) method of realising its messianic aspirations by political action.

In that sense the 'old' co-operative movement of King, Holyoake etc, and of Rochdale, had become senile and impotent. From direct source references Youngjohns showed how and when, officially, the theory of classical co-operation was abandoned in the United Kingdom and superseded by State Socialism, showing also the crucial and basic differences between those two aspirations.

What did Youngjohns mean by 'classical' co-operation? He argued that in British philosophical enquiry there had been two main streams of thought, empiricism and utilitarianism, and over two centuries these had coalesced into a theory of human behaviour,

potential, and aspiration which became labelled by its advocates 'co-operation'. It posited that a 'co-operative' society was the logical and attainable pole to a 'competitive' society. From Locke's 'Human Understanding', through to Owen's 'New Society' by way of Thompson, the two Mills, King, and the Rochdale Pioneers, and then onto Hughes, Holyoake and Neale, the theory and practice of classical co-operation had emerged. Long before the end of the nineteenth century there was much proof that the theory worked nationally and internationally remarkably well.

Two basic questions had been confronted and answered: "In the final outcome is there sufficient evidence in human behaviour to believe in human tolerance and kindness – in humanity?" Is there an impulse to co-operate – to share voluntarily? Locke and Owen thought that there was and that:

it was possible to find a solution to acquisitiveness, to unrestrained self-interest, to the jungle.

And, if the goal was 'human happiness' how best to pursue it? The answer for King, Holyoake and the Pioneers et al was 'classical' co-operation. "Its ethical doctrine rests securely on the principle of enlightened self-interest: it is to each member's advantage to co-operate with his fellows."

Co-operators believed that three basic principles were the true foundation of their theory of co-operation. First, voluntary association: the alternative being compulsion and coercion:

The voluntary act of co-operating is fundamental to the whole scheme. Compulsory co-operation, (ie state control) is a contradiction in terms.

Second, the crucial educative value of self-help and self-reliance exercised within the context of mutual concern and enterprise: "man can learn co-operation only by co-operating". And Youngjohns quotes Holyoake: "Co-operation proceeds by self-help and socialism by state help". The third basic principle was that of political neutrality:

It is one thing to enter politics defensively to guard one's interest against unfair discrimination, it is quite another to enter politics offensively; to use the machinery of

government to bring about one's social and economic objectives.

Neutrality is not compromised by the former; it is, obviously, by the latter.

The formulation of a specifically co-operative theory was the product of a nation-wide debate about the need for social reform which had started about 1740, and which Youngjohns meticulously researched. It involved many diverse contestants with diverse views – Owenites, Chartists, Radicalists, Rationalists and (later) Socialists. It took place in two main areas: in the radical, polemical, political journals of the day, and in public meetings. From 1831, however, the major oral debates about the ideology, form, and future of co-operation were mainly confined to Co-operative Congresses which, after 1869, became the official forum of the movement. The attitude of co-operators and their movement to the State were constant themes.

Youngjohns quotes *The Pioneers' Almanac* for 1860:

The present co-operative movement does not intend to meddle with the various religious and political differences which now exist in society ...

as well as a discussion at the 1872 Congress which "reaffirmed the movement's hostility" to any kind of political action:

This was the official line: the movement had no competence to discuss non-co-operative matters. Strictly interpreted it meant that the co-operative movement could have no official attitude towards State Socialism or any other political creed.

The debate was brought to a direct confrontation at the Congress of 1900 when Margaret Llewellyn Davies submitted a paper entitled, *The Relations between Co-operation and Socialistic Aspirations*. This was now a clear-cut issue which its supporters intended to force to a favourable conclusion. It was a classic case of 'entryism'. In the same year Congress rejected a resolution to affiliate to the Labour Representation Committee: in 1905 a proposal for "alliance with the Labour Party" was decisively defeated. In 1915 "the co-operators were still politically neutral and unconcerned about political representation". But "the forces"

advocating change were “still hard at work. For 24 years they had been nagging and worrying.”

Eventually, within two more years, Congress took two momentous decisions: “for political action and for a particular stance, socialism”. The old “purist” school of co-operators, which had believed in an independent, non-political

movement on the Rochdale model, lost the argument and the vote. Llewellyn Davies, and her fellow socialists won it. “Classical” co-operation was “senile and impotent”.

It will remain for historians to judge that result, and its outcome.