

LEARNING FOR A COOPERATIVE WORLD

EXTRACT: CHAPTER 2

Education, social change and
the Co-operative College

Edited by
Tom Woodin
and **Linda Shaw**

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# Recovering histories of co-operative education and training: Character, culture and citizenship

*Tom Woodin*

The histories of co-operative education offer new insights into our understanding of learning and social change. In Britain, since the early nineteenth century, co-operators have actively educated themselves, fashioned education for their own purposes and campaigned for educational change. The size, scale and longevity of the consumer co-operative movement, which has retained a continuing interest in education, has made it a considerable yet undervalued educational force that has impacted on the development of educational systems and institutions for two centuries. Today, co-operatives and co-operative values and principles are helping to unlock social and public innovation. Ideas for a co-operative university have built upon a groundswell of dissatisfaction that has grown over the last decade, especially since the 2007–8 financial crisis and the ensuing period of austerity.

Simultaneously, the consumer movement itself faces a new educational crisis in the early twenty-first century, which makes this an apposite time to review its history. The reduction in the number of consumer societies has depleted the range and depth of co-operative education. While the Co-operative College began in 1919 as the headpiece of a complex educational structure, today it is more of a stand-alone structure and its *raison d'être* is harder to justify solely in terms of the actually existing consumer movement. In addition, the decimation of funded adult education provision since the 1990s has left co-operative education isolated (Co-operative College, 2019). Evaluating the history of co-operative education thus provides a means of reflecting on key contradictions while thinking about the future.

Ironically, the centrality of education to contemporary economic and political thinking has squeezed marginal practices. The assumption of some human capital theories – that everyone is educable – contrasts sharply with

earlier historical phases when it was commonly believed that there was a 'pool of ability' and only a small percentage of the population were capable of educational achievement (Simon, 1991). Yet today, the narrowing of compulsory education in terms of curriculum and assessment has aroused concerns about educating the whole person. These changes relate directly to notions of a democratic deficit and low levels of social well-being. Indeed, the current historical moment is characterized by a surfeit of individualism and a reluctance to address head-on issues of belonging, mutuality and collective welfare.

The relevance of co-operative education is not always apparent. Co-operation and education are both contested practices that have varied considerably over time. At the heart of co-operative education is the belief that education is a vital force underpinning the success of co-operative democratic ventures, and a basis for its expansion. It connects to vocational learning, liberal education and education for social change. There is also a constant tension over whether co-operative education is distinctive or merely makes use of generic forms of learning. Examining the different pasts of co-operative education may provide the groundwork for understanding our present predicament and, in turn, fashioning the future. What follows is a partly chronological account of the primary developments in co-operative education, predominantly within the consumer movement in Britain from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. It outlines the positive embrace of education by the movement, the ways in which it advanced new ideas and made use of education, while also having to respond to broader changes, notably the expansion of state funding and provision.

## **Knowledge is power**

The British co-operative movement arose out of the political, social and economic ferment of the early nineteenth century when new forms of industrial capitalism were being imposed. For radicals, the transformatory potential of education was encapsulated in the popular idea that 'knowledge is power', a phrase commonly attributed to Francis Bacon. They took forward enlightenment traditions of learning while also critiquing the nature of power and inequality (compare Simon, 1960 and Johnson, 1979). Robert Owen was an influential figure in the development of the co-operative movement and an important educational thinker. He believed that a harsh environment imprisoned the minds and bodies of working people, a predicament that his infant schools at New Lanark were intended to ameliorate. Indeed, Owenites believed that education was to provide the

means to overcome difficult circumstances and the principal force underlying all useful and social behaviour, which might ultimately make government unnecessary (Claeys, 1989: 71, 75, 120–1). The power of education struck a chord across various radical movements. But Owen was also a paternalist and could be wary about small-scale attempts by the ‘lower classes’ to build the ‘New Moral World’ through co-operatives:

The working classes never did direct any permanently successful operations ... Whenever the working classes have attempted any complicated important measure that required unity, patience and perseverance to bring it to a successful issue they have failed in every instance as soon as they have taken the direction of it. (Mercer, 1947: 183)

Owen would come to appreciate the significance of small-scale self-help projects that, at first sight, had appeared trifling in comparison with his community experiments (Lovett, 1920: 44). In fact, many of the problems and obstacles to creating co-operatives also beset Owenite communities. It exposed a dilemma about agency of the working class that was to remain central to co-operative education over the coming two centuries. Owen’s critique recognized the severe practical limitations on co-operative action from below. In order to fathom a successful example in practice, many experiments had to be tried out first and working-class co-operators realized that these had to be small-scale to get off the ground.

