

# Pleasure, Politics and Co-operative Youth: the interwar Co-operative Comrades' Circles

Selina Todd

In 1936 *The People's Yearbook*, produced annually by the UK Co-operative Wholesale Society, declared that, 'there is now definitely a section which comprises the Woodcraft Folk and the Circle movement, which might be termed the Youth Section of the co-operative movement'.<sup>1</sup> The Woodcraft Folk, established outside the British co-operative movement as a pacifist break away from Scouting, in 1926, has survived until the present day and is the subject of interesting, although far from numerous historical studies.<sup>2</sup> Yet the 'Comrades' Circles' referred to, established in 1922 as the British co-operative movement's own, original youth organisation, have received no more than a passing mention by historians of British youth movements or co-operation.

Part of the reason for this neglect is undoubtedly the Circle movement's short lifespan and small size. A resolution passed at the 1909 Co-operative Congress urged co-operative societies to develop young peoples' circles, but was heeded by few societies and aroused little interest at senior levels of the co-operative movement until the end of the First World War. Attempts were then made to co-ordinate and expand youth provision. In 1922 the various local co-operative youth groups in existence across Britain were termed 'Comrades' Circles', and aimed at the fifteen to twenty-five age range. Two years later the British Federation of Co-operative Youth (BFCY) was founded by young members, or 'Circleites' themselves, as a national body with the purpose of organising and co-ordinating Circle activity. Despite the enthusiasm of both co-operators and young participants, in 1937, the last year for which membership figures are available, Comrades' Circles possessed just 8,000 members. Britain's largest youth organisations, the Boy Scouts, the Girl Guides and the Boys' Brigade, could boast memberships of 448,396, 581,000 and 111,442 respectively.<sup>3</sup> In 1941 the Co-operative Union's Educational Executive closed down the BFCY in its original form, thus winding up the British

co-operative movement's first youth organisation.

While historians' neglect of the Comrades' Circles is partially explained by the youth movement's character, it is also symptomatic of a generally dismissive attitude towards the labour movement's relationship to leisure provision in interwar Britain. Social historians have in recent years begun to explore the previously neglected terrain of interwar leisure, but the continued success of many forms of left wing leisure provisions, such as the Workers' Educational Association, and the emergence of new ones during the interwar period remains largely undocumented. Yet, as Gurney's study of the co-operative movement suggests, it continued to make a significant contribution to the cultural and educational life of its members during this period, creating and maintaining a sense of community which embodied alternative political, social and economic values to those espoused by wider society.<sup>4</sup>

This paper is divided into four sections. The first outlines co-operators' reasons for establishing a specifically co-operative youth organisation, through a survey of the interwar British co-operative movement, and the wider contemporary concern over working class young people's leisure activities. The writings of co-operators at senior and local level are then scrutinised to identify the ideals and purpose that they envisaged for the Circle movement. Section three suggests reasons why young people chose to join a specifically co-operative youth organisation. Finally, the movement's decline is analysed in the context of social, economic and international developments and the co-operative movement's changing attitude to its political role.

### **Reasons for development of a co-operative youth movement**

The British co-operative movement was in a favourable position in the immediate post war period. By 1918 it boasted four million members, a rise of 30 per cent on the 1914 figure.<sup>5</sup> The movement benefited from the increased popularity and expansion of labour organisations following the Russian revolution and the armistice, with many trade unions and Labour controlled local authorities depositing funds with the Co-operative Wholesale Society's bank. Amalgamations of smaller co-operative societies, and the relatively weak trading position of multiple retailers like Marks

& Spencer and Lewis's following the war, meant that co-operative department stores were setting a popular trend, and in smaller centres had little competition. Co-operative membership increased most in the midlands and the south of England - the centres of economic development - and thus co-operation attracted a new generation of workers in prospering industries throughout the interwar period. As P. Maguire has commented, 'this was no miniscule sect which could be dismissed as eccentric and unrepresentative'.<sup>6</sup>

Despite good reasons for optimism, co-operators perceived a need to develop new forms of cultural provision to attract a loyal membership. Large, amalgamated societies could become anonymous, with individual members counting for less than in smaller, localised concerns. A low price policy in some stores necessitated a low dividend - attractive to casual customers but not to a loyal membership. Meanwhile, those northern strongholds of co-operation which depended on the loyal member were hard hit by economic depression in the early 1920s and again in the later 1920s and 1930s.<sup>7</sup> Hopes that the 'Co-operative Commonwealth' was realisable were increasingly tempered, then, by worries that 'hundreds, perhaps thousands of new members are being added without any indication of the social importance of their new duty being imposed upon them'.<sup>8</sup>

