

The Active Co-operator

JOHN WHITFIELD, B.A.

(Mr. J. Whitfield is a Research Officer in the Nuffield Research Unit in Statistical Sociology at the University of Keele)

The Society for Co-operative Studies has rightly chosen to emphasise two concerns. Research into topics likely to be of fairly direct benefit to co-operative management and business organisation is one. The other is the further training and specialised education of managers and employees. But there is also a third concern, which, though perhaps not of such direct importance, should be recognised as having a secure place in co-operative studies. The co-operative movement is a unique social phenomenon, important both for its principles and for its practice. It would be regrettable if neglect of this aspect of the movement came about by default. Many co-operators still display concern for and about the principles of the movement; debate about the relevance of the co-operative philosophy is continuing. Reference to this aspect is necessary to a full understanding of the movement.

In comparison with the Labour Party and the trades unions, the co-operative movement has been neglected as an object of study. Such study as there has been has concentrated on the history and the economic growth of the movement. Reference to co-operative philosophy and democratic institutions has appeared rather more incidental. A number of studies have been primarily concerned with the latter aspects. As an historical part of the labour movement the co-operative movement can be proud of its claim to a prominent place in social history.

The democratic aspect of co-operation is also of immediate relevance. Debate about regionalisation has prompted discussion of the forms to be taken by democratic control in the new retail societies. Information about the nature of participation in the democratic government of present day retail societies can contribute to that discussion. This contribution also has a general interest. The expansion of sociological studies is in part a consequence of a growing realization that the ways in which society works are often very complicated. Interest in this field is increasing. Just as the co-operative movement deserves a substantial part in historical studies, so it must press its claim in sociological studies. The immediate utility of such studies may not be persistently apparent, but their value is not therefore to be lightly dismissed.

As a contribution to the establishment of the suggested claim, this brief article will concentrate on one aspect of the co-operative movement and indicate its position in sociological studies. It is hoped that co-operators may feel prompted to comment from the basis of their personal experience, and the sociologists will both criticise and also further examine the sociology of retail co-operation. Some results from a small survey investigation of the Burslem and District Industrial Co-operative Society Ltd., carried out at Keele University will be included to illustrate certain points. Such results refer only to that retail society.

THE CO-OPERATIVE ACTIVIST

The co-operators who personally participate in the democratic institutions of their retail societies are clearly individuals important to co-operative democracy. Among their number are committee members, directors, delegates to regional and national bodies, and the leading enthusiasts of the auxiliaries. They also provide co-operative representation, either formally or informally, in many other social institutions. Two principal aspects of these phenomena are important. Firstly, participation in co-operative democratic institutions begins for some activists a process of socialization. As participants, new activists are in situations where new ideas legitimate new patterns of action. It is into these values and institutions that the activist becomes socialized. Secondly, continued active participation can be analysed partly in terms of how the member views society as a whole, his own position in it, and the evaluation he gives each. In other words, participation is to be taken to serve some function in the activist's life as a whole. This function may be uncomplicated, such as that of providing opportunities for social contact. Alternatively, it may be an expression of the interaction of social ideals and changing or static social position and relationships.

These two aspects clearly may interact. The latter may variously reinforce different stages of the former, or the progress of the former may produce changes in the latter.

SOCIALIZATION

The process of socialization can be divided schematically into three aspects: recruitment, ideology, and institutional. The latter two are concurrent aspects of all activist behaviour: the first is a special part of both. For socialization recruitment is necessary. This implies that new activists attend sufficient co-operative functions to become fairly well acquainted with co-operative ideals and practice. Recruitment thus involves more than a simple visit to a guild or members' meeting. A single visit can have the same proximate cause as a visit intended to be the first of a series of experimental attendances: for example, the casual invitation of a friend. Recruitment so defined permits the new activist to acquaint himself with the principal aspects of a new organisational milieu. If socialization is to continue from this stage, then the new activist must have been persuaded that co-operation has something to offer him. It may often be the case that after a short period of participations, the activist reverts to being an ordinary member. In the study of the Burslem Society it was found that, among the activists at the time of the study two different patterns of attendance occurred. During the period 1960-1966 the Society held twenty-eight quarterly meetings. Two-fifths of the activists had attended at least three-quarters of these meetings. The remainder had all attended fewer than half, and most fewer than a third of the quarterly meetings. This grouping was not found to be associated with any factors likely to give it a special explanation. It seems probable that the Society successfully holds the interest of only a small proportion of those who ever attend its business meetings. A variety of causes for such reversion can be identified. Among them are the lack of developed ideas about the aim of co-operation, the lack of opportunity for the activist to immediately and directly

participate in important decisions and the often unattractive nature of members' business meetings. Many co-operators are aware of possible remedies.