However, co-operators were also motivated by utopian ideas about the future state of society and these were a motor for social change. Owen advanced a crucial insight – that education was a vital force in transforming society and the conditions under which people laboured. Indeed, human agency was to be the basis for a revolutionary conception of learning and social change, the foundation for a new humanity. The New Moral World was to be constructed from ‘that material of humanity which contains within itself the germs of every kind of human excellence and of high attainments; – germs which, when they shall be rationally cultivated, will insure high intellectual, healthy and joyous happiness to each individual, and to every association of men’ (Owen, 1968: 121). Through education, new circumstances would be moulded in order to ‘regenerate the human race from its gross irrationalities’ (ibid.:122). In addition, education was conceived in terms of everyday experience. It was not to be stored away in discrete institutions but rather the ‘rational character ... must be formed in the great school, academy, college and university, of actual life, amidst men and things (ibid.: 123). Thus, despite Owen’s paternalism, the democratic

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impulse implicit in his thought and action rapidly spread among radical movements.

The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers operated within this milieu and is credited with creating the first successful consumer co-operative in 1844. Education was a central part not only of the Pioneers' vision, but also of the way in which they viewed the world: they were to 'arrange' their powers of production, distribution, government and education, which were understood to be the four key departments of society. This revolutionary vision helped to generate enthusiasm for building a co-operative. In 1877, when reflecting on the educational work of the Pioneers, Abraham Greenwood coupled prosaic and utopian elements in noting that the Pioneers were sentimentalists who desired revolutionary change yet had the 'common sense to curb that sentiment within the bounds of reason and what was practical'. They formed newsrooms, a bookshop and a library, disarming the critics who complained of wasteful expenditure, and it was agreed that 2½ per cent of profits would be devoted to education. By 1858, the newsroom was made free to all members and a year later the library had over 1,000 volumes (Greenwood, 1877: 6). New reading rooms spread across the town and atlases, globes, telescopes and opera glasses were acquired, as well as, in 1862, a full-time librarian. By 1867, there were 6,000 volumes and ten newsrooms (*ibid.*: 7). The collection included works on theology and morals, arts, science, history, poetry, geography and fiction. The instrument department made available magnetic batteries, opera glasses, telescopes, microscopes and a cosmoscope, all of which could be rented at a relatively low cost.

The demand for general transformation found expression in the fascination with diverse forms of learning among members of the Society. From 1870–3, as part of the nascent university extension movement, the Pioneers organized a series of free lectures that stimulated many other organizations to follow suit, until the town became 'surfeited' with lectures. New initiatives proliferated. Classes were organized through the Science and Art Department from 1873 with courses on mechanical and architectural drawing, applied mathematics, geometry and perspective, and French, which attracted 30 students a year (*ibid.*: 10). Moreover, blending scholarship, moral action and practical skills was to hasten the arrival of a new society and the independence of working people – this was the basis for 'social science' as opposed to the dismal science of political economy (Janes Yeo, 1996).

According to Greenwood, improvement had resulted from two factors. First, higher levels of human happiness accrued from the advancement in

science and arts, increased productive powers of industry and the abundance of things. The second was a notion of what would later be called equal educability, that everyone could participate in the new intellectual universe, which linked into radical ideas:

Some approximation to intellectual equality, by the extension to the many of the knowledge and tastes developed amongst the comparatively few, so that a co-operation for common purposes has been rendered possible, and the utmost result for the good of all extracted from the knowledge and skill which is and shall be attained. (Greenwood, 1877: 16)

Greenwood expresses a sense of equality in arguing that education should be available to all classes of the community, including ‘he who follows the plough or wields the trowel’. Across the country, co-operative libraries became places where working-class people found an education. They would open up new possibilities and many labour movement leaders experienced the power of learning in them (Mansbridge, 1944: 14).