Co-operative training for the young had been viewed as essential to the movement's future since the late nineteenth century. The initiative came from the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG), which began to provide children's classes in the 1880s. By 1918 several co-operative societies had begun to tailor educational and leisure provision to this age group: the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society (RACS) was home to the first Young People's Circle, established in 1907, which combined formal academic work with recreational and vocational pursuits.<sup>9</sup> A year later the National Co-operative Publishing Society launched *Our Circle*, a national magazine for children and young people.

The main reason for the apparent increase in co-operators' concern over provision for young people following the First World War was the social and economic changes in leisure and employment being experienced by this age group. The abundance of casual labour for young workers was coupled with a decline in long term job security and male apprenticeships.<sup>18</sup> The younger

generation was not, then, becoming a skilled workforce, a trend which threatened to diminish the traditional constituency of both trade unions and the co-operative movement. The insecurity of their employment meant that young workers were in a weak bargaining position, and were unlikely to be impressed by the long term benefits of trade union membership or co-operation. A Mass Observation study of Bolton Co-operative Society concluded that under 25 year olds, a very small percentage of the Society's membership, were unlikely to be attracted by the 'divi', since they had little domestic responsibility and were more interested in leisure activities than in saving.<sup>11</sup>

The effects of commercialised leisure on the co-operative movement were also noted with concern. As recent research has demonstrated, working class youth generally had enough 'spends' to take full advantage of commercialised leisure.<sup>12</sup> Leisure entrepreneurs were now beginning to aim services at this group; the number of British cinemas increased from 3,000 in 1926 to 5,000 in 1939, while 1,100 dance halls were opened between 1918 and 1925.<sup>13</sup> Young workers were thus unlikely to turn to co-operative social activities simply due to a lack of alternatives. The conviction that consumption could be a site of class solidarity and identity, which had been influential in dictating the form of the British co-operative movement, was shaken by such developments.

Co-operators shared with other sections of the British labour movement the conviction that failure to provide political and social education for the young would not only jeopardise the future of working class social and political association but also possibly democracy itself. As the Trades Union Congress' General Council warned in 1936, 'A generation of voters who have been taught to seek a 'kick' in everything they do ... are ... liable to be swayed by slogans, by mass hysteria'.<sup>14</sup> The fragility of European democracy in the early 1920s and the 1930s suggested that a generation of independent minded young people would be needed to defend civil liberties. Co-operators therefore sought to provide an attractive and distinctively co-operative form of youth provision.

### **Conflicting purposes**

Right from the launch of Comrades' Circles in 1922, a clear

division emerged between many senior co-operators and a number of co-operative educationalists at local level over the proper purpose of a co-operative youth movement. Senior co-operators primarily intended to train a vanguard of future co-operative officials. The structure of Circles, with their weekly meetings and elected officials, deliberately reflected the practices of co-operative committees, signifying an attempt to teach Circleites 'the art of self-government and the meaning and application of democracy'.<sup>15</sup> Junior examinations, introduced by the Co-operative Union at the turn of the century continued to be offered, made up of questions such as 'what is surplus value?', and, 'describe how you would form a Co-operative Society'.<sup>16</sup> While wishing to introduce working class young people to new intellectual and cultural spheres, senior co-operators primarily intended the Circle movement to offer an introduction to co-operative business practices.

At lower levels of the movement less pragmatic considerations guided educationalists. The co-operative movement attracted young, idealistic activists who believed that the Circle movement should provide an ethical, co-operative education. Walter and Clara Davies, the founders of the first Young People's Circle in 1907, were a young couple with a history of involvement in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the WCG. Joseph Reeves, elected educational secretary of the RACS in 1918 was a 30 year old ILP member. Well known for his participation in British co-operative cultural and educational projects, his influential role in the Circle movement has been neglected by many later researchers. The title of one of his numerous educational publications, *Education for Social Change*, reflects his view that the creation of a working class culture, combining 'originality with a discriminating selection of the best in bourgeois society' could bring about the defeat of capitalism.<sup>17</sup> Other young, charismatic educationalists shared with Reeves the belief that, 'the dynamic of education must be altered from individual assertiveness to service on behalf of the community'.<sup>18</sup> For them, the youth movement was a means of inspiring social change through the celebration of a socialist, co-operative culture.

