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Co-operative education in Britain during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: context, identity and learning

Tom Woodin

Over the previous two centuries, education has been central to the development of the consumer co-operative movement in Britain. Yet it remains a paradox that, despite considerable depth and achievements, co-operative education has not received significant attention, either in studies of education or of co-operation. Education within labour and social movements remains an under-researched area and this is particularly true of co-operation.[1]

Where it has been addressed, co-operative education has been commonly viewed as contributing to the growth of adult education and mainstream compulsory education. Its distinctive features have been downplayed – not only practices and structures but also the impulses and sensibilities that marked out a co-operative educational idiom. For example, Brian Simon's four-volume history of education touched upon educational aspects of the co-operative movement which, in the long run, were presented as feeding into growing demands for common schooling. This account was valuable but tended to sweep the movement up into more general trends and paid little attention to specifically co-operative ideals and practices.[2] The unique contributions of co-operatives, along with other examples of private working-class education,[3] could easily be lost in such overviews.

The tendency to impose wider educational and social lenses upon co-operative learning has been resilient. At the time of the second reform act in 1867, the very existence of the movement testified to the 'improvement' of the working class and showed that social and educational advance was indeed possible, a belief which bolstered the case for growing state involvement in education.[4] Over half a century later in 1919, the Report of the Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee noted the co-operative movement as one of a number of

nineteenth-century educational precursors; these were portrayed as the beginnings of a bigger project to be taken forward by other bodies. Preparing the field of education for cultivation by the state was indeed a persistent theme: in addressing co-operators in 1912, R.H. Tawney argued that their 'special responsibility' now lay with higher education, to act 'as pioneers in building up those parts ... which the State has left almost untouched'.[5] In the long run, however, these creative processes of state formation would serve to constrict the extension of voluntary co-operative activity.

The marginalisation of co-operative education has also resulted from the way in which 'education' has been narrowly conceived as structured and directed learning. This perception has often been replicated within the movement itself where education commonly played second fiddle to more important economic and political developments. As a result, historians of the consumer movement have tended to isolate education from other activities.[6]

To begin the process of recognising and assessing co-operative education, we must be alert to the fact that it is possible to identify a wide diversity of practices which fostered change through individual and mutual learning, from the establishment of the Co-operative College, the provision of libraries and newspapers, to the more diffuse areas of informal learning, socialisation and participation by members as well as vocational training for employees. In doing this we can draw upon recent important reappraisals which have placed co-operation within a broader cultural and social setting.[7] As a movement which incubated social transformation, co-operation nurtured particular cultural understandings for much of its history, many of which cannot easily be encapsulated as 'education'. This paper will focus upon some of the meanings, practices and tensions surrounding co-operative learning in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It offers an indicative overview which blends thematic and chronological approaches. Archival records, including journals, press, reports and autobiographies, form the basis for this study.[8]

'Something tangible' – beginnings

The early nineteenth century witnessed a diverse array of experiments in working-class emancipation. Many co-operative societies grew out of a milieu in which education and learning were inextricably linked to a range of collective self-help initiatives. There were considerable continuities between the early Owenite movements, the co-operatives which briefly flourished from the late 1820s, and the later co-operative

movement.[9] Dr John Watts, an Owenite, noted that the later co-operative stores and manufactories from 1844–60, 'originated amongst men who were formerly communists of the school of Robert Owen – who, undaunted by many failures, have retained their faith in the Co-operative principle, until they have achieved success'.[10] Watts accurately identified a sense of determination to develop avenues of self-help through the most available means to hand. In this way, learning from experience was inscribed into the early achievements of the movement.[11]

