

ROBERTSON, NICOLE. *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914–1960. Minding Their Own Business.* [Studies in Labour History.] Ashgate, Farnham 2010. 251 pp. Ill. £55.00; doi:10.1017/S002085901200003X

Despite its undoubted size and influence it is probably fair to say that, until recently at least, the cooperative movement has received less attention from historians than the labour movement. This now seems to be changing. A number of important stock-taking collections have appeared recently and new research projects are now underway.¹ Much of this recent work has been influenced by new perspectives on the history of consumption and consumerism. During the 1990s, influential studies by Peter Gurney and Ellen Furlough among others demonstrated the need to consider consumer cooperation on its own terms, as a movement challenging the dominant capitalist mode of consumption.²

Nicole Robertson's study of the British consumer cooperative movement is influenced by this consumerist perspective on cooperative history, and, like most recent studies of British cooperation, acknowledges its debt to Gurney in particular. Robertson presents a detailed study of various aspects of cooperative ideology and practice during the period 1914–1960, organized around three themes: cooperation's contribution to economic and recreational life; cooperation and consumer protection; and cooperation as part of the wider labour movement.

The study combines an examination of the published sources of the national cooperative movement with records from eight local cooperative societies in England, Scotland and Wales. These varied enormously in size, ranging from the tiny Ewloe Place Cooperative Society in Flintshire, which had barely 300 members during the 1920s, to the very large urban societies of London and Birmingham. The ambition is not to present a systematic comparison of the eight societies but rather "a national study with a local dimension" (p. 14) which allows for an exploration of the interactions between local and national levels and considers the cooperative movement in the context of the communities that it served. As Robertson points out in her introduction, most local studies of cooperation have been concentrated on the north of England so her choice of local societies also helps to broaden this perspective.

Not surprisingly, the story Robertson constructs from these sources is above all one of diversity. As she reminds us, local cooperative retail societies in Britain retained considerable autonomy for most of the twentieth century and this meant that their activities and outlook varied enormously. For example, arrangements for the provision of sports and recreational activities for employees and members were very different, as was the

1. For example, Nikola Balnave and Greg Patmore (eds), "The Politics of Consumption and Cooperation", *Labour History*, 91 (2006), pp. 1–77; Ian MacPherson and Erin McLaughlin-Jenkins (eds), *Integrating Diversities within a Complex Heritage: Essays in the Field of Cooperative Studies* (Victoria, 2008); Lawrence Black and Nicole Robertson (eds), *Consumerism and the Cooperative Movement in Modern British History: Taking Stock* (Manchester, 2009); David Stewart et al. (eds), *The Hidden Alternative: Cooperative Values Past, Present and Future* (Manchester, 2012).

2. Ellen Furlough, *Consumer Cooperation in France: The Politics of Consumption 1834–1930* (Ithaca, NY, 1991); Peter Gurney, *Cooperative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870–1930* (Manchester, 1996).

extent to which societies supported the Rochdale principle of allocating a proportion of the trading surplus for education. Many societies disregarded national policy recommendations that they should allocate 2.5 per cent of the surplus for this end. There was also great variation in the extent to which local cooperatives participated in political activities. Of the societies examined in this study, four out of eight established political organizations, and the tight links with the labour movement developed at grassroots level in Birmingham, Kettering, and London were not always mirrored elsewhere.

Against this diversity, local cooperative societies also shared many things in common. There is no reason to disagree with Robertson's assessment that "the cooperative movement formed an integral part of neighbourhood life across much of Britain" (p. 209). Cooperatives were at the forefront of local retailing developments throughout the country and the "divi" remained of central importance to members well into the interwar period, though its significance was declining by the 1950s. Also common seem to have been complaints about the apathy of members and their reluctance to take a more active role in running their societies, a distance between activists and the mass of the membership that is familiar from the labour movement. In a very interesting chapter on consumer protection, Robertson highlights the importance of the cooperative movement in this field, and makes the important point that unlike the consumer advisory organizations that emerged during the twentieth century, "the cooperative movement operated in the trading sphere and was thus able to implement the actions and policies it was promoting" (p. 133).

