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# Consumer Co-operation in Comparative Perspective

Katarina Friberg, *The Workings of Co-operation. A Comparative Study of Consumer Co-operative Organisation in Britain and Sweden 1860–1970*, Diss, Acta Wexionensia no 71, Växjö University Press, Växjö & Intellecta docusys, Göteborg 2005. 508 pp.

Consumer co-operation has been neglected by historians of Sweden and Britain alike. Only recently have scholars begun to take more interest in co-operation as an historical movement, inspired partly by the renewed interest in consumer politics, and the more general scholarly attention to consumption and consumer culture. This neglect has been unfortunate given the prominence of consumer co-operative societies, as retail businesses, as local institutions and as social movements, in both Britain and Sweden throughout the twentieth century. In 1942 the British co-operative movement had nearly 9 million members, accounting for 18 percent of the population, and the Swedish movement was almost as impressive, with 850,000 members (13 percent of the population) in 1946. Besides their significant contribution to the retail trade in many towns, co-ops also provided a wide range of social activities to their members. Moreover, consumer co-operatives were unusual organisations, where ordinary members could and did hold heated debates over decisions affecting the business, and played an important role in determining the strategy of their societies.

Katarina Friberg's doctoral thesis on consumer co-operation in Malmö and Newcastle is therefore a pioneering study, original in both its source material and its use of the comparative method, and one which will make an important contribution to the growing corpus of literature on the co-operative movement in Britain, Sweden and beyond. The context for the thesis was a wider research project comparing Newcastle and Malmö since 1945, though in this case the chronological scope is broader, stretching back to the foundation of the Newcastle Co-operative Society in 1860. Specifically, as the title suggests, the thesis is concerned with the internal organisation and functioning of consumer co-operation: how did co-operative societies actually work in Britain and Sweden in the period 1860–1970? What opportunities were there for members to express their demands through democratic systems and what impact did these demands have on the conduct of co-operative business?

As Friberg shows in her long introduction, consumer co-operation was strong in both Britain and Sweden, though it came later to Sweden than to Britain, and since the Second World War the Swedish movement seems to have been more successful than the British. The Swedish movement was also more centralised

through its federation Kooperativa Förbundet (KF), founded in 1899, whereas local British societies experienced more autonomy. This is also reflected in the secondary literature, as Friberg shows: Swedish historians have generally been more concerned with the ideas and organisation of KF, whereas in Britain there has been more interest in co-operation as a social movement with its own distinctive culture, and especially its relationship to wider working-class culture.<sup>1</sup> As Friberg rightly points out, however, most of the existing work has been concentrated on the national organisations. Her study is instead built on two local case studies: the Newcastle upon Tyne Co-operative Society in the city of that name in the north east of England, and the Kooperativa Föreningen Solidar in Malmö, in the far south of Sweden. Both these towns had developed originally as ports, but by the nineteenth century both could be considered major industrial towns. Newcastle's wealth was based in particular on its famous shipyards. Malmö too had a shipbuilding industry but its industrial base was generally more diverse. Malmö, of course, is also known as one of the most important centres of the early Swedish labour movement, and from the 1920s local politics was dominated by the Social Democratic Party. The Labour Party could not match this success in Newcastle, and did not take control of the city council until the 1960s.

The thesis is divided into three long sections, excluding the introduction and the conclusion. These sections deal with, in turn: the development of co-operative retail services and the experience of shopping at the Coop; the internal organisation of the societies and the means by which members could influence decision-making; and the internal politics of co-operation broadly understood, that is, the internal struggles over the raising and, more importantly, the distribution of co-operative resources. The two cases are dealt with side by side throughout the thesis.

In Part 2 we learn that the Newcastle Society expanded fairly rapidly from its foundation in 1860, so that even as early as the mid 1860s it had extended its activities to include boots and shoes, drapery and tailoring. It developed a network of stores across the city, sometimes encroaching on the territory of rival co-operative societies. After the Second World War the network of stores was rationalised, and most were converted to self-service, but there was no further expansion in the range of goods and services offered. Solidar, founded in 1907, was originally a combined workers' and consumers' co-operative manufacturing and distributing bakery products. It was the retailing side of the business that flourished, however, and following a series of amalgamations in the 1920s Solidar was by 1928 the second largest consumer coop in Sweden after Stockholm. In both cases, the experience of shopping in the co-operative stores was different to

1. For examples of recent work, see Peder Aléx, *Den rationella konsumenten. KF som folkuppfostrare 1899–1939*, Stockholm 1994; Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England 1870–1930*, Manchester 1996.

that of shopping in other commercial stores. Clearly the dividend was an important part of this, but so too was the refusal of the Swedish society to offer its customers credit.