Mutuality rapidly became a significant working-class organisational form from the mid-nineteenth century when shared impulses and tendencies found expression in social, economic, religious and educational enterprises. Education and co-operation were at times coterminous, woven into interconnected webs of working-class activity. The Manchester and Salford Equitable Co-operative Society was established in 1858 by the Roby Brotherhood. They had been members of the Roby Sunday School who formed themselves into a mutual improvement society and essay class helped by 'the kindness and co-operation of well disposed friends'. However, they wanted 'something tangible' and followed others in subscribing pound shares to form a co-operative. The Tame Street Institute and Phonetic Sunday School followed suit by dissolving itself in 1859 and joined the store, en masse, presenting its library, tables and tea service. But members were angered by the fact that the society was unable to register its rules with the Registrar of Friendly Societies because it proposed to devote a percentage of profits to education, a provision which had been left out of the Industrial and Provident Societies Act of 1852. Following amendments to the Friendly Societies Act of 1855, co-operative education became a bone of contention with Tidd Pratt, the Registrar of Friendly Societies, who refused to accept educational aims.[12] These legal wranglings illustrate how co-operative education, from its inception, was intertwined with the regulatory role of the state.

The Manchester situation appeared to be particularly unfair as the Rochdale Pioneers, established in 1844, had successfully devoted 2.5% of their surplus to educational purposes. Ten per cent had been proposed but this had also been disallowed by the Registrar. Co-operators had to wait until the 1862 Industrial and Provident Societies Act, when provision for education once again became permissible. Despite legal obstacles, the Pioneers were tenacious in their commitment to education and, by 1875, had a library of some 11,000 volumes, a full-time librarian and eleven reading rooms and laboratories.[13] Education was closely tied into wider social aspirations; an

original object of the Rochdale Pioneers was to 're-arrange the powers of production, distribution, education, and government, or in other words to establish a self-supporting home colony of united interests'.[14]

During these early years of consumer co-operation, it is possible to gain glimpses into a learnt associational identity which had developed from a shared cultural and class background. Co-operatives developed through aggregated ownership, personal sacrifice and a determination to improve economic security. The experience gave rise to a corporate feeling which rapidly became apparent to a stonemason building a co-operative store in a mining district:

> most of the miners had shares in a local Co-operative Society ... they came and sat, crouched on their heels, all over the building. As they were really, though indirectly, our employers, they were tolerated, although sometimes they were sadly in the way ... I have never heard politics discussed with more force and directness than among these men ... Their debates, couched in the very plainest English, were interesting to follow, and differed totally from the vague generalities and hackneyed phrases heard when an MP addresses a meeting of working men. All this struck me because, in our own trade, politics, as a rule, were left to so-called 'cranks' ... The new building was on the roadside, and soon became the Trafalgar Square where everything was discussed ... those miners ... seemed to me to have reached the high water mark of industrial prosperity; the most striking thing about them was the fact that they had gained their advantages by organisation.[15]

As an outsider, the stonemason attested to the way in which co-operative ownership extended out into a sense of entitlement, control and engagement with political forces. Co-operation not only reflected wider social formations but, in addition, represented a structured articulation and further development of work and community-based identities. George Jacob Holyoake, an Owenite, free thinker and historian of the movement, would call this the 'spirit of association' or 'social education' to 'prepare members for companionship'. He realised that it gave co-operative education a characteristic purpose; co-operators

> did not require classical, scientific, and historical knowledge in order to sell oatmeal and candles ... 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.[16]

The interconnection between ownership, learning and common identity was to be an enduring theme in the history of the movement. The very buildings which housed co-operative activity could inspire awe and pride. A Bury co-operator described his feelings on entering

the Rochdale Pioneers' central newsroom, 'capacious, lofty and neat ... When in it, one feels as if he had got into the Temple of Wisdom ... what noble thoughts of the wise, the great, and the good, are collected here!'[17]

Co-operative control of physical assets represented something durable and tied the individual into the co-operative body; buildings would continue to cement corporate feelings and fuel co-operative visions. From the late nineteenth century, the opening of new premises would become grand affairs with packed crowds who celebrated the visible representations of their joint power. In the early twentieth century, Linda McCullough Thew would lovingly describe the buildings of the Ashington co-operative, a reflection of her pride and personal investment in the society.[18] By the 1930s, these impulses would also feed into co-operative film which regularly offered panoramic views across the range and scope of consumer societies.[19] The built environment of the movement offered a visual resource, 'a distinctive grammar of construction and design', that provided a continuing induction into the palpable identity and values of co-operation.[20]