The expansion of co-operative education also had an impact on mainstream developments. Co-operatives did much to ensure the ‘spread of education and diffusion of knowledge among those of the labouring classes’ that supported the development of state education, and in some areas co-operative societies for a time became an essential educational agency (Mansbridge, 1944: 15–16). Although many societies did not devote a lot of resources to education, the movement as a whole served as a seedbed for new practices, such as the Workers’ Educational Association, established in 1903 (Woodin, 2019). However, generic educational provision by co-operative societies went into decline around the turn of the twentieth century in response to the expansion of state provision. Local authorities took over libraries and adult education classes that had outlived their usefulness or were becoming harder to justify (Rae, 1904). W.R. Rae, from the Co-operative Union, wrote that ‘Our duty is plain ... to see that ... [local authorities] do theirs’, meaning that co-operatives were to cede control to local government (Rae, 1904: 6). While the wariness about state action among many co-operators was evident, even co-operative stalwarts such as George Jacob Holyoake had recognized the need for state elementary schools. In fact, fear of state education softened in the face of municipalization and, later, nationalization. This development could of course leave a bitter aftertaste and Rae noted how co-operative libraries had been ‘managed out of existence’ by local authorities. Nonetheless, he argued that the movement should concern itself with distinctively co-operative

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education across the age range, inculcating the history and principles of the movement, including classes for children, young people and adults; specialized libraries; and classes on co-operation that might involve the Women's Co-operative Guild. He also wanted to refocus scholarships on secondary education, technical colleges and workers' colleges with direct links to the movement as he felt that general educational scholarships to Oxbridge colleges had done the movement little good (Rae, 1904: 7).

Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, different approaches to the state can be discerned within the history of co-operative education that are not necessarily polar opposites but existed in a creative tension (see Vernon, 2013). Co-operators were often aware of the limitations of the state and fiercely guarded their autonomous democratic societies. At times they hoped to form a new co-operative state, the co-operative commonwealth. Yet co-operative action had always been curtailed by the state and legal system, most notably when, at one point in the 1850s, the registrar of friendly societies had ruled that contributions to education were not legal. Although this was to be temporary, it pointed to a contradiction, that co-operatives were independent and autonomous but often came up against state regulation and provision, not least in education. This was apparent to Joseph Reeves, the educational secretary of the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society (RACS), who noted that the 1918 Education Act created an opportunity to sustain and safeguard 'full autonomy':

That the workers have to develop their own culture no sympathetic observer can possibly deny, and the more they use the educational funds of the State for the purpose of developing their own system of education, the greater will be their chances of building a new system of society. (Reeves, 1921: 4)

A further approach was to make advances in new areas such as managerial education and higher education. In 1912, R.H. Tawney was actively encouraging co-operators, having played an important role in the development of compulsory education, to make their influence felt in the arena of higher education, particularly concerning the availability of scholarships (Tawney, 1912). As ever, the movement's strategy was to influence wider developments while establishing their own alternatives. The Co-operative College was to come into being in 1919 as a form of 'higher education' for the movement. It would provide specialist and tailored courses for co-operative leaders who had already received a certain level of general education (Woodin, 2017; Woodin et al., 2019).

In the post-war period, further opportunities were opened up by the 1944 Education Act and its promise of ‘secondary education for all’ that offered escape routes for a small section of the working class who might previously have been funnelled into the labour movement. Innovation proved harder in a system dominated by the state and where co-operatives struggled to connect their members to new business models. It would be some time before co-operatives started to once again emphasize their unique character as member organizations.

### **The spirit of association and co-operative character**

From the turn of the twentieth century, as the general educational presence came to be seen as unnecessary, there was a reassessment of co-operative education. From 1896 to 1898, the movement actively debated education and this process drew upon a definition of education that relied on specifically co-operative purposes and meanings. The main aim of co-operative education was:

primarily the formation of co-operative character and opinions and secondarily, though not necessarily of less import, the training of men and women to take part in industrial and social reforms and civic life generally. (Hall and Watkins, 1948: 168)

These twin perspectives represented two forms of specialization out of the broad assault upon education that stretched back to the Owenite period.

