

Reclaiming the Economy: The Role of Co-operative Enterprise, Ownership and Control

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Molly Scott Cato

When we began work on organising the conference we were inspired by the rather grand title we had chosen for ourselves: Reclaiming the Economy: The Role of Co-operative Enterprise, Ownership and Control. This bolstered our confidence when tackling the might of the neo-liberal, capitalist Leviathan whose response to our audacity might have been to ask, "You and whose army?" A year's planning, three months of frenetic activity, and three hugely enjoyable days of exchange later we can claim that we are pleased with what we achieved and hope that it is a foundation for others to build upon.

Our motivation in organising the conference was partly to raise the profile of the research into the co-operative organisation that is going on around the world, and partly to discover how far we are right in thinking that this research field is not nearly as developed as it should be. One undoubted achievement of the conference was to encourage those with expertise and knowledge of the field to put this into writing and now into print. As well as this special issue we are preparing a special of the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, which should take our findings to a broader-based audience.

And what an eclectic and wide-ranging series of contributions they were! One stream of papers focused on the role of co-operatives in bringing about social change. Linda Mapp from Birmingham Business School promoted the idea of women as co-operators while Linda Shaw from the Co-operative College drew attention to the essential link between co-operative organisation and Fair Trade. In another session Alan Robb from the University of Canterbury in New Zealand described a successful campaign to resist a demutualisation while Paul Jones, from Liverpool John Moores University presented results from his research into credit unions as a means of promoting financial inclusion.

There were a clutch of papers on technical

and financial issues. This seems a particular source of research focus in Spain, whose academics produced half a dozen papers focusing on issues such as the nature of accounting within co-operatives and financial instruments relevant to their operation. With agricultural co-operatives forming such an important backbone to the movement in many countries we were glad to welcome three papers on this theme, two from Europe and one on South African wine co-operatives.

On the more theoretical side, Peter Somerville from Lincoln University gave a thoughtful presentation addressing the kinds of democratic governance that might sustain co-operatives and help them to grow, while Roger Spear, from the Co-operatives Research Unit at the Open University, outlined the relevance of the concept of 'social entrepreneurship' to co-operatives.

To add life to the conference we inserted some 'theory-practice workshops' where academics were required to use their own knowledge and expertise to stimulate a discussion. Len Arthur joined with Mark Kaswan, from California, and Martin Hoban from Cork to offer a session on co-operatives as social movements, while John Rogers from the Welsh Institute for Community Currencies offered time currency as 'a new mutual'. Elsewhere Bob Cannell from Suma gave a fascinating workshop on how employment law can impede democratic management, while Jim Brown ran a discussion on the ethical investment society.

I am sure that most readers of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* agree that there is little value in knowledge for its own sake and that, once we have found our answers, we want to use them to change the world. Alun Michael's presentation to the conference reassured us that it is possible to do this. When we invited him to be a keynote speaker he was the minister with responsibility for social enterprise. But by the time the conference arrived he had been

reshuffled to the back benches in spite of his decades of experience in this area, to be replaced by the fresh-faced, on-message, younger Miliband. This is the depressing side of politics. But the enthusiasm and expertise Alun Michael demonstrated inspired the delegates and impressed our foreign guests immensely. Taking a positive approach to the burgeoning interest in social enterprise, and even David Cameron's support for it, he concluded that

The Co-operative Ideal is alive and well, and gathering new enthusiasts – but co-operation in the UK must be much more outward-looking and all-embracing than it has been in the past.

Marthe Nyssens, a leading figure in social enterprise research in Europe from the Catholic University of Louvain, both gave a keynote presentation and launched her new book (which is reviewed later in this issue). The research she reported into work-integration social enterprises in Europe is exactly the sort of theoretically grounded work that this sector has lacked in the past. Bob Burlton, Chair of the Co-operative Group and Co-operative Financial Services, offered the view from the movement which was positive and inspiring. He made much of the co-operative contribution to sustainability, through its support for consumer-owned windfarms and through its own commitment to reducing energy use and switching to solar power. Mervyn Wilson of the Co-operative College argued that academic research, in documenting the impact and diversity of co-operatives internationally, would make a real contribution to overcoming their invisibility. Roger Spear joined Mervyn in tackling the issue

of the linkages between the higher education sector and the co-operative movement.

So what has the conference achieved? Now that the dust has settled that is the question we, as the organisers, as well as those who participated and made the conference such a stimulating and lively arena for debate, need to address. Well, on one level there was the 'craic' - the human exchange, the knowledge that others are just as fascinated by that piece of legal minutiae as you are, the sharing of the triumphs and disasters that any human endeavour naturally evokes. Tyrone O'Sullivan, Chair of the South Wales Tower Colliery workers co-operative, gave particular inspiring examples of both during this after-dinner speech.

Intellectually, what we learned from the conference is that, while there are researchers and academics throughout the world who are keen to raise the profile of co-operative enterprises and see them strike a blow for freedom in an era of increasingly repressive neo-liberal economics, they often struggle to find a space within the institutions and culture of that globalised economy. While in some countries co-operative studies finds its rightful place within the management school, in others it is marginalised within disciplines such as geography or urban studies. We need to have the confidence to take our place alongside the other management gurus and offer the co-operative model of economic organisation as a mainstream alternative.

On a deeper level I think I am right in saying that we drew hope from a shared commitment to reclaim the economy and to keep alive a vision of a different economic system where the benefits accrue to those who work for them, and where people can control their own work.