Similarly, participation in co-operative institutions could spark utopian desires which embraced education. The climactic and millenarian impulses of early nineteenth-century thinkers would continue to reverberate into the twentieth century. For example, T.W. Mercer, speaking at the Lytham summer school for co-operators in 1917, stressed that co-operation

> must be a deeply religious movement and a living faith ... co-operation was a life to be lived as well as a new order to be established ... if civilisation was to endure, society must be organised, and unless co-operators were prepared to apply their principles in the great work of social reorganisation he feared that it would be reconstructed from above, and that free institutions would disappear ... The laws of God and the laws of wise economy were one, and co-operators believed that by discovering and applying those laws they would at last be able to establish the new Utopia, the splendid city of God ... co-operation ... became a splendid crusade, a high adventure, a holy religion.[21]

Mercer blended religious belief with co-operative and educational ideas which animated the bricks and mortar of co-operative expansion: the interconnection between vision and materiality was inherent in the co-operative educational project.

Growth through knowledge

Nineteenth-century co-operators were imbued with a strong sense of history and progress. This was complemented by an enlightenment faith that the simple distribution of knowledge could have quite transcendental effects. Again, 'knowledge' was viewed in both spiritual and physical terms. Books and lectures with the correct message needed simply be spread among the people in order to transform society. This demand for knowledge was met through the proliferation of co-operative libraries, journals and newspapers which appeared both locally and nationally and became established features of the co-operative landscape by the late nineteenth century.

Whilst knowledge was to be distributed like tea and flour, a typical co-operative metaphor, its effects could be far-reaching. Holyoake himself favoured 'that old propagandist feeling' to counteract 'this sordid side of materialism ... we ought to make it a condition that every member should take a periodical which his society should supply to him along with his butter and cheese'.[22] This was not merely a fanciful aspiration and there were many concrete examples of the ways in which knowledge had a direct impact. For example, Holyoake's own *Self-Help, A History of the Rochdale Pioneers* (1857) was a highly influential text, perhaps the most significant co-operative tract ever written in the UK. By charting the history of the Pioneers, it offered an accessible model which could be copied and so facilitated the establishment and growth of co-operative societies. Holyoake's book had a tremendous impact at the York Equitable Industrial Society, where Chas Ernest recorded that the text

> came amongst them as a revelation. The lamp of faith which had been glimmering for years, at once became full and bright. It was a message of inspiration. It even caused many old deserters to give themselves up ... caused ... many societies to spring into existence.[23]

Through shared readings and group learning, co-operators helped to alleviate issues of literacy. Examples from the text were given in meetings which helped to win over the doubters and thus increased a sense of corporate identity. Knowledge was shared in a social context and co-operative education helped to facilitate this communication; the Prestwich Co-operative Society held a 'discussion and essay class' where everyone 'should read and speak on his feet, and thus improve them in the art of thinking in that posture'.[24]

However, the focus upon knowledge could lead to a seriousness that excluded others. Establishing successful societies was one stage in development; broadening their appeal to a larger group of members

was another. Tensions would arise that centred on class and gender which, at times, appeared to undermine the ostensible focus upon education. As societies expanded their membership and extended their range of social provision, divergent forms of learning and culture came into conflict with one another. Social occasions and performances became widespread in the 1860s and 1870s, including recitations and humorous dialogues – Edwin Waugh, the dialect poet, featured at some societies.[25] But activists feared that opportunities for improvement and learning were deteriorating into mere entertainment. From the late 1860s, complaints about frivolity escalated as wider social and cultural distinctions congealed within some societies. This often took place along gender lines: for instance, 'A True Co-operator' complained of co-operative tea meetings, where coarseness and popularisation coincided with the appearance of women:

> times have changed; for whereas the meetings used to be of a few working men, who sought for knowledge and instruction – now the meetings are large to excess, composed principally of women, babies, children and youths of both sexes, tempted to come by a richly got-up tea, and lots of ham sandwiches, tarts and spice cakes, and very little plain bread and butter ... To teach, to learn, to sympathise, and to instruct used to be the object and principle of the meeting; but now these are decidedly secondary, and the music, singing, and buffoonery are the principle attractions ... as the meetings become more popular their utility declines ... I protest against the prevalence of mere sensual indulgences, under the name of co-operative meetings.[26]

