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The Persistence of Historical Alternatives

In this day and age of "the end of history," a study of consumer cooperation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a highly welcome occasion to reflect upon alternatives to seemingly dominant paradigms. The past and present of the cooperative experience challenged and continues to challenge a whole host of preconceived notions such as market fetishism in society at large, the state-centered orientation of much of historical and contemporary socialist thought and practice, or tendencies to identify cooperatives with the urban working class Left. If the editors of this volume had done nothing else but to question these assumed certainties, they would have reached or surpassed this reader's expectations. In many ways, they accomplished much more.

Leaving apart a tantalizing reference by Ruth Grubel on the presence in Japan of "mutual assistance groups" (p. 306) as early as the seventeenth century, the cooperative movement generally emerged parallel to the rise of industrial society. The founders of nineteenth century cooperatives without exception attempted thereby to respond to at least some major social ills of laissez-faire capitalism. Bourgeois liberals were as much involved as the much-maligned "utopian socialists." Interestingly, marxist-influenced social democrats initially frequently abstained from the construction of a cooperative commonwealth as many of them (though not all) regarded such ventures as facilitating an eventual accommodation to actually existing capitalism. If urban problems as a rule gave birth to the theory and practice of consumer cooperation, in several important national cases the rural population became the most forceful and numerous propagators of the cooperative cause. Any ever-so-brief glance at the checkered history of consumer cooperation thus raises at least as many questions as it answers.

Writing these lines near the city of Wuppertal, where one of Germany's largest consumer cooperatives in the interwar period built and owned a vast array of distribution and production facilities, buildings that still stand but in the post-World War II era housed a succession of private enterprises, the image of consumer cooperation as a mere symbol of a bygone age suggests itself with remarkable ease. Surely, the specific death knell of German cooperatives, expropriation by the Nazi state, played little role outside of Germany proper. Belgian cooperatives, for instance, continued to operate even during the Nazi occupation and, though they suffered, they apparently suffered from the general economic malaise of German occupation, not from specific anti-cooperative measures. But the era of consumer cooperation is now long past its prime.

Or so it seems, until the reader begins to realize that, in Denmark for instance, the story is an entirely different one. "In the mid-1990s, the Danish consumer cooperatives represented a market share of roughly 33 percent of the national foodstuffs and beverage consumption. In every town, suburb, and rural community, one could find a cooperative supermarket or smaller shop. In many rural areas, the only retail shop at all was a cooperative" (p. 221). Canadian cooperatives likewise saw their highpoint in the most recent decades. "During the 1960s, it seemed on the verge of becoming a major force in the Canadian economy," and only "significant economic swings in the 1970s undercut the capacity of the movement to realize its earlier promise" (p. 331). Last but not least, today "consumer co-ops represent 20 percent of the households in Japan" (p. 303). Such simple facts, everpresent realities for consumers in those states but little-known to the outside world, should immediately question many preconceived notions about consumer cooperatives.

In their joint contribution at the beginning of the book, the two editors attempt to synthesize the points of view of the various contributors: "It is the argument of most of the authors in this volume that the real challenge for consumer cooperation in the industrialized world has

not been the movement's economic weaknesses but its obligation to confront the consumerist revolution. Cooperation's great crisis was adaption to changing times and tastes - providing a fuller range of goods and appealing to more tastes without giving up the advantages of low costs and democratic, consumer participation" (p. 33). In other words, as consumption became ever more central to the lives of First World citizens, consumer cooperatives began to trail, or, in the words of Furlough and Strikwerda: "The fundamental shift in thinking from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, which caught consumer cooperation in midstream, was the move from production to consumption" (pp. 33-34). Were things really that "simple"?

A mere quantitative analysis of the rise and fall of First World consumer cooperation undoubtedly confirms this trend. In most continental European countries (and not only here) the highpoint of cooperation by all means predates World War II. But the sheer weight of statistics may be a necessary but certainly not a sufficient element towards an explanation for this trend. Indeed, on one level it defies even elementary logic that, of all things, *consumer* cooperatives should begin to decline precisely at the moment when consumerism begins to grow in societal importance and increasingly determines everyday life. Perhaps a closer look at the success stories of consumer cooperation since the breakthrough of consumerism in the Golden Twenties may furnish elements of a more convincing explanation for the postulated (and, of course, to some extent very real) secular decline of consumer cooperation.

Carl Strikwerda, in his assessment of Belgian cooperatives ably disassembles several prominent myths pertaining to the supposed lack of business acumen as a key cause for the decline of cooperation. Belgian cooperators, he asserts, early on successfully applied economies of scale and utilized innovative financing schemes, measures equal to the most flexible tactics of contemporaneous private entrepreneurs. There is thus no reason, I contend, why similar creative responses could not have successfully taken up the challenge of modern consumerism, once it arose. In the heartland of the modern welfare state, Sweden, the cooperative movement apparently for a while adapted exceedingly well to the demands of a consumer society and, significantly without caving in to the demands of rampant *capitalist* consumerism, the Swedish movement oriented its members and sympathizers towards the choice and acquisition of "high-quality, tasteful products without wasting resources" (p. 257). By 1939, its newspaper "had become Sweden's most widely read weekly, printing 570.000 copies every week" (p. 251), no mean task in a country of at that time no more than six million people. And in Japan today the cooperative movement has spawned a series of peripheral leisure activities, such as sports programs and youth activities, that prove to be rather popular.