The idea of ‘co-operative character’ made visible a hidden history of informal learning. From the inception of the movement, it had been acknowledged that co-operatives had a significant effect on individuals and communities. By marrying self and collective interest, they supported the individual, the co-operative and the society. Indeed, the movement claimed to be:

a valuable means of education in the widest sense of the term. Through their membership of the Movement a number of men and women are being trained to exercise tolerance, forethought, and self-restraint, are being trained in the general conduct of business, are learning to trust men and women of sterling character, and are discovering the power and value of united action and organization. Many working men and women have gained a great deal of moral and intellectual power through their interest in the practical and varied work of their societies and by

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attendance at the annual Co-operative Congress and at local and other conferences. (Acland and Jones, 1884: 8)

Holyoake distilled these thoughts and practices in his injunction to foster the 'spirit of association', which would help co-operators to work together in solidarity:

to prepare members for companionship. They did not require classical, scientific, and historical knowledge in order to sell oatmeal and candles. It was the social education which goes before and after which they had primary need.

Education is not co-operative, because it is given by co-operators to co-operators, unless it is conducive to the formation of the co-operative mind ...

The education of the schools is of supreme service in public citizenship, but co-operation is a school of social citizenship, which erudition does not supply. (Holyoake, 1898: 7)

Holyoake drew a direct comparison with the attempt to promote 'associative character' among the Owenites.

Character could of course be an elusive term that was difficult to categorize and act upon but was part and parcel of working together in a democratic co-operative. Writing in 1914, the Plymouth co-operator W.H. Watkins drew lessons from a historical analysis of the previous century in arguing that training, education and character were indispensable if people were to 'avail themselves of such improved social and industrial conditions' (Watkins, 1914: 4). Co-operative character was a prerequisite for the new state that was to be brought into being:

We are ... building up a State within a State, a State in which ... people are arranging the business of life on harmonious and co-operative lines, rather than on the competitive and discordant lines we find in the competitive world. (ibid.: 8)

Watkins noted that something more than 'intellectual assent ... outwardly conforming to co-operative principle' was necessary. Rather, in line with Holyoake, he asserted the need for the 'spirit of co-operation':

We may have co-operative students; we may have numbers of people joining co-operative societies and taking part in the work of the co-operative movement; but unless these people hold within themselves the true ideal of co-operation, and endeavour

strenuously day by day to act it outwardly, we shall not have co-operators, and there will be in them no force of co-operative character. (ibid.: 10)

The religious inflection was apparent in the requirement to know thyself and develop the ‘inner state of condition’ that was necessary for outward co-operative expansion.

Co-operative character pointed in different directions. It was to cultivate committed co-operators who would put visions into practice yet it could also concentrate the mind on purity of purpose, which might be best attained in small groups. This related to a puritan leaning that favoured purposeful learning over more amorphous social participation or entertainment. But activists were also troubled by their need to influence all co-operators:

... a few people can determine the rate and course of development of the whole co-operative movement. We, however, do not desire it shall be a few people; we desire to make the whole of those within the movement true co-operators, and develop the co-operative character; and so we must be unflagging in our efforts at co-operative education. (ibid.: 14; see Woodin, 2011)

One answer to this conundrum was to expand the explicitly educative aspects of co-operation. The urgency to acquire knowledge, metaphorically on the same basis as cheese or bread, helped co-operators to access education as an everyday resource but it also created problems in terms of co-operative growth beyond certain groups. In later years, one aspect of this strand of co-operation would connect with training for committee members and lay directors of societies that became a staple of the Co-operative College. However, during the post-war period, with the onset of the welfare state, the informal and intangible nature of co-operative character was harder to access and became less sought after in any case.

### **Co-operatives and citizenship – schools of democracy?**

The second area of specialism mentioned in the definition of co-operative education related to citizenship and civic participation. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the seemingly inexorable rise of democracy was a potentially explosive force that splintered off in multiple directions and generated varying class responses. The notions of progress and improvement were palpable and propped up by growing prosperity coupled with advances in education, welfare and the built environment.