These criticisms reflected a puritan fear of sensuality and unstructured social occasions at a time when early editions of the *Co-operative News* would warn about 'comic ribaldry' replacing 'elevating music'.[27] In the process of incorporating 'women and children', distinctions between 'high' and 'low', quality and popular became more common. This was a complex picture with local societies often at variance with stated aims and congress presentations, just as respectability could be a strategy adopted at appropriate moments and dropped at others.[28] In reality, in the mid-nineteenth century, women had been central to the formation and growth of many societies although the onset of structured organisations appeared to marginalise them.[29] Even though they became less visible, their participation was nonetheless essential to the growth of the movement and reached a critical mass in 1883 with the formation of the Women's Co-operative Guild. The very process of utilising knowledge to bring about the growth of co-operation gave rise to contradictions and tensions that rumbled on in future years.

There were gentlemen

As co-operation became a significant force in nineteenth-century society, debates surrounding social class also became prominent. The movement attracted many middle-class observers who viewed it in education terms. Co-operators appeared to offer a source of learning and understanding which was in line with dominant trends in the nineteenth century in so far as it projected a harmonious image of society with those at the bottom gradually improving themselves. In 1886, Miss Sharp from Rugby, an activist in the Women's Co-operative Guild, recognised this alignment between the co-operative movement and the improvement of society:

> the moral qualities necessary to the economic success of co-operative undertakings are also those on which the growth of true civilization depends – they are patience, foresight, care, self-control, mutual forbearance, willingness to sacrifice individual claims to the good of the whole.[30]

The meaning of these words could vary considerably across class divides. For example, one liberal politician argued that co-operation taught the virtues of capital and served as 'a great preservative against strikes'.[31] By contrast, co-operators were certainly alert to the ways in which capital could be utilised for emancipation and they read their own messages into this shared script. As a result, latent but significant class differences in relation to education can be identified, which simmered within mid to late Victorian Britain.

Christian socialists were particularly active supporters of the movement and offered legal services, publicity and public support. But they stereotyped northern working class co-operators as 'materialist', a position which hardened in the later nineteenth century under the influence of idealist philosophers such as T.H. Green. This position reflected wider class tendencies: in 1874, the then university extension lecturer Edward Carpenter had urged Leeds co-operators to embrace spiritual matters and question materialism and science.[32]

Working class co-operators were more apt to perceive business development to be at the heart of educational processes; 'materialism' was in fact bound up with learning. Education was perceived as central to developing new business models, such as federations, branch structures, banking and insurance. Informing members, building on values and responding to needs was a learning process at the heart of commercial success. Education was to be a galvanising force, disseminating new ideas and practices which underpinned the proliferation of co-operation.[33] The Owenite co-operator, William Pare, recommended

reading the *Co-operative News* backed up by personal visits to members as the basis on which to expand banking.[34]

As the contrasting assumptions of Christian socialists and co-operators rubbed up against one another, they produced moments of friction. Whether the consumer movement should share profits with employees proved to be a vexed issue that spilled over into educational matters. One such affair in the early 1870s was the establishment of the *Co-operative News*. Co-operators considered it to be an essential democratic means of circulating knowledge among members across the movement. The issue became fraught when the Christian socialist Lloyd Jones and lawyer, author and M.P. Thomas Hughes, attempted to exert control over the paper and publish it from London under the generic title of *The Citizen*. The Scottish co-operator, 'Mr McInnes', distrusted their motives and justified this in terms of a perceived distinction between 'practical' and 'theoretical' knowledge – it was better to have the *Co-operative News* in the hands of trusted men in Manchester who would make a success of it rather than gentlemen in London.[35] Such spatial distinctions were a further feature of these debates given that many successful societies were located in the North.