This division between senior and local co-operators was by no means entirely clear-cut. The Co-operative Union's Central Education Committee (CEC) agreed with Reeves and other

educationalists that the Circle programme should be shaped largely around cultural and sporting activities. As well as organising hiking, camping and sports, Circles sent delegates to annual summer schools for children and young people organised under the auspices of the Co-operative Union. Such activities were clearly encouraged because of their appeal to potential members; like the Scouts, the co-operative youth movement attracted young people who could not otherwise spend cheap weekends in the countryside. Yet co-operators were clear that their educational theory differed markedly from that of the Scouts, and co-operation rather than competition characterised activities. At a 1922 co-operative education conference Reeves emphasised his belief that the Circle programme provided 'new methods for the teaching of social problems'.<sup>19</sup> It was hoped by many adult co-operators involved in educational work at senior and grassroots level that Circle life would create 'an experiment in co-operation, providing opportunities for the development of the virtues ... essential to the success of all co-operative endeavours'.<sup>28</sup>

The Circle movement's study and debating programme was distinctive in its commitment to pacifism and internationalism. Esperanto lessons, penfriend schemes and articles on Europe's political situation featured in the pages of *Our Circle*, and *Co-operative Youth*.<sup>21</sup> As the 1930s progressed, BFCY members participated in international camps and schools with other young co-operators. These meetings developed participants' awareness of the growing international crisis; members of the German and Austrian co-operative youth movements risked much to attend the conferences as late as 1937.<sup>22</sup> Such activity reflected the co-operative movement's long held wish to create an international co-operative commonwealth, and a widespread desire, prompted by the First World War and articulated particularly by the WCG, to prevent future conflict through education.<sup>23</sup>

Given that debate over the form that the 'Co-operative Commonwealth' should take can still generate much passion as the movement reaches the millennium, it is interesting to note the interpretations of this elusive utopia that young co-operators in interwar Britain constructed. Textbooks for young co-operators cited Morris' *News from Nowhere* as presenting the desired society, and the legacy of romantic socialist thought was evident in

contributions published in the co-operative youth press. One Circleite wrote of a co-operative commonwealth highly reminiscent of 'Nowhere': a garden city in which poverty is unknown; Esperanto is spoken and generosity and co-operation are the social values most highly esteemed.<sup>24</sup> Circleites' imaginations were fired by the same principles that had influenced nineteenth century romantic socialism: that social change, through the conversion of individuals rather than economic reform via the state, was the best means of securing a co-operative future.

Two central weaknesses dogged the Circle movement, as a result of conflicting and at times ambiguous visions held by adult co-operative educationalists. The question of whether the youth movement was to provide a vocational training for future co-operative officials, or whether it was to broaden the cultural horizons of working class youth and possibly enact wider social change was never resolved. The philosophy of Reeves et al, while stimulating imaginative youth provision, contained a fundamental flaw, in failing to address the question of agency. Exactly how creating visions of the co-operative commonwealth was to initiate the overthrow of capitalism remained an unanswered question. These potential conflicts were to erupt in the later years of the Circle movement, but before turning to that period, it is important to establish who the members of this youth organisation were, and to examine their own interpretations of the Circles' aims.

## **Aims of the Circle movement**

The membership of the co-operative Comrades' circles was predominantly working class, with a fairly even division of gender and age. Linda McCullough Thew's autobiographical account of her childhood in 1930s Ashington, and testimony from former members of Brighton's co-operative children's groups, suggest that working class children represented the bulk of Circle membership. Mr E. Cooper remembers being recruited into a co-operative children's group by an active co-operator who lived in the same working class neighbourhood as his family.<sup>25</sup> Potted biographies of senior members of the BFCY, which appeared in *Our Circle* and *Co-operative Youth*, the BFCY

newspaper launched by the National Co-operative Publishing Society in 1932, and accounts from participants in the co-operative adolescent summer school, also suggest that Circleites were drawn from working class families, received a state education and frequently began work at the age of 14.<sup>26</sup> The majority of Circleites, then, were young workers and would usually have some knowledge of co-operation through the experiences of older family members.