Overall, then, this is a detailed and nuanced account which does much to extend our empirical knowledge of the British cooperative movement during the twentieth century. Robertson is very well-read in the historiography not only of British cooperation but also labour and working-class culture and politics more widely, and uses her empirical research to illuminate a range of recent debates within the literature. Given such a diverse range of materials and experiences, perhaps the author's reluctance to draw very bold conclusions is understandable. Nevertheless, at times the argument is perhaps a little tentative, even in the conclusion.

In particular, it would have been interesting to have had some more discussion of the question of cooperative decline and the broad trajectory of the movement during the twentieth century, in response to the suggestion of Gurney and others that cooperation retained its identity and self-perception as an anti-capitalist movement well into the twentieth century, but faded both commercially and idealistically in the postwar period. Although Robertson discusses some important milestones in postwar cooperative development, for example the 1958 report of the Cooperative Independent Commission, the main focus of the book is the interwar period. It would have been interesting, for example, to have seen more discussion of the vision of the Cooperative Commonwealth in relation to the collectivist sentiments engendered by World War II, or the responses of local societies to the movement's well-known decline.

Considered in a transnational perspective, the case can be made that the British cooperative movement was unusually strong and powerful. It dominated the ICA until the interwar period at least and avoided the major ruptures experienced in other parts of Europe, such as Germany and Italy. It was also unusual in many respects, such as in the dominance of the consumer wing of the movement – "cooperation" in the British context generally seems to mean consumer cooperation, as it does in this book – and its close if sometimes troubled relationship with the Labour Party after 1918 which placed it at odds with some of the other powerful consumer cooperative unions in the ICA, not least those of Scandinavia which insisted on political neutrality. Robertson's study is not

transnational, but it is informed by an implicit comparative perspective in some parts, especially in the section on cooperative cultural and recreational activities, where she argues that the movement's attempts to construct an alternative culture were similar to those of the continental social democratic parties in the same period.

Certainly a strong case can be made for this, and Robertson's work sheds important light on the nature of grassroots cooperation in this respect: its sports and social clubs, its educational activities, and its links with labour informally as well as formally, for example through the cooperative provision of relief for areas affected by the 1926 General Strike. Comparative studies of cooperation are still rare, unfortunately, but it would be fascinating to examine the British cooperative movement in comparison with the "social democratic world of consumption" created by the famous Vooruit cooperative of Ghent, for example, or the integration of cooperation with other forms of socialist organization in "Red Vienna".³

There has been a revival of interest in cooperation recently. As Robertson herself points out in her introduction, cooperatives have been cited by UK politicians as both a sound business model and a means of social regeneration. The UN's declaration of 2012 as International Year of Cooperatives may help to stimulate further interest in cooperation. It is to be hoped these debates will also lead to further interest in cooperative history, and they will undoubtedly benefit from well-researched and empirically detailed studies like this one.

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RODRÍGUEZ GARCÍA, MAGALY. *Liberal Workers of the World, Unite? The ICFTU and the Defence of Labour Liberalism in Europe and Latin America (1949–1969)*. [Trade Unions Past, Present and Future, Vol. 5.] Peter Lang, Oxford [etc.] 2010. xvi, 338 pp. € 45.50; doi:10.1017/S0020859012000041

When the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) was established in 1949 it adopted a *regional* structure of organization for the promotion of *free* trade unionism. Regionalism represented a new departure in the long history of labour internationalism and was specifically represented as an alternative to the centralized control practised in the rival World Federation of Trade Unions. The ICFTU's regional structures were to operate with a measure of devolution, allowing national affiliates to exercise more initiative in international affairs. In particular, they were intended to facilitate a stronger emphasis on organising. As vigorous proponents of this approach, US union leaders, especially from the American Federation of Labor, saw it as a means of transcending the mere exchange of information on conditions of labour that had characterized the approach of the International Federation of Trade Unions, the mainly social-democratic

3. Peter Scholliers, "The Social Democratic World of Consumption: The Path-Breaking Case of the Ghent Cooperative Vooruit Prior to 1914", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 55 (1999), pp. 71–91; on Red Vienna, see Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 212–213.