Holyoake harboured fears about materialism but realised that, for many middle-class men, the movement offered opportunities for engaging with the 'problem' of the working class. While he was supportive of Christian socialists, they represented temporary participants who were only able to connect with working-class people through the conduit of the movement:

> There were gentlemen ... who could never have been interested in the welfare of the working classes in the way they had, but for the rise of Co-operation, which enlisted their sympathies, and on which they had bestowed a large amount of attention'.[36]

In time, the co-operators would afford more permanent spaces where such tensions were expressed. The widening opposition between 'materialist' and 'theoretical' tendencies were to be stoked up further by Edward Vansittart Neale, as the General Secretary of the Co-operative Union, a position he used to criticise the materialism of the movement, often represented in the figure of J.T.W. Mitchell, the head of the Co-operative Wholesale Society.[37] In the long run, with the decline of the movement from the mid-twentieth century, wariness about theoretical knowledge would inhibit the ability to respond adequately to changing circumstances.

Structure and enthusiasm

The expansion of education within the co-operative movement quickened after 1885 when the Co-operative Union established an Education Committee. Educational opportunities were offered for both members and staff. Course syllabuses were established in subjects such as economics, citizenship, industrial history and the history and principles of co-operation. Examinations, testing and qualifications infused this educational structure with prizes, certificates and scholarships on offer for different age groups. By 1900, 1,154 members were enrolled and 582 were examined on co-operation, industrial history and bookkeeping. Sectional Educational Associations were set up from 1898. This was a conscious attempt to provide a staged educational hierarchy, the apex of which was to be the Co-operative College, established in 1919.

Significant advances also took place in technical training for employees, an area in which the co-operative movement was at the forefront of developments. Education and training became necessary as the size and scope of business operations increased. Previously, personal experience had been an adequate basis for employment, but, as societies developed in scale and complexity, with multiple branches, federations, wholesaling, banking and insurance, staff required a more thorough training. Courses were developed in vocational areas such as bookkeeping, sales and managing the various departments of a co-operative store. These blended personal experience, informal on-the-job learning and formal educational provision. Correspondence courses were developed from 1890 which reflected the wide dispersal of co-operative societies across the country; by the turn of the century the number of independent societies stood at approximately 1,500.[38]

This systematic structure did not meet the needs of all and there were drawbacks to formal organisation. Throughout its history the movement had acted as a seedbed for a broad range of educational innovations, notably university extension and the Workers' Educational Association which focused upon 'liberal' rather than 'technical' education. Some co-operators found avenues for wider learning based on liberal education and personal development.[39] But the growth of institutions and structures created problems for co-operative educators who at times felt they were losing out to other more popular forms. One contributor to the *Co-operative Educator* complained that, 'Vast funds of enthusiasm, which are ours by right, are secured by other bodies', and that classes 'should not exhaust the missionary spirit'.[40] Having developed structures to deal with an

increasingly sophisticated and large-scale movement, co-operatives found that they had inadvertently constrained the spirit of mutuality and self-help.

Having said this, we must place the rather stern, 'traditional' image of co-operative education, as concerned with testing and qualifications, within a broader context. A more nuanced picture emerges when we begin to appreciate the multiple meanings, purpose and pedagogy of co-operative education. Education was part of a democratic and autonomous movement that was trusted by its members. The curriculum of co-operative education increasingly drew on the movement itself, from Robert Owen and early co-operative societies to later developments in business and retailing. While it was a voluntary activity for members, high standards were expected for a democratic working-class organisation that offered considerable avenues for development and learning. Moreover, as members, employees could take advantage of multiple opportunities for learning. McCullough Thew, an assistant in the Ashington store, did not necessarily expect to pass bookkeeping exams the first time and many failed them.[41] But she persisted with 'store classes' and recalled with great excitement when she won two scholarships and, as a young woman, attended summer schools on her own.[42]

Teaching and pedagogy served to further strengthen a sense of collaboration among co-operators. In 1917, W.R. Rae, chairman of the Co-operative Union Education Committee, argued strongly in favour of an inclusive pedagogy in children's classes so that 'triers' were rewarded, not just those who did well. In this way, co-operation would serve as a force to uplift everyone together.[43] In addition, he supported teaching bookkeeping to women, which had been opposed by others in the movement, and recommended that tutors, 'Proceed along the lines that are closely parallel to their work' and develop role-playing as 'Mrs Cash Book' and 'Mrs Trade'. Yet, in outlining his case, limiting assumptions about women were incorporated – associating participative teaching with lower mental capacity to some extent. He emphasised the need to keep it simple for women: 'The average woman is not quick in arithmetic, and cannot quickly add up long columns of big figures.'[44] The urge for freedom and equality through education could be curtailed by assumptions about different ability levels. Nevertheless, Rae's account represents an early and innovative attempt to think through the detailed problems of pedagogy and classroom experience in a co-operative context.[45]

