

Living the Vision: Co-operative Principles in Contemporary Practice: an address to the UK Society for Co-operative Studies, September 2006

Stephen Yeo

Responding to the title of the 2006 Society for Co-operative Studies conference, this keynote address drew attention to four respects in which our situation as co-operators attempting to “live the vision” may be said to be “new”: the end of “the Co-op”; the end of Labour-led democratic politics; information and communications technology; and “endism”. The Address then offered three “resources for a journey of hope” for co-operative and mutual enterprises: fair trade; education; and mutuality.

New times

The *New Moral World*, New Harmony, New Model Unions (1850s), New Unionism (1890s), the New Left, Harold Wilson’s New Britain (1964), *Marxism Today*’s New Times (late 1980s), New Labour ... for all the newness to which the Left has been attracted for many years, as members of co-operative and mutual enterprises (CMEs) trying to live the vision in the first decade of the twenty-first century, we probably **are** in a new situation. I will draw attention to four aspects of its novelty, before turning to three resources co-operators currently have for what Raymond Williams once referred to as “a journey of hope”. (Williams, 1983 pp241-269; Williams 1979 pp406-437)

The end of the Co-op

To begin with something near home as well as new, we are living through the beginning of the end of ‘the Co-op’. The new brand hit the Sunday business pages over August Bank Holiday 2006 when the Dividend project went public. (Observer, 2006) By the Spring of 2007, for example, it will be apparent on every package in the Eynsham branch of the Midcounties Co-operative.

I clung to the cloverleaf until my son, who works in marketing and communications, told me that the old logo did not do much for the young. I now see the point of “the co-operative ...”. Co-**operative** is active as adjective, rather than completed as noun. It invites other CMEs into our project, instead of subsuming their project into that of the Co-op. We were in danger of sinking under the weight of ‘heritage’, with trust status or niche food retailing as a probable destination. Trust status remains the most serious internal threat which we face. The new management of the Co-operative Group merged with United may be tempted to formalise an existing trend towards allowing member control of the ‘foundation’ or ‘social’ side of the business,

while putting out the business itself to managerial, or even to explicitly capitalist control. Can ordinary people be trusted, they will ask, to govern a £9 billion business? Regulators will support a negative answer, maybe even insisting upon it. Surely, the Regulator (no longer the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies) will say, we need protecting from ourselves (a nice way of putting de-mutualisation!). Social and community enterprise will be the fashionable figleaf: in one form or other, this has always been private capital’s vaccination against member-owner, democratic governance of the economic sphere.

When he took over the Co-operative Group (CWS) Ltd, I warmed to Martin Beaumont’s ambition to give it a ‘modern personality’. But beware of rationalisation. Scope will be as important to the movement during the twenty-first century as scale. Windfarms, legal services, management services (as in farm management) and Specialist Schools are encouraging. But we will need more breadth. Hence this conference: how are we to extend an ecology of co-operation and mutuality, growing from a chain of stores, diverse enough to encourage new growth?

The end of Labour-led democratic politics

Further from home, New Labour provides a second, less pleasing aspect of novelty: a terminal breakdown of politics by and for labour. For all its confrontational style, New Labour has capitulated where it matters most, to the entirely capitalist conditions of production of modern politics. There is no longer a major political party which trusts the courage, intelligence and deep desire of many democrats to arrange the powers of production, distribution, education and government differently, democratically and for ourselves. This is a great opportunity for the Co-operative Party which, in its ninetieth year, urgently needs to reclaim the movement’s original version of socialism as associationism,

pitted as it was against individualism twenty years before capitalism (as terminology) was invented. Today's breakdown is worse than it was in the days of *The Forward March of Labour Halted* (1981), when Neil Kinnock and Eric Hobsbawm argued that the working-class movement was finished. (Jacques, 1981; Hobsbawm, 1989) At least theirs was a materialist account of the situation, even though it dealt mainly with labourism in one country. And articulating a movement for labour in 2007 **will** be different from what it was in 1907 or 1807. It will involve building on bases which have hitherto been coloured blue rather than red, sites like 'voluntary association', 'civil society' and even 'private enterprise'. It will involve problematising old Labour's best mate – the state – as much as new Labour's best friend, the market. Ours is and always has been a third way.