CO-OPERATIVE IDEOLOGY

Co-operative ideology refers properly to the philosophy and basic legitimating values of the co-operative movement. No value judgement is implied. Co-operative ideology has several useful functions. It links the activist's personal situation and aims to an institution. It serves centrally in passing on a pattern of action to new recruits. It also offers the value of local co-operative auxiliary activity.

There are clear difficulties to the empirical investigation of co-operative ideology. In the Burslem Society study connections between the activist member and the society were examined so as to include an indication of the ideas and the knowledge of the society itself involved.

The indices chosen for the limited examination of co-operative knowledge, etc., among activists were the following. The type of reason given for joining their co-operative society, the number of board members known by name, degree of acquaintance with co-operative publications and knowledge of two basic problems facing the co-operative movement.

Reasons for joining their co-operative society could be conveniently grouped into four categories: references to family habit or parental example, specific mentioning of the dividend, financial advantage or commercial convenience, the employment of the respondent or a relative, and reference to the ideals, and principles of co-operation. The following table shows how the replies of three types of survey respondents fell into the various categories.

	<i>Family</i> per cent	<i>Trading</i> per cent	<i>Employment</i> per cent	<i>Principle</i> per cent	<i>D.K.</i> per cent
Activist Member	25	27½	22½	20	5
Guild Member	43	43	4	4	6
Ordinary Member	42½	41	5½	1	9

Table I: Reasons given for joining a retail co-operative society.

The extent to which these replies represent accurately the true reason for joining, or include subsequent colouration or learning is not clear. It probably varies between the groups of respondents.

Knowledge of board members and of problems facing the co-operative movement can be considered as evidence that activists are to a certain degree sufficiently informed to contribute to co-operative government. Such knowledge indicates the quality of the community of activist members around the society.

The activist members of the Burslem Society were found to be able to name on average 4—2 members of the board of directors.

The extent to which activists read co-operative publications was also investigated. *Platform* and *Co-operative News* were chosen. The *Sunday Citizen* was taken as a publication sympathetic to the co-operative movement, and consequently likely to carry a substantial amount of news about it.

	<i>per cent</i>
Readers of <i>Platform</i>	10
Readers of <i>Co-operative News</i>	80
Regular readers of <i>Co-operative News</i>	60
Readers of <i>Sunday Citizen</i>	30

Table II: Activist readership of co-operative publications

Activists were asked whether they knew the attitude of the Co-operative Union to the then recently imposed SET. Half the activists knew that the Co-operative Union opposed the imposition of SET.

The second question used to determine the economic knowledge and awareness of the respondents was a request for a reason for the changeover to self-service in retail outlets, ("This change is now a general trend in this country. Can you give me an explanation of why it is happening?").

If a respondent gave a reason which could be taken to be a 'structured' reply in an economic sense, then that respondent was considered 'informed'. Only a quarter of the activists gave acceptable replies.

It has been possible here only to briefly indicate empirical findings about the socialization with respect to recruitment and knowledge of the co-operative movement. However it would be of interest if the experience of co-operators elsewhere could be made available.

International Notes

W. P. WATKINS, J.P., B.A.

(Mr. W. P. Watkins, a President of the Society for Co-operative Studies, is a former Director of the International Co-operative Alliance. He will be reporting regularly on co-operative studies abroad)

A STUDY OF CO-OPERATIVE DEMOCRACY

France. It is, of course, no mere coincidence that the elder sister organisation of the Society for Co-operative Studies, the French Institute of Co-operative Studies, is also engaged on a study of democracy in the Co-operative Movement. The French Consumers' Co-operative Movement, although it is much further advanced in regional organisation than the British and although a number of its regional societies have long possessed internal representational structures based on a network of local "sections", enabling active members to play an effective role in their societies' administration, is well aware that the reality of democracy is not to be found in machinery and that the Co-operative Movement is alive just in so far as its democracy is effective and dynamic.

The Institute of Co-operative Studies has recently launched a research project under the direction of the chairman of its administrative board, Professor Georges Lasserre. In March a brain-storming session was held for which Professor Lasserre prepared a fascinating interrogative pre-report. This somewhat outlandish term is a literal translation of the French "Pré-rapport