The concept of pedagogy helps us to understand not only the co-operative classroom but also the wider transformative potential of the

movement as a whole. Co-operative education links to the notion of 'subjectivity' and the sense of self engendered within a specific collective context. Educational practices were articulated in terms of developing an individual and social being: 'primarily the formation of co-operative character'. Co-operation was a way of life in which individuals might be immersed from birth and subjectivity was fostered through participation in such a way that the co-operative movement 'produced' distinctive types of people. By the turn of the twentieth century co-operators who were fluent in business, accountancy and bookkeeping as well as citizenship, principles and social science, became a visible part of the social landscape. J.T.W. Mitchell reveals this complex character – running an international business as well as a Sunday School.[46]

Of course subjectivity was heavily gendered, and this was very clear in the work of the Women's Co-operative Guild which was based upon a sense of self which not only engendered fierce loyalty to the co-op, but engaged in wider citizenship and campaigning activities on behalf of women and mothers. Virginia Woolf, on visiting a Guild conference, was both impressed and troubled by the detailed knowledge of the working-class women who could not be placed in neat categories. This dissonance felt by outsiders demonstrated the way in which co-operation could serve as an educative force.[47] Learning within a democratic social and economic movement was thus connected to wider purposes and social changes. It may be viewed in terms of a broad social history of learning which revolved around the 'character' of the working class in an emerging industrial democracy.

In this context, co-operators bridged the widening dichotomy between technical and more general educational development. The strong focus on technical issues could paradoxically stimulate a concern with co-operative values. For instance, Ben Jones, author of *Co-operative Production*, referred to 'technical instruction in co-operation ... careful and systematic teaching of the principles and practice of co-operation'.[48] The fact that, for Jones, the principles of co-operation were tied into business development meant that 'technical' education could not easily be dissected into a set of discrete skills. Right into the mid-twentieth century, the principal of the Co-operative College, Robert Marshall, resisted the then prevailing distinctions within adult education between liberal and vocational streams:

> The old definitions are no longer accepted, that the 'social' student is concerned with ends and the 'technical' student with means. Both are

> concerned with ends and means; and 'technical' studies can be the opportunity of educating that familiar figure in educational addresses 'the whole man'.[49]

The manifest need to 'train' co-operators encompassed wider educational aims and aspirations. Indeed, these examples of technical education testify to the serious way in which vocational learning was understood and practised within the movement, as an induction into a way of life as well as gaining skills. Learning was conceived as part of one's whole sense of self within a social context, a perspective which resonates with continental notions of 'formation' in France, 'formazione' in Italy and 'bildung' in Germany.[50]

In the ensuing years, co-operative education would broaden out in a number of directions. Nurturing a 'co-operative consciousness' became a priority in the face of unfair treatment of the movement during the First World War and the subsequent entry into politics.[51] One result was the growth of cultural participation by co-operative members in order to enhance loyalty and build support. A snapshot of the 1920s and 1930s would reveal a plethora of educational and cultural activity, including drama, choral, musical, film and dance groups. Along with the guilds and youth groups, the Woodcraft Folk and Comrades Circles, they provided pathways into the governance of co-operative societies. Paradoxically, the shift into politics and the 'labour movement' would create further problems for co-operators who tended to be subordinated beneath the 'economic wing' of trade unions and the 'political wing' of the Labour Party which focused attention upon the state. Co-operators had always had an ambiguous relation to the state, extracting benefits and funding for education but also, in the words of Joseph Reeves, the education secretary of the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society, attempting to claim 'full autonomy' which needed to be 'constantly safeguarded'.[52] Rae noted how some local authorities had taken on co-operative libraries and classes but then 'managed them out of existence'.[53] In the twentieth century, as state ownership emerged as a dominant means of taming capitalism, co-operative messages became muffled. Co-operative educational and cultural life would struggle to thrive in this rapidly changing world.