The crisis of popular democracy under New Labour is terminal because it has been chosen – even engineered – by the leadership. The Labour government **chooses** to act as if most people – 'hard-working families' – accept individualist, competitive, business 'choice' and 'jobs' in the 'global market' as their guiding stars. In fact, most people have now rumbled that New Labour no longer believes in anything other than democracy managed to almost complete attenuation. This is in spite of all the CMEs, the voluntary associations, the Unions, the unattached longings, the textured impulses and localisms, the social movements (good, bad and ugly), the sects and the tribes which still inform civil society in Britain and which are, by now, not raw but overcooked materials for democratic co-operation of old and new kinds. New Labour never had the humility to grow from its pre-parliamentary roots.

If, in the late summer of 2006, the government could send a morally-discredited John Prescott to talk with moderate Muslim leaders (whose religion whether we like it or not is a way of life, as co-operation is) and if 'our' government can defend the corporate gambling industry as regenerative, where is the hope of a religion of socialism, or a member-based democracy based on popular values and principles, unless in the associational life of old and new CMEs?

Information and communications technology
Information and communications technology (ICT) adds a third element of novelty to our situation as would-be co-operators trying to live the vision. I am not the best person to speak

about it. It is the twenty-year olds among us who feel for and work naturally with ICT. For them, however, it has already been naturalised. They do not see it as revolutionary. While technological romanticism is tempting for older people, we can at least take the measure of ICT in the long history of communications. There is now the 'social net' or web 2.0 and an explosion in user-generated software. The Co-operative Group probably should have invested **intellectually** in Poptel when it fell on hard times a few years back, even if we did not have the **money** to take it on. Thank goodness for the Phone Co-op. But how vulnerable is that to Skype?

Marx wrote of communism as "the production of the very form of communication". Raymond Williams referred to this in a lecture in Zagreb in 1978 on "Means of Communication as Means of Production". During the 1970s, he was excited by the possibilities for complex co-operation and mutuality offered, for example, by cheap radio transmitters. Such inventions were enlarging "direct autonomous production" "by comparison with ... huge centralised systems ... based on varying but always substantial degrees of control and selection in the interest of the central social order".

Within a socialist perspective these means of autonomous communication can be seen not only, as under capitalism or in the difficult early stages of socialism, as alternatives to the central dominant amplificatory and durative systems, but in a perspective of democratic communal use in which, **for the first time in human history, there could be a full potential correspondence between the primary physical communicative resources and the labour-created forms of amplification and duration.** (My emphasis) (Williams, 1980 pp56-7)

The technical possibility of Marx's "social production controlled by social foresight" have advanced since then. Yochai Benkler's *The Wealth of Networks: how social production transforms markets and freedom* (Yale, 2006) suggests that "technology is changing the nature of economic production for 'information goods' from an industrial model based on capital to a networked one, characterised by so-called 'peer-production'" (Benkler, 2006)

In the world as it is, we are being disassembled by ICT into the hell of individual boxes, as E M Forster predicted we would be in his story *The Machine Stops*. (Forster, 1911) But in the world as it could be, we are also being

reassembled into new service, interest-based and identity mutuals which could turn, or already have turned into co-operatives of prostate gland sufferers, bread makers, mountain equipment purchasers, alcoholics, local exchangers and traders (LETS), drug-users, letter writers, anti-capitalist activists, leisure-service users and Divine Chocolate company agents.

How can we multiply new CMEs from below as well as reacting to policies from above as we have to do with Foundation hospitals and Foundation schools? Discontent with Thames Water and First Great Western trains, for example, is massive where I live and work. But it is largely inarticulate as a movement. How can exploited consumers, angry at remote equity capital and weak-kneed Regulators, use ICT to network themselves into self-governing membership associations ready to form new utility and transport CMEs? Bulk buying of water or train-tickets could be an old/new way forward, tried and tested from Rochdale to the Phone Co-op. But there must be other ways. The model to use may be that of Raymond Williams in *Communications* (1962). He proposed public (for us, secondary co-operative) ownership of the means (of communication, transport, utility distribution etc) surrounded by consortia (for us, primary co-operatives) of users. We need leadership and guidance from a **different kind** of political party, providing templates, matrices, **animateurs** of co-operative and mutual expertise. Do Supporters' Trusts need the same? Are they to remain largely ineffective against predatory capital as it buys up the Premiership, club by club and then player by player? Is this not a **moral** issue?