Young women made up a large section of the BFCY's membership, constituting the majority of its fifteen to eighteen year old members, and slightly under half of the 18 to 25 year age group.<sup>27</sup> They were present at the more senior levels of the movement, serving as Circle officials and on the BFCY's National Executive, although in far smaller numbers than young men. The involvement of young women in the co-operative youth movement suggests that, in contrast to established girls' organisations such as Guiding, they welcomed the chance to escape domesticity rather than embrace it, and were interested in outdoor pursuits and political debate. The co-educational nature of Comrades' Circles probably encouraged both girls and boys; Fowler found that during the 1930s those youth clubs and societies which fared best were those which initiated co-educational activities.<sup>28</sup> The popularity of the Circle movement among young women was probably due in part to the influence of the WCG. Many of the co-operators who were influential in the youth movement's development, such as Clara Davies and Julia Carling, were members of the WCG, and it organised a number of conferences and workshops regarding co-operative youth education: Gill Scott's recently published study of the Guild highlights its influence in all co-operative educational endeavours.<sup>29</sup> The co-operative youth press noted frequent appearances by WCG speakers at Circle meetings and events, and since many Circleites would have had mothers who were active WCG members it is likely the Guild directly influenced the membership of the circle movement.

Circles' reports in the press show that women's rights formed the subject of numerous Circle debates, ranging from light hearted discussions on such questions as, 'Should Girls Have Bobbed Hair?' (Bolton Comrades' Circle, 1925)<sup>30</sup>, to debates over equal pay during the 1930s. The apparent frivolity of some of these

subjects should not detract from their significance. Appearance and style were important in the debate over how far young women should be 'protected' within the domestic sphere. This debate often (thinly) disguised moral anxiety over the behaviour of young women, as articulated by Lady Baden-Powell, wife of the Scout movement's founder, who warned that 'familiarity with freedom is apt to make a girl blasee'.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike the Guiding movement with which she was associated, the co-operative youth movement was not inspired by a conservative reaction to young women's social lives. However, such debate at local level was not reflected at national BFCY conferences; no resolutions dealing with gender equality were ever debated. Women's issues were viewed as part of a wider agenda for social and political change, and were frequently fairly low down that agenda.

The Circle movement steadily increased its membership between 1922 and 1936, the number of Circles rising from 100 in 1923 to 215 in 1936. There were consistently great disparities between sections, however. The southern section which boasted 78 Circles by 1936, accounted for much of the membership increase during the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>32</sup> The nature of local co-operative societies was undoubtedly the most important factor on Circles' development. An academic survey of the co-operative movement conducted in 1938 found that smaller societies - and in 1938 30 per cent of co-operative societies had less than 1,000 members - could be introspective, concerned more with the traditional membership and profit making than expanding social provision.<sup>33</sup> The Circle movement was never a truly national organisation, mainly because of this conservatism.

The pattern of Circle membership demonstrates that imagination and innovation at both local and national level were essential for the youth organisation's success. The greatest increase in Circle membership occurred between 1928 and 1932, with the number of Circles increasing from 53 to 156. This was undoubtedly due in part to the support of the Co-operative Union, which clearly felt that the Federation was now developing along approved lines. Financial assistance continued, the CEC receiving permission from the Co-operative Union to double its grant to the Federation to £50 per annum in 1930. Two years later, the national Co-operative Publishing Society launched the

monthly *Co-operative Youth*. The BFCY began to produce pamphlets for members and co-operative societies' education committees, while the increased grant aided the establishment of the much desired annual conference. Support from national level offered security and optimism to the Circle movement.

The pattern of Circle membership also suggests that young people's economic and social situation influenced their decision to join a specifically co-operative youth movement. It was in the north west and south east regions of England that young people were most likely to enjoy a relatively generous disposable income, and it was here that the youth movement's expansion was greatest. While young workers might suffer short term unemployment in these regions, the material and psychological effects of this were much less traumatic than those caused by long term unemployment.<sup>34</sup> On mainland Europe long periods without paid work caused widespread disaffection among young people with time on their hands and little hope in the political system. The experience of young Britons was on the whole distinctly better, as both left and right wing movements discovered to their cost. The Circle movement relied largely on young workers who, while possibly dissatisfied with their own political and economic status, had enough faith to work for reform within the existing political and economic system, and enough 'spends' to enjoy the full range of Circle activities.