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On the eve of the 1867 Reform Act, co-operatives themselves provided compelling evidence of the ‘progress of the working classes’ and were a vital conduit through which the new ideas of citizenship were funnelled (Ludlow and Jones, 1973). The spread of democracy created a concern to bring the working classes into the nation and empire and to align their interests in a common project. The most publicized introduction of the concept of citizenship to co-operators was that of Arnold Toynbee at the 1882 Co-operative Congress where he argued for ‘the education of the citizen. By this I mean the education of each member of the community, as regards the relation in which he stands to other individual citizens, and to the community as a whole’ (Toynbee, 1882: 60). He specified the need for political, industrial and sanitary education. Similarly, Arthur Dyke Acland, who was appointed to the Central Co-operative Board in the early 1880s, argued that co-operative societies were in a unique position to enlarge the scope of citizenship. He addressed working-class co-operators as members of the nation:

... your own daily lives as part of the great body of working people – as English citizens of a great country, as fathers and mothers, as neighbours of the suffering and the poor. We want you to think about your daily lives in your homes and cities, and also your lives as citizens of England, to remember that we are always thinking about things connected with these lives of ours. (Acland, 1883: 11)

Systematic knowledge, aided by university men, was to support the development of English citizens, ‘to apply common sense and sober judgment to the many problems of our lives as English citizens ...’ (ibid.: 18–19). The approach wedded the practical nature of citizenship and attendant responsibilities to an appreciation of the history and literature of the nation. For instance, the writings of Thomas Carlyle, Charles Kingsley, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Macaulay, Robert Owen and William Cobbett were all recommended.

Working-class co-operators were supportive of citizenship and higher learning but many were not content with what they perceived to be an attempt to divert the movement from its core purpose. Indeed, citizenship was interpreted in terms of the practical and long-term needs of co-operatives and revealed simmering class distrust within the movement. The nation was not construed as a finished product but rather as a space in which co-operative ideals could be used to reconstruct social arrangements. As a result, there was a need for practical forms of citizenship that encouraged

the growth of co-operation through what Ben Jones described as ‘a careful and systematic teaching of the principles and practice of co-operation’ (Jones, 1882: 61). Indeed, one practical outcome of this discussion was the production of a handbook, *Working Men Co-operators*, jointly authored by Acland and Jones (1884).

In the coming generations, co-operators would embrace Toynbee’s talk but interpret their responsibilities as citizens in co-operative ways. They occupied public spaces as teachers, magistrates and school board members as well as local and national political representatives who supported co-operative ideals. In addition, the importance of this work was not lost on the Women’s Co-operative Guild, which worked hard to get women into civic positions as well as elected posts within the co-operative movement itself. The Guild’s educational schemes would also challenge both the movement and society at large, on issues relating to poverty, maternity and the lives of working-class women. The needs of members brought them into close contact with the state and extending welfare services along co-operative lines became a priority (for instance, Scott, 1998).

The emphasis on citizenship could also spill over into cultural activities in changing contexts. At the Royal Arsenal Society, Reeves was a great proponent of cultural activity, which had expanded from the late nineteenth century, especially the National Co-operative Festivals held at Crystal Palace (Magnanie, 1988). In the 1930s, Reeves’ conception of ‘education for social change’ fused radical citizenship with cultural action and reflected his disenchantment with the state as a representative of capitalist economics. He was influenced by the Labour College movement as well as the ideas of the Popular Front, expressed in various cultural productions such as the London Co-operative Societies’ film *Advance Democracy* (Reeves, 1936).

## Culture, progressivism and standards

Cultural participation became a significant feature of co-operative education during the early and mid-twentieth centuries. It was one way of responding to the burgeoning membership, which officially grew from 3 to 8 million between 1914 and 1939. Cultural groups were given a fillip with additional funding for adult educational classes in the 1918 Education Act. Choirs, drama groups, pageants, bands and dance groups were all organized. Cultural activity was conceived in democratic and co-operative terms so that co-operatives were merely reclaiming a social activity that was theirs by right. For example, in 1937, 74 dramatic groups were counted in the movement and this was highlighted as a positive development:

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Drama ... implies very practical co-operation between different groups of people – dramatists, actors, producers and stage craftsmen. Drama originally belonged to the people ... at the market place or in the churchyard, and the whole community attended. (Co-operative Review, 1936)

However, co-operatives were not simply receiving and passing on cultural practices; they did so in rapidly changing circumstances. Mounting technological and business challenges combined with the need to represent co-operatives in the best possible light while also ensuring popular participation by members themselves. Co-operatives were to aspire to the best in culture just as they did with standards of food. This was a difficult set of contradictions to manage. One commentator noted that ‘If drama is worth organizing on a co-operative basis through amateur societies then it is worth organizing properly, and co-operative societies should see to it that drama is presented at its best’ (Co-operative Review, 1936). The desire for outward-facing provision, which might appeal to new audiences, aroused political anxieties. For example, the *Co-operative Review* observed that cultural provision might help to attract a ‘vast middle class public ... on grounds of commercial merit ... not ... social revolution’ (Co-operative Review, 1939: 108).