Conclusions

Various modes of learning have been illuminated through the prism of co-operative education: supporting a common identity, developing

skills for business development; nurturing individual co-operators; entertainment; book learning; and fostering social change and participation in wider social institutions. Education was enmeshed within virtually every aspect of the movement. The project of remaking social relations, which was central to the co-operative movement, necessarily incurred novel and widespread examples of learning. One danger of this approach is that a broad range of activity is simply collapsed into an educational eclecticism which envelops the whole movement. We must be alert to the need to tease out learning from other connected areas of activity.

A number of persistent issues have been identified in this outline. A widely shared thirst for knowledge helped to bring the co-operative movement into being and was further stimulated by the experience of collective ownership and business development. Education itself was perceived through metaphors of growth and the distribution of goods in which the movement was deeply imbricated. The moral economy of co-operation coalesced around material forms which in turn stimulated democratic and educational ideas.

Extending co-operative education to ever-wider audiences proved difficult amid restrictive expectations that permeated the movement, particularly in relation to women. From 1883, the Women's Co-operative Guild would actively challenge these limiting assumptions while also campaigning in wider society. In addition, the very success of the movement led to a tension between self-help and structure that became embedded within the co-operative educational project. The rapid growth of the co-operative movement went hand-in-hand with the institutionalisation of personal relationships resulting in structures which might both enable and inhibit further creativity. Increasing formality and organisation was necessary to handle the burgeoning activity but, in turn, could weaken common feelings and activism which had invigorated early societies. The difficulties that arose related to a further dilemma between supporting general educational advances and providing a distinctive co-operative education. Co-operators found it necessary to engage with wider political, economic and educational developments in order to avoid insularity and ensure that their message was propagated. Yet, in the process of engaging with these social institutions, where different assumptions prevailed, the co-operative message could, in the long term, become subdued.

Today, the re-configuration of wider social and economic forces has created spaces which co-operatives have begun to inhabit. In this new context, both changes and continuities with the past can be identified.

For example, the potential for influencing mainstream compulsory education through 'co-operative schools',[54] and the widening scope of the Co-operative College, will necessarily involve both an extension and a dilution of co-operative education. The challenge to maintain and extend co-operative values while fostering broader growth will be a contradictory but necessary process which builds on deep historical roots. Re-discovering the historical depth and range of co-operative education may offer resources for the potential futures inherent in these new developments.

Notes

1 For example, C. Griggs, *The Trades Union Congress and the Struggle for Education 1868–1925* (Barcombe: Falmer, 1983); C. Griggs, *The TUC and Educational Reform 1926–1970* (London: Woburn Press, 2002); D. Lawton, *Education and Labour Party Ideologies 1900–2001 and Beyond* (London: Routledge-Falmer, 2004); K. Manton, *Socialism and Education in Britain 1883–1902* (London: Woburn, 1999).

2 *Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee. Final Report* (London: HMSO, 1919); B. Simon, *The Two Nations and the Educational Structure 1780–1870* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974); B. Simon, *Education and the Labour Movement* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1965); B. Simon, 'Can Education Change Society?', in B. Simon (ed.), *Does Education Matter?* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985); T. Woodin, 'Working Class Education and Social Change in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Britain', *History of Education* 36:4/5 (2007), 483–496.

3 See P. Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

4 L. Jones and J.M. Ludlow, *The Progress of the Working Class, 1832–1867* (Clifton: Augustus Kelley, 1973/1867); on the capacity for improvement, see C. Hall, K. McClelland and J. Rendell, *Defining the Victorian Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

5 R.H. Tawney, *Education and Social Progress* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1912).

6 For example, A. Bonner, *British Co-operation: The History, Principles and Organisation of the British Co-operative Movement* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1961).

7 S. Yeo (ed.), *New Views of Co-operation* (London: Routledge, 1988); P. Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England 1870–1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); P. Gurney, 'Labour's Great Arch: Co-operation and Cultural Revolution in Britain, 1795–1926', in E. Furlough and C. Strickwerda (eds), *Consumers Against Capitalism? Consumer Competition in Europe, North America*

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8 I would like to thank Gillian Lonergan at the National Co-operative Archive.

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