What were the distinct attractions of the Circle movement for these young workers? The foundation of the BFCY by Circleites in 1925 provides some indication of their views on politics and co-operation. The Federation committed itself to engaging adolescents' interest in the co-operative movement and 'to promote co-operation and education in all its phases'.<sup>35</sup> Its ranks were open '... to all young workers irrespective of religious or political opinion', suggesting that the BFCY was keen to follow the co-operative movement's lead, committed to the promotion of education and culture rather than waging class conflict.<sup>36</sup> This was further demonstrated at the first BFCY Conference in 1932, when proposals to affiliate to sporting and recreational associations run by trade unions or the Communist Party were defeated by a large majority of delegates who protested that sport should not become 'political'. Affiliation to the Youth Hostelling Association was, however, passed unanimously.<sup>37</sup> The

BFCY clearly hoped to be a loyal but influential organ of the co-operative movement, primarily concerned with educational and social provision but also with the representation of young people's concerns both within the movement and in wider society.

### **Obstacles to continued growth**

As the interwar years progressed, the co-operative movement faced new obstacles. Economic depression hit its heartlands badly, and competition from multiple retailers increased. While in 1914, the movement and the multiples had each controlled about 7 per cent of total retail trade, by 1940 the co-operative movement's share had risen to only 11 per cent, while the multiples controlled 18 per cent.<sup>38</sup> The political influence granted by this discrepancy was evident: the National Government's imposition of taxation on co-operative reserves in 1933 was attributable to a sustained campaign by the multiples and the press. Co-operation had begun in the age of the small storekeeper; many co-operators wondered if it could survive the development of monopoly capitalism.

The political relevance of, and influence provided by, co-operative cultural and educational provision appeared increasingly questionable as recession hit Britain in 1929 and the early 1930s. While co-operators' priorities frequently paralleled those of the wider British labour movement, divisions could appear under the stress of economic crisis. This was demonstrated in 1925 when a wage dispute divided senior co-operators from trade unionists; a year later, co-operative employees were called out in the General Strike. The Labour Party and trades unions were increasingly occupied with the procedures of parliamentary politics and the location of the state in the provision of social welfare. Influencing the state through inclusion in the corporatist agenda, rather than creating working class self help initiatives increasingly characterised the actions of the Labour Party and trades unions, and both co-operators and those in the wider labour movement were unclear about the co-operative movement's role in this changing political and economic context.

By the early 1930s, questions about the relevance of co-operative educational provision were being asked at senior

levels of the movement, and within the Circle movement itself. The BFCY's 1932 Conference highlighted a growing division between the Executive which clearly saw the Federation as 'primarily a co-operative educational body',<sup>39</sup> and idealistic recruits who, in the months following the conference, criticised the Executive for avoiding the formulation of national policy opposing fascism and capitalism.<sup>40</sup> A significant number of Circleites clearly felt disillusioned that a more 'political' response to the economic and international crises of the period was not forthcoming. As in the wider co-operative movement, a growing number of Circleites were increasingly convinced that economic and political instability demanded a response more direct than the creation of an alternative community and the encouragement of working class self education. Scott's study of the WCG demonstrates that in the years leading up to the Second World War, co-operative auxiliary bodies opposed the Co-operative Union's attempt to limit their autonomy, particularly in the political arena. In a similar manner to Guildswomen - probably largely due to their influence - Circleites became involved in pacifist campaigns during the 1930s; in 1932 many took part in Remembrance Day ceremonies organised by the WCG. In the later 1930s, the co-operative movement aided Republican Spain with donations of food and help for Spanish refugees; Circles across the country participated in this. At the 1936 BFCY conference, all but three of the resolutions were concerned with politics. The Federation was urged by delegates to campaign against war and unemployment, for expanded social welfare and for the concerns of young workers.<sup>41</sup> Increasingly, a large section of the Circle movement was acting as if it were an organisation for political activists, conflicting with the original aims of both senior co-operators and more idealistic educationalists.

In 1935, a strategy to reform co-operative organisation and double membership and trade was introduced by the co-operative movement's leadership in the form of a Ten Year Plan. This aimed to co-ordinate all aspects of the movement's work at local, regional and national level, and included a number of educational aims and objectives which had important consequences for youth provision. By 1936 a youth section, led by a full time youth organiser, J.L. Willson, was established at Holyoake House.

Willson's main priority was to replace the BFCY with a new National Co-operative Youth Organisation, control of which would rest in the hands of the Co-operative Union's Educational Council. This was clearly a move to limit the autonomy of the Circle movement and reduce the influence of unconventional educationalists like Reeves. For Willson and his colleagues, politics and education were strictly separate entities, and the youth movement was to be solely educational. The evolution of a political programme by and for young people was not on their agenda.

