

Member Participation in Retail Societies

PARTICIPATION AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

by

DR. R. HOULTON

(Chief Education Officer, Co-operative Union)

The debate within the Co-operative Movement about "apathy" and the level of participation is almost as old as the Movement itself. Calling it a "debate" is perhaps a misnomer, because rarely does anyone argue back. Neither is it an exclusive problem, for concern about levels of participation is shared by all organisations which incorporate a voluntary sector - trade unions, political parties, leisure groups, churches, etc.

Several aspects of the debate within Co-operative circles are striking, first, its inwardness and, secondly, its emphasis on diagnosis. This sometimes results in speeches of mind-numbing predictability in which vehemence is clearly preferred to rational analysis. Unfortunately, even the written contribution to this debate is affected by the need to diagnose what has happened and focuses on statistics and methodology to the exclusion of models and alternative perspectives and explanations. The literature also tends to ignore the changes which occur in similar organisations.

The purpose of this note is to shift the emphasis from diagnosis to prognosis by outlining the alternative ways in which the different social science disciplines might approach the "problem of participation". Effective prognosis depends on placing the diagnosis within the life-history of the organisation. So, imagine that

four social scientists are gathered in a case conference to discuss their patient's participation problems. They each deliver their assessment in turn. I should warn the unwary reader that the social sciences do not deal with certainties. They offer provisional conjectures which can be falsified.

### 1. The Economist

Colleagues, my discipline is often disparaged as the dismal science. This is perhaps because Economics is concerned with the allocation of scarce resources and most people adhere to the romantic notion that scarcity is but a transitional phase in the history of mankind. Economists have to explode this myth and are therefore unpopular. Scarcity applies to leisure time. Voluntary activity is an allocation of leisure time and I would expect it to be allocated or indulged in by any rational human being on the basis of the expected opportunity-costs (i.e., the "cost" of foregoing alternative pleasurable activities) being "traded off" in relation to the expected satisfactions involved in this activity.

The opportunity costs of voluntary activity are never static. As society changes and an individual's circumstances change, the galaxy of costs shifts. May I remind you that since the establishment of the Co-operative Movement in the middle of the 19th century, living standards, and hence the discretionary income for leisure activities, have tended to rise. For the population the marginal value of leisure-time has also risen with the development of the leisure and entertainment industry. Under these circumstances (all other things being equal) I would expect that voluntary activities which were

established in the 19th century and have remained fixed in time would have a marginal value which has suffered a decline relative to other activities and for this reason alone I would expect a decline in the level of participation.

### What Interest in Co-operative Participation?

This, gentlemen, indicates the general nature of the problem. Could I now turn to the voluntary activities themselves. It is clear that some of the most popular leisure-time activities are those which provide a hierarchy of challenges to the abilities of the participant - fishing, golf, bridge, chess, squash and even citizens band radio are cases in point. What challenge does attendance at a half-yearly meeting of a Co-operative Society offer a participant? Apart from the challenge of speaking at a public meeting or competing for office and election which, inevitably, will attract only a minority, there is little challenge and therefore little stimulus in this kind of activity.

Moreover, even the exercise of accountability, which should provide an element of drama and tension at Co-operative Society public meetings (quarterly and Annual General Meetings) cannot provide much of a stimulus because many of the areas of Board-level decision making are not amenable to public discussion and debate because they relate to trade-confidential, technical and legislative information. Given the complexity of contemporary decision-making at Board level, the increased predictability of business and agenda, and the decline of the social and economic importance of the dividend I would suggest that voluntary activity in the Co-operative Movement in public has become less interesting, less challenging and less rewarding. The gulf between

the satisfaction of the Board member and the ordinary member has widened, making Board members even more reluctant to return to the ordinary ranks of the membership. The gulf can widen to the point where meaningful accountability no longer takes place - and judging from recent history this point has been passed in many societies.

### The Prognosis?

Gentlemen, my prognosis for the trend of participation suggests a continued decline in attendance and participation in the formal business of Co-operative democracy. The cohort of participants who were "caught" in the procedural net of the Movement during the period of depressed living standards in the inter-war period is now moving off the stage. But the smaller number netted in the 1950's and '60's should match the fewer opportunities for service in the 1980's and '90's.