Maybe the new Co-operative Group will need a think-tank of one hundred 10 to 30 year-olds blogging, free associating, googling in semi-permanent session, generating idea after idea until roots and shoots begin to be put down. In any event, it is obvious that ICT will be a major agent or instrument for living the vision during this century.

End-ism

A fourth component of our new times is a growing sense of apocalypse not as millennial fantasy but as real, military, scientific and political possibility. Since the late-1980s, the end of any optimism of the intellect has been the hardest feature of our times to counter with any residual optimism of the will. Rational pessimism can no longer be avoided. It is fed by the dispersal of weapons of mass destruction; the inevitability of

pandemic; climate change; the known periodicity of mass extinctions; and fundamentalist death-cults on the street and in places as high as the White House. In such a setting, how do we construct the politics of sustainability?

Who knows? Succeed or fail, however, such a politics is likely to involve mutually sustaining, relatively small co-operative enterprises/associations mature enough to take mutual responsibility and to recognise that the 'Other' is ourselves. I find the metaphor of the goddess Gaia helpful, in spite of James Lovelock's deeply depressing *The Revenge of Gaia* (London, Allen Lane, 2006). In his Introduction to Lovelock's book, Crispin Tickell asked:

Who is Gaia? What is she? The What is the thin spherical shell of land and water between the incandescent interior of the Earth and the upper atmosphere surrounding it. The Who is **the interacting tissue of living organisms** which over four billion years has come to inhabit it. The combination of the What and the Who and the way in which **each continuously affects the other** [my emphases], has been well named "Gaia".

Lovelock identifies humanity as part of Gaia, of course, but as having become enemies of her age-old capacity to regulate herself. The Gaia metaphor (it is no more than that) points to co-operation and mutuality in the same way that Alfred Russel Wallace did during the mid-nineteenth century. Wallace (1832-1913) was an Owenite socialist pioneer who almost theorised natural selection before Darwin.¹

Unless humans consciously co-operate with Gaia's 'interacting tissue', allowing it to co-operate with us in complex patterns of mutuality, it is possible that our species will become extinct during the next three or four generations. At best, Lovelock foresees small bands of humans living much-reduced lives, carrying the species into a new age. Novelists such as Doris Lessing and communitarian philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre anticipated this thirty years ago. "It is now radiantly clear" wrote the poet Don Paterson recently, "that it is not the Earth that needs saving – the Earth will cheerfully flick us off like ash on its sleeve – but ourselves". (Paterson, 2006 p67)

The theory and practice of co-operation and mutuality is, surely, better adapted for this redemptive task than any other. It may be of some interest that, in a preface to the thirtieth

anniversary edition of *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, 2006), Richard Dawkins mused that an alternative title to his 1976 classic could have been “the co-operative gene”.

Resources for a journey of hope

Fair Trade

In the context of such new times, the first of my three resources for a journey of hope is Fair Trade, small though it still is as a proportion of world trade. Fair Trade *en route* to trade justice may be the most practical and politically hopeful resource we have, even if **really** Fair Trade needs to be distinguished from the ersatz versions currently being adopted by worried capitalist corporations. Real Fair Trade is about social relations as well as the exchange of commodities. The co-operative ... has lost the early edge it had over capitalist competitors as regards Fair Trade. But it is not too late to overtake them, in the same way that early-nineteenth century socialists used the slogan Really Useful Knowledge against the utilitarians' idea of useful knowledge.

The word ‘fair’ runs deep in popular consciousness as well as in the labour movement’s history, like the word ‘independence’. These two words represent what many millions of people have wanted and still want, on issues like poverty, Palestine, wages and prices. If trade between producers and consumers was to become fair, separated as we now are by thousands of miles, as from Accra to London, and by fundamental inequalities, like those between cocoa growers and chocolate eaters, it would embarrass state and expert socialists. It would actually deliver what we talked about in Capital reading groups during the 1970s. ‘Impossible’, we might mutter: ‘voluntaryism’, ‘humanism’, ‘utopianism’. Fair Trade has the capacity to get cells right, in ways that revolutions seldom do, so that cells can divide and multiply to make a **different**, non-capitalist, **associated** mode of production. An emergent ‘system’ is prefigured, in which producers and consumers jointly own and jointly govern enterprises/societies. As a condition of their success **and** of their possible failure, the associational forms of fair trade take on some of the colour of the competitive system which surrounds them. But daily challenges **are** made to that system, in the name of co-operative and mutual livelihood.