Interestingly, French cooperators in the 1920s executed a similar turn and "founded vacation colonies, organized excursions, and added movie 'palaces' to cooperatives." "Cooperative stores expanded their inventories to include items such as furniture and bicycles, and movement literature stressed 'elegance' in fashion and 'tastefulness' in home decoration" (pp. 185-186). Curiously, however, what is elsewhere in the volume regarded as proof of potentially successful adaptation to the challenge of consumer society, Ellen Furlough here, in combination with some other trends, criticizes as an abandonment of lofty goals. "The reorientation of consumer cooperation after World War I signaled the decline of a collective perspective within the movement. It also eroded the possibility of a collective ideology, of socialized structures, and of a culture of consumption that was socially engaged within twentieth century French commerce and distribution" (p. 186).

Only a more detailed examination of the French case may tell whether French cooperators in the Golden Twenties really did abandon a "collective perspective" and "collective ideology." As Furlough's abovementioned contribution stands, however, this reader is tempted to locate the author's hostility to the changes of interwar cooperators primarily in the latter's creative engagement with consumer culture and its refusal simply to ignore the reality of a changing world, where an increasing range of goods to buy and things to do may constitute a growing source of collective and individual pleasure. As the success stories of Denmark, Sweden and Japan suggest, if coops have a chance, it lies precisely in abandoning an attitude of splendid isolation and in taking up the challenge and adapting to the modern world.

Several authors (and both editors) stress the role of gender in the cooperative movement and point out that, whereas women constituted the vast majority of consumers in the various cooperatives, the top decision makers for the movement were, with few exceptions, men. Furlough and Strikwerda indirectly suggest that this gender bias hampered cooperators' success: "While cooperation differed in important ways from capitalist consumerism, notably in its commitment to social control over consumption, an analysis of the ways that gender informed the cooperative movement calls into question

the cooperative movement's claim to be an active counterexample to capitalist society" (p. 52). But pointing out the limitations of cooperation as feminist alternative to the capitalist norm is not the same as explaining its tendential decline. For, capitalist retailing businesses were no more oriented towards including women as active decision makers, but they obviously won many a competitive battle with cooperatives.

If the level of business skill proper to cooperatives cannot explain the coops' secular decline; if coops were indeed able to integrate the challenge of consumerism into their project, as witnessed in Sweden, Denmark, Japan and perhaps France in the 1920s; if gender politics may explain why coops may not have constituted full-scale societal alternatives but not why coops failed–then what does account for the fact that, within the First World, coops are less prominent and visible today than seventy years ago?

Here, Carl Strikwerda's observations on the Belgian case may point in the right direction. After justifiedly stressing the difficulty to separate the "ideological and the business sides" of cooperation, he goes on to make the following capstone statement: "When the movement as a whole had a vital mission, before World War I, it managed to pioneer more in business methods and at the same time to adapt to the needs of consumers. When the movement lost its forward motion in the interest-group politics of the 1930s, cooperation, too, failed to innovate" (p. 86). In other word, when cooperators were able to develop a forward-looking dynamism, innovations followed suite. When stagnation began to set in, a growing lethargy affected all aspects of cooperative life.

Given the fact that, on the eve of the new millenium, the First World remains home to several thriving cooperative experiences, one is left to conclude that explanations of cooperative failure pointing to secular societal trends are fatally flawed. Rather than searching for general causes, it thus appears that nationally specific and contingent causes may ultimately be of far more persuasive power than answers stressing the historically limited viability of the cooperative experience as such.

In their opening contribution, the editors stress that "we believe that capitalist and cooperative commerce represent different models of consumer culture, models that for a time exercised different appeals" (p. 5). This reader therefore concurs with Furlough and Strikwerda who contend that a "particular [capitalist] consumerist ethos was, as the study of consumer cooperation will demonstrate, neither inevitable nor universally embraced, and there have been (and continue to be) competing visions and practices. The form of capitalist consumerism that has immense power and influence today is a peculiar historical development, not a linear and inevitable 'end of history"' (p. 2).

As can be expected in any collection of articles, the relative merits of the contributions vary, as do the authors' particular approaches to their subject matter. Repetitions and lengthy empirical narratives abound; but all these potential drawbacks cannot diminish the importance of this collective anthology. It constitutes an insightful and stimulating first step towards the explanation of the infrastructure of consumption in the age of capitalism. And it simultaneously suggests that there is no inherent logic why retailing businesses are structured as they tend to be today. It is the great merit of Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda to have drawn attention to the possibility of historical alternatives in an area as seemingly "naturally" capitalist as commercial activities in nineteenth and twentieth century First World societies.

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