Could I caution anyone who hopes that increased unemployment will swell the ranks of Co-operative participants. Most of the unemployed "in transit" to another job focus their energies on "job-search". The leisure industry (which has a public and a private sector) is much more fiercely competitive than it was in the 1930's so the opportunity-cost of attending Co-operative meetings will remain high. Of course, I have not considered the possibility of substantial innovation in the form and content of Co-operative participation. Clearly, attempts to increase the entertainment value of meetings and increased publicity would increase attendance but this would be merely an upward "blip" on a long-term downward secular trend.

## 2. The Anthropologist

Friends, you are aware that Anthropology began with a concern for the study and understanding of "other" cultures and societies, many of which were classified initially as "primitive". Since the days when we adopted the concerns of missionaries and colonialists we have developed a measure of humility and have been able to demonstrate to the other social sciences that "primitive" societies can be as complex, sophisticated and logical as our own societies. Anthropology is concerned about the way in which people order their lives, the rituals and demarcations which make up their social reality. We also examine the way that people borrow and adopt the conventions of other groups, the way that they persist through time and the way that the themes are used by the participants in relation to roles and role aspirations.

The participation "ritual and incantation" was imported into the Co-operative Movement from the populist dissenting religious groups and became part of the "Guild" tradition. (1) The Guilds probably benefited from the increased secularisation of society in the first half of the twentieth century but, having failed to change their organisation and content, have followed their progenitors, the Churches, into decline.

### The Elements of the Ritual

The incantation of the participation-decline ritual as performed by a skilled bel cantor in public will seek recognition and affirmation of a series of observations:-

- a) the traditions of voluntarism;

- b) the many sacrifices (opportunity costs?) which voluntarism involves;
- c) the sacrificial role is the prerogative of the "few";
- d) an equivalent sacrifice by the "many" would usher in the millenium;
- e) the "many" would opt for the millenium if they "knew";
- f) forces hostile to the millenium, to the "many", to the "few", and to voluntarism are preventing the diffusion of this vital knowledge;
- g) the agents of the hostile forces may be within the ranks and can be identified by their lack of commitment to voluntarism and unwillingness to make real sacrifices.

The attraction of this ritual is that it is circular, repetitive and can be invoked under almost any circumstance. Being a ritual it is, by definition, legitimate. One of the conventions of ritual is that too many specifics can frustrate the ultimate aim which is to increase solidarity. Depending on the role and perceptions of the different members of the congregation the "hostile forces" can equally be imagined as being officials, employees, members of a political party or persuasion, auxiliaries, the Co-operative Wholesale Society or the Co-operative Union. Sacrifices can be cancelled out by the payment of expenses, wages, salaries, tea and cakes or other fruits of office.

The conferences of the Auxiliaries might be expected to have a sharper and harsher incantation

than, say, the Co-operative Congress as the Auxiliaries' relationship stands as incorporated dissenters within the Established Church of the Movement. Given their dissenting tradition it is natural that the lay congregation are suspicious and prepared to be hostile to the priesthood of officials should the occasion arise.

The incantation is, of course, weakened by the decline of belief in the millenium (or salvation) and a decline in the practice of ritual incantation in society. Being a ritual it does not seek engagement with reality. Indeed, there are grounds for suspecting that the incantation-ritual is a substitute for action and thus may contribute to the decline in participation and membership.

### The Prognosis

So, friends, I conclude my examination by suggesting that the participation incantation is part of the traditional culture of the Co-operative Movement. It is easily learned by those who would seek election to office and easily invoked by those who depart from office. However, with the passage of time and the decline of the auxiliaries it will probably be less frequently but more effectively invoked. There is a possibility that, in future years, it will be displaced by another ritual which is being extensively developed in the trade unions and the Labour Party - namely, the confrontation and alienation ritual. This ritual with its verbal flagellation and authority-humiliation practices scores high in dramatic and entertainment potential and is guaranteed to convince departing delegates that their journey was really necessary.