This is the co-operative and mutual practice

of ‘the transition’. It is also the theory of transition which socialists have always tended to say that co-operators do not have. Of course it may not work. After all, it is conceivable that the transition to capitalism might not have worked. It certainly took a long time. During **our** transition, there are limits to the extent to which capitalists can steal our clothes. They cannot give way on **ownership, membership** and fully **democratic governance** without giving way to our new mode. Nor can they contest dominant **divisions of labour** like Suma does. That would be to yield to our versions of what humanity is and can become. The current danger is that **we** give way, deciding to take the capitalist road in our own enterprises. Free Trade is so obviously “good thing” and so obviously deliverable, up to a point, that, as with trade unionism, the Left could easily get bored of it, ceasing to struggle over ‘the frontiers of control’.

Education

Education was central to the ways in which the Rochdale Pioneers lived their vision. It is still a prime resource for CMEs. Education is an inherently mutual, social good. But as the nineteenth century progressed, education was slowly annexed to dominant forms of schooling, minority private forms as well as majority state forms. By the early twenty-first century, however, these dominant forms were being called into question. State education? Local state or national state? Private education? Market led? Which precise forms? Could CMEs produce hybrid forms, to address the democratic deficit as well as the skills shortage?

We have resources in our history. Robert Owen was an educator before he was a co-operator. Co-operative schools were not unknown in the early days of co-operation. They have become better known since. (Wilson and Taylor, 2003; Wilson, 2006 pp43-50; Yeo, 2000) The fifth Principle in the 1995 ICA Statement of Co-operative Identity commits societies to providing “education, training and information for members, elected representatives, managers, employees **and the general public**” (my emphasis).

For Fair Trade to enter this field would be the most radical, demanding step it could take: so many other changes would be entailed. ICT is on the same side too, as I have mentioned, moving “from an industrial model based on capital to a networked one, characterised by so-called ‘peer-production’”. Knowledge production in a ‘knowledge economy’ generally involves a

challenge to top-down instruction, as didacticism gives way to **learning**. Modern ideas about knowledge also challenge Victorian-style institutions such as schools and colleges, recovering the idea of collective self-help in learning centres or, in the inherited language of CMEs, Mutual Improvement Societies.

So CMEs could move with the modern educational grain, reconstituting 'authorities' in mutual forms. There are Supplementary Schools, schools as Community Based Organisations, secondary schools of half-a-dozen kinds, Sure Starts, After School Clubs, Nurseries, Nursery Schools, Nursery Classes etc. CMEs provide models of appropriate, democratic, connecting forms ('Connexions'). We run shops, funeral services, pharmacies, travel services, farms, banks, insurance agencies, car dealerships ... and, in the Midcounties co-operative, nurseries. We are better placed to listen to parental choices and needs than any government policy machine. There is nothing co-operative or mutual about Public Schools except their mutual self-regard. But nor is there anything necessarily co-operative or mutual about State Schools, until we reconstruct them and the state with them. If state activity in the field of education is put out to PLCs, Education Trusts, Social Enterprises and Not for Profits, why should it not be put out to, or brought into a reconstructed state by, CMEs? Our expertise is much needed. It concerns forms of association, from partnership to networks to connectivity to co-operation and mutuality. **And** there are returns on capital employed to be made in this field larger than those in groceries.

Mutuality

I have been promoting the acronym CMEs – Co-operative **and** Mutual Enterprises – ever since I heard Edgar Parnell use it during 1999 in the work of the then Oxford, Swindon and Gloucester Co-operative Society Mutuality Task Force. (*Mutuality: Owning the Future*, 2000) One reason for doing so is to bring mutuals back into the co-operative family. Whatever happened to those Association of Friendly Societies, Building Societies Association, UK Co-operative Alliance conferences of 1997-2001? They were among the most important labour (with a small 'l') events in Britain since the Labour Representation Committee of 1900, complemented by the General Secretary of the TUC chairing the Co-operative Commission. Mutuo's work on 'the mutual state' was also full of hope. Where did all that ambition go?