Co-operative culture also blended participation and business. One educational committee developed the notion of ‘co-opera’ and ‘made a considerable financial gain by transferring its show from a school room to a super cinema’ (Co-operative Review, 1937: 182). Indeed, scale impressed co-operators and was implicit in the idea of a co-operative commonwealth that was being supported across the labour movement and beyond. RACS put on Handel’s *Belshazzar* at the Scala Theatre, which told a story of liberation of the Jews from Babylon. London societies also used the Royal Albert Hall on occasions, which represented a continuation of the visible celebrations of co-operative power in the public displays at the opening of new premises and the co-operative parades through city centres on International Co-operative Day. Perhaps one of the most symbolic of these events was the 1938 Wembley Stadium pageant, *Towards Tomorrow*, which was attended by over 60,000 people. Each of these events involved hiring professional conductors and specialist advisers to help celebrate and co-ordinate the immense voluntary activity of co-operative singers, dancers and performers. Alan Bush, Benjamin Britten, Michael Tippett, L. du Garde Peach, André van Gyseghem and Montagu Slater were some of the

luminaries who supported co-operative societies to represent their cultural and artistic skills on a public stage.

The interest in culture also related to the broadening curriculum in compulsory elementary schooling. By the early twentieth century, the reaction against a restrictive basic curriculum had become visible and a new set of ideas began to have an influence among teachers, school inspectors and others (Holmes, 1911). Educators involved with the Co-operative Union and College were influenced by progressive educational ideas that emphasized the need for the all-rounded education of the whole person. The first principal of the College, Fred Hall, wrote about the possibility that young people might be engaged through:

new methods of teaching juniors through action ... Singing, dancing, drawing, modelling, and other activities are employed, so that the children may play themselves into knowledge.  
(Hall, 1918: 9)

Similarly, Reeves explicitly compared the restrictive elementary school to the open possibilities of co-operative education and argued for:

a broad humanistic system of education for the children, so helping to rectify the narrow and utilitarian methods now adopted in our elementary schools ... inculcating knowledge of human progress ... We should not set too much store on whether the child knows where and when Robert Owen was born, but upon the interest the child takes in the beauty of a noble life.  
(Reeves, 1921: 6)

These pedagogical interventions must be placed alongside the structured examinations system of the co-op itself, which Reeves may have been criticizing indirectly. However, under the growing influence of developmental psychology, progressive ideas also distinguished between levels and abilities. The tendency helped co-operators to structure their provision accordingly with classes targeting different ages and, to some extent, abilities. It could also have the unintended consequence of undermining the earlier espousal of equal educability. The onset of levels, exams and pedagogy all induced a reluctant acceptance of different abilities – a tendency also visible in vocational education.

## **Vocational education**

The origins of the co-operative movement had been based on finding solutions to the industrial and social chaos of the early nineteenth century.

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Co-operative stores, workshops and communities, which were to bring about working-class independence, gave prominence to learning practical skills. Into the 1870s, the veteran Owenite William Pare would speak and write about the need for ‘co-operative industrial colleges’. This aspect of co-operation set the co-operative movement apart from radical and adult education movements, which often kept their distance from ‘useful knowledge’ or vocational learning, assuming it was a way of diverting the working class from power (Johnson, 1979; Harrison, 1961).