Combined with this suspicion of the Comrades' Circles was a marked reluctance to offer commitment and support to the youth movement, both by the Co-operative Union and by many local societies. Economic constraint was given as an explanation for the Co-operative Union's grant to the BFCY remaining at £50 throughout the 1930s, and for the delay in establishing a juvenile department. There was some truth in this justification, but the co-operative movement's problems were not crippling handicaps; it continued to expand throughout the 1930s. Cultural and educational projects, particularly for young people who were not even eligible for co-operative membership, were not high on the priorities of the co-operators at national or local level. In 1936, Reeves commented in exasperation that many smaller societies' education committees lacked funds and support, and concentrated too much time and money on propaganda, in the form of fetes and teas.<sup>42</sup> This lack of interest in education, and youth provision in particular, implied that co-operative educational provision was outdated; that concentration on trading and politics was of paramount importance.

Among co-operative activists, there was a growing feeling that co-operative youth work in its existing form had failed. Reeves' 1936 pamphlet *Education for Social Change* recognised that co-operative youth provision had lost sight of its original aims. Many Circles were indistinguishable from youth clubs and had no desire to participate actively in co-operation or the wider labour movement, while those that did wish to do so were restricted by their parent body. In 1937, the secretary of Bristol Comrades' Circle noted that many members were leaving to join other organisations 'to which they feel more suited in these difficult times'.<sup>43</sup> Were these organisations which embraced political participation, such as the Young Communist League?

Did they attract members through advocating imaginative responses to the increasing turmoil in Europe, which must have contrasted sharply with the British co-operative movement's reluctance to actively encourage anti-fascism, or any other 'political' creed? It is clear that by this period, the BFCY had lost the ability to attract politically motivated young people, or to enthuse more politically disaffected members with a passion for co-operation or socialism.

The distinctive nature of the co-operative youth movement was diluted, as an emphasis on providing popular, professional and non-political youth provision replaced faith in the value of training young co-operators. The British Federation of Young Co-operators (BFYC), formed from the BFCY in 1941 as an organisation for older teenagers and young adults, had a short, bleak history. It was abandoned in the early 1960s, due to little popular interest in the co-operative movement, a lack of consistent support from local societies, and apathy at national level. Engagement with the state, rather than the training of a new generation, increasingly appeared to hold the key to a co-operative future - or at least a future in which the co-operative movement survived.

Ethel Smythe, a senior member of the BFYC, suggested in the late 1940s that:

in the pre-war years it was not the method of education and organisation that was wrong, but the lack of willingness on the part of the [Co-operative] Movement ... to give full support ... to the work being done.<sup>44</sup>

While the external challenges faced by the British co-operative movement during the 1930s explain some of the 'lack of willingness' they were not the cause of the Circle movement's demise. Despite problems, Circle membership increased during the 1930s and had reached 8,000 by 1937. While much smaller than the major youth movements, its demise was not inevitable: in its final years it still enjoyed 3,000 more members than the Woodcraft Folk, which, unfettered by an unimaginative parent body, has survived to the present day. Unfortunately, behind the rhetoric citing youth as the future of the British co-operative movement lay a moral anxiety about the

activities and outlook of working class young people; a certain puritanical approach to working class leisure and perhaps particularly youth culture. A feature in *Co-operative News* reflected this attitude when it noted with grudging resignation that young people 'may make a nuisance of themselves now and then; but - they are the future'.<sup>45</sup> Such ambivalence provided insufficient support for a youth movement faced with the turbulence of the Second World War and its aftermath.

## Assessment

While the political and social climate in 1930s Britain may not have been conducive to fundamental social and economic popular reform, attempts to create pockets of alternative culture continued, and co-operators' role in this should be treated as significant. Such efforts can challenge society's dominant ideology, even if the historical moment in which they are located does not allow them to overturn it. The silence over just how working class young people could become a force for social change does not negate the fact that the co-operative youth movement offered a more hopeful and positive conception of this group than many other sources. Comrades' Circles hinted that the warnings and worries of social commentators, and the complacent belief of leisure entrepreneurs that working class youth was an essentially passive, pliable group, who would believe whatever was served up in cinemas and magazines, might be a patronising misconception of young people's judgement and potential.