While all mutuals are co-operative, not all co-operatives are mutual. Definitional differences between the two can serve as useful performance indicators for both. Co-operatives were well defined in the 1995 Statement of Identity. Mutuals are more difficult. It may not be accidental that it is hard to find a **legal** definition of a mutual. They are, in a sense, outlaws. Complete mutuality would bypass **the** state in order to reconstruct **a** state. In an ideal mutual – the adjective is important – members produce and consume, govern and exchange among and for themselves rather than with a general public. The public is ourselves. The circle is complete. Hence historical controversies concerning the tax liability of mutuals. They are none of the state's business. At the same time, they do some of the state's business. Could they do it all, constituting a mutual state or a state of complex co-operation? (I can never forget that J T W Mitchell of the CWS thought of buying up the National Debt!) (Yeo, 1995)

Even one-to-one mutuality is not easy to describe. But it is possible. Poets and Christians, perhaps, do it best when they reach for ways of describing love: couples "self-healed in sexual love, each serving each, the gift of that necessity their elect choice". (Hill, 2006) On an organisational scale, co-operators such as Will Watkins and Edgar Parnell have produced plausible definitions.² But on a universal level – as in Owen's An Association of All Classes and All Nations – adequate descriptions become increasingly difficult. *The Communist Manifesto* remains important in this regard. General mutuality would involve (perhaps it will always remain in the conditional tense) everyone dealing with everyone else in the direct, unmediated ways which characterise one-to-one, entirely loving relationships. This has to involve some alienation, some rendering unto Caesar, with Caesar standing in for abstract 'society'. But through what precise co-operative **and** mutual forms? The difference between inclusive *agape* and exclusive *eros* gets us some of the way, but says nothing about associational forms. Is it possible to construct a co-operative commonwealth or entirely mutual state (of affairs)? W H Auden's "we must love one another or die" is increasingly true. But how, in more than personal, more than private ways? To repeat the old Owenite question what could full 'community' or 'going into Union' actually look like? We must continue to attempt an answer, if it is the **vision** which is to be lived.

'Mutuality' as endlessly inspiring goal is the resource for a journey of hope for members of

CMEs which we most need if we are to **live** the vision, and to which I would most like to have something original to contribute. Right now, we need to look in odd places like the service-providing role that Hisbullah and Hamas provide for their members – and their members for each other – rather than at conventional political parties.³ We need to look at the fundamentals from which large numbers of people draw their inspiration and the social movements to which large numbers of people belong and ask “what have they got which the **family** and **society** as presently constituted have not?” Could CMEs fill the gap? The early history of Solidarity in Poland could still be an inspiration, as could John Le Carre’s insights in recent, highly political novels such as *The Constant Gardener* (2001). Emergent state formations within the fragile, mad, dysfunctional, old state and new capitalist

formations which Le Carre describes, are of great interest. All I know is that we need serious, new/old theory as well as new/old practice, books on the theory and practice of **belonging** (to more than families and more than nations) as well as initiatives on the ground. Socialists need to dare to face the wrath of Marx’s polemics against Proudhon, and to get back behind Marx’s and Engels’ analysis of utopian socialism. Mutuality could have provided the grand narrative New Labour was believed to be looking for, before Iraq. It is the wrong question to ask because we have to do it ourselves: but could Gordon Brown, a leading sponsor of Mutuo, still help to put together such a narrative, if he was to concentrate not on policies but on co-operative and mutual practices?⁴ As Quakers continue to say to each other, “I hope so ...”.

Stephen Yeo is an historian, writer and consultant. He has been Principal of Ruskin College Oxford, Chair of the Board of the Co-operative College, Visiting Professor at the Centre for Civil Society at the LSE and at Warwick University. For many years he taught at the University of Sussex and was active in QueenSpark and in the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers. He is working on a history of the CWS and the Co-operative Group from 1970 to the present.

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Notes

- 1 There are many recent biographies, but for a short appreciation see Gould, 2000 pp201-216 and Wallace 1898.
- 2 Parnell, 1999 pp24-5 on mutual co-operation versus business co-operation, and p67 on mutual benefits. Parnell’s contributions on mutuality on www. co-opnet were always a thread worth following through.
- 3 “The unfinished war”, a symposium in Prospect, no 126, September 2006, pp18-26, for a perspective on Hisbullah and Hamas.
- 4 Gosling 2006 offers a hopeful view.