The remarkable growth of consumer co-operation rapidly highlighted the need for effective training of staff, managers and leaders, not only in technical skills but also in democratic processes that were essential to the effective functioning of a co-operative. For instance, *The Co-operative Managers’ Text Book*, documented the complex internal workings of the society: ‘The relationship between a manager and the committee, a manager and the employées, and of the latter to a society’. The textbook was a recognition that ‘store-management by committee’ had become outdated and that the manager’s technical skills were pivotal in the success of a co-operative store (Wilson, 1915: xi). Indeed, the general manager was to be:

so sympathetically disposed towards the theory and practice of co-operation as to impress his staff with the importance of understanding the primal features of co-operative service, such as loyalty to a society’s trading departments, and the necessity of taking advantage of educational facilities for the better understanding of one’s business tend very materially to promote efficiency within the movement. (ibid.: 13)

Managers were not solely to focus on the ‘commercial aspect’ but also ‘schemes with an educational character’ (ibid.: 16–17). The Co-operative Union developed a system of training for employees comprising training and examinations as well as on-the-job experience. Examination pass rates could be quite low as the movement demanded high standards (Vernon, 2011).

However, while the movement had its own impressive range of training courses, it was not entirely independent of the state. In political and policy circles, less priority was accorded to non-academic educational routes in comparison with the raising of the school leaving age. Fewer resources were devoted to vocational and part-time training. A number of co-operative societies did take advantage of the day continuation schools that were supported for a time under the 1918 Education Act but funding would be curtailed in the 1920s. In addition, after the 1944 Education Act,

co-operatives looked forward to working with the vocationally oriented 'county colleges' that were on the statute book but were never implemented, again considered less important than the school leaving age (Woodin *et al.*, 2013).

Nevertheless, the Co-operative College would develop a range of management training and, after the Second World War, a faculty of management that trained staff full-time for a year. This represented a rich educational experience from which many co-operative leaders emerged, but it could only cater to a small number of people. In the post-war years, the habit of recruiting from within the movement persisted and the anachronistic image of co-operatives made it hard to draw in graduate staff. As the movement went into decline, which was particularly sharp from the 1960s, managers and leaders tended to hold on to their positions, which engendered further stasis. In addition, in the 1970s and 1980s, societies became less willing to release staff for such long periods of time. As societies merged, they often moved training in-house which could ironically lessen the influence of co-operative values. Universities also entered the field of business studies and management training but tended to marginalise co-operatives. Yet, during the 1990s, the importance of co-operative values was again reasserted and co-operatives saw business opportunities in values, for example, through fair trade. Following the problems that beset the movement in 2013, the evaluation reports made implicit criticisms of co-operative leaders and their skills. It is a challenge faced by the proponents of the co-operative university in 2019 who are attempting to blend skills-based education with social purpose and general education.

## **Conclusions**

The British co-operative movement built and sustained these educational strands of activity that help to illuminate historical changes in capitalism and the state. Each of them changed over time and were not always fully developed in a movement that was not able or willing to financially support them. They also overlapped considerably. Indeed, one of the attractions of co-operative education has been that, when it attempted to prefigure a co-operative commonwealth, it blended management with social science, co-operative play with statistics, citizenship with liberal education. The curious mix made for distinctive co-operative activists whose lives cut across prevailing educational distinctions. Co-operative education has also for long had an international aspect and mutual two-way learning took place as British co-operation was exported to many other countries. For instance, the Co-operative College became a model for emulation as colleges were

formed across Europe during the inter-war years and, after 1945, in Africa and Asia. More recently, an awareness of multiple co-operative traditions is rich with potential to understand how new futures may be moulded (see Shaw, Chapter 3, in this volume).

Co-operative education grew out of a democratic movement and was highly inventive in meeting the needs of members. It certainly went into decline in the post-war years when membership and the unique qualities of co-operatives were downplayed in a declining business faced by incomprehension and ridicule from without. However, co-operative education, in all of its diverse incarnations, has not died out completely and can potentially be redefined and reworked for the present. Since the Statement on Co-operative Identity was agreed in 1995 and the Co-operative Commission of 2001, there have been attempts to apply values and principles to mainstream institutions, asserting confidence in the co-operative message, particularly in terms of co-operative schools and a co-operative university (see Ralls (Chapter 10) and Neary and Winn (Chapter 11) in this volume). Once again, the tension between distinctiveness and working with the mainstream has resurfaced. We should not jettison either of these perspectives. Co-operators attempted to embrace the mainstream and develop an impact while maintaining a unique identity and remaining accountable to their members. The interconnections between liberal education, citizenship and specific co-operative learning has been at the heart of the movement. It is a dilemma faced by democratic institutions that necessarily have to engage with the world where state regulations and the ‘needs of the economy’ make co-operative and democratic working difficult but not impossible.

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