The Circle movement's short-lived success suggests that the co-operative movement was potentially capable of addressing the peculiar problems of British youth, a group included in social progress as consumers but suffering political disaffection due to their lack of economic and political influence. The way in which the more enthusiastic co-operative educationalists responded to this challenge may provide a precedent for current attempts to include young people in the co-operative community, and inform our response to political disaffection in a consumer society.

**Selina Todd is about to begin a DPhil at the University of Sussex, on the Labour Movement's role in educating young people for citizenship in interwar Britain.**

## Notes

- 1 *People's Yearbook*, 1936, p66.
- 2 D Prynne, 'The Woodcraft Folk and the Labour Movement, 1925-1970', *Journal of Contemporary History* 18 (1983), pp79-96, is the most extensive account of the Folk's history.
- 3 British Federation of Co-operative Youth and Woodcraft Folk, *Does Co-operation Want Youth?*, BFCY, 1937, p2.
- 4 P Gurney, 1996, pp29-143.
- 5 B Lancaster and P Maguire (Eds), *Towards the Co-operative Commonwealth*, History Workshop Trust, Manchester, 1996, p10.
- 6 Maguire, in Lancaster and Maguire, 1996, p193; see also Gurney, 1996, p219.
- 7 A Bonner, *British Co-operation*, Co-operative Union Ltd, 1961, p163.
- 8 *Co-operative Congress Report*, 1924, p56.
- 9 J Atfield, *With Light of Knowledge: A Hundred Years of Education in the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society*, Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society and the Journeyman Press, 1981, p104.
- 10 J Stevenson and C Cook, *Britain in the Depression: society and politics, 1929-39*, Longman, 1994, p68.
- 11 Mass Observation Archive, Worktown Collection, Box 32D, MS entitled 'The Co-operative Movement in Worktown', p3.
- 12 Davies, 1992, pp90-112, Fowler, 1995, pp93-116.
- 13 D Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: women between the wars 1918-1939*, Pandora, 1989, pp115, 118 and 129.
- 14 TUC General Council, 'Memorandum on the Organisation of Young Persons', 1936, p4.
- 15 *People's Yearbook*, 1936, p66.
- 16 Atfield, 1981, p104.
- 17 *Ibid*, p43.
- 18 *Ibid*, p43.
- 19 *Co-operative Congress Report*, 1922, p157.
- 20 *People's Year Book*, 1926, p47.
- 21 See, for example, *Our Circle*, February 1925, p107.
- 22 *British Federation of Co-operative Youth Annual Report*, 1938, p14.
- 23 *Co-operative News*, 27 April 1924, p12.
- 24 *Our Circle*, January 1925, p58.
- 25 E Cooper, interviewed by the author, Brighton, 12 July, 1998.
- 26 *Co-operative Youth*, March, April and September 1931, and Co-operative Union Education Department, 'Particulars of Applicants for the Position of Organiser for Co-operative Youth'.
- 27 *BFCY Annual Report*, 1938, p11.
- 28 Fowler, 1995, p112.
- 29 G Scott, *Feminism and the politics of working women: the Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War*, UCL Press, London, 1998.
- 30 *Our circle*, February 1925, p111.

- 31 O Baden-Powell (1917), quoted in C Dyhouse, *Girls growing up in late Victorian and Edwardian England*, Routledge, London, 1981, p114.
- 32 *BFCY Annual Report*, 1936, p5.
- 33 A M Carr Saunders et al, *Consumers' Co-operation in Great Britain*, Allen and Unwir. Ltd, London, 1938, p489.
- 34 J Burnett, *Idle Hands: The Experience of Unemployment, 1790-1990*, Routledge, London, pp213-265.
- 35 BFCY, *BFCY Handbook*, BFCY, 1934, p14.
- 36 Baggelely, E, Secretary of Manchester and District Co-operative Comrades' Circles, letter in *Co-operative Youth*, September 1935, p14.
- 37 *Co-operative Youth*, April 1932, p13.
- 38 *Ibid*, p232.
- 39 M Price, 'The Comrades' Circle Movement', *Co-operative Youth*, July 1931, p6.
- 48 *Co-operative Youth*, May 1932, p15.
- 41 *BFCY Conference Agenda*, 1936.
- 42 J Reeves, *Education for Social Change*, Co-operative Union, 1936, p24.
- 43 *Co-operative Youth*, May 1937, p10.
- 44 Smythe, *History of the BFYC*, BFYC, c1948, p2.
- 45 *Co-operative News*, 2 April 1936.