Part 3 discusses the possibilities for members to influence the society's business and strategy. An impressively detailed discussion of the evolution of the rules and practice for decision-making in both societies reveals some important differences between the two cases. In Newcastle, business was conducted at the quarterly member meetings, and these afforded the members a real opportunity to influence important business decisions, though to do so they had to be familiar with the complex body of rules and procedures. Whereas the Newcastle rules evolved gradually and pragmatically in response to changing circumstances, *Solidar* was more or less constrained in how it operated by its adoption of the KF model rules in 1910. These placed more authority in the board of management, and accorded more of an advisory role to the member meetings, channelled through a three-tiered system of representative meetings. Over time, the authority of the member meeting in Newcastle also declined in significance. In addition to the member meetings, co-operators could also become involved in one or more of what Friberg calls 'co-operative forums', that is the auxiliary organisations such as the women's guilds, the Co-operative Party (in Newcastle), youth groups and educational groups and study circles. In Newcastle, these organisations were important in mobilising particular groups of members within the society and as such could have a powerful influence on meetings. In Malmö, the main role of the educational groups in particular was more in propagandising for co-operation.

In part 4, Friberg turns to the most important questions that were discussed within these forums, namely matters concerning the distribution of co-operative resources. As Friberg reminds us, this was not only a matter of distributing resources but also of raising them. For both coops, the principal issue was how to balance the members' frugality – given that for many co-operators the coops functioned as savings institutions as well as shops – with the fluctuating capital needs of the society. Newcastle relied more on economic incentives to promote member loyalty to its different services, whereas *Solidar* used education and propaganda. Again, Friberg shows that the different national context was important in each case, this time by a detailed analysis of the legal framework in which both societies were operating. Within *Solidar* there were fewer possibilities to introduce new schemes, since the society's rules laid down that certain percentages of the surplus had to be earmarked for certain purposes, such as education and the reserve fund. In Newcastle, there was more leeway, and thus more possibility for controversy, for example over the establishment of a local branch of the Co-operative Party, something which caused major tensions in many English co-operative societies. Another perennial question for co-operative societies was the trade off between higher dividends and lower prices: in Newcastle where the

members were more influential there was strong support for a higher dividend, whereas in Malmö members seemed to support Solidar's cut price strategy. Finally, although in a large society day to day management decisions had to be left to the board – and became increasingly professionalised during the twentieth century – co-operative members could and did debate questions concerning the management of the retailing services: strategies for the expansion and rationalisation of stores, and decisions about the types of goods that were to be stocked.

The conclusion draws together these findings. In Newcastle, the struggles over the distribution of resources took centre stage, debated through the member meeting, though by the end of the period this was declining in influence. In Solidar, questions concerning the retail service were more important, and members used the system of membership branch meetings to communicate their views on the quality of this service, making the organisation, as Friberg notes, something of a pioneer of now widely used tools of market research. Solidar was more constrained by its adherence to the KF rules, whereas more local variety seems to have been tolerated in the English co-operative movement.

The great strength of this thesis is its empirical detail. The study is based mainly on the minutes of the different co-operative meetings in both societies, together with rules, reports, and some interviews with local co-operators. Few stones can have been left unturned, and the level of detail is absolutely meticulous. Co-operative minutes can be turgid documents, and I can only admire Friberg's diligence and patience in ploughing through so many of them. Much of this painstaking work will have a relevance beyond the immediate context of Newcastle and Malmö. The detailed discussion of the legal framework within which consumer co-operation developed in Britain and Sweden is likely to be of use to future scholars for example, as is the comprehensive survey of the secondary literature in both countries. Generally, the book is written in clear and accessible English, with only one or two minor lapses betraying that English is not the author's mother tongue. Friberg also demonstrates an immense enthusiasm and sympathy for her subjects, while managing at the same time to retain the necessary degree of objective distance.

A major criticism of the thesis is that, at over 500 pages, it is too long. At times, the minutely detailed description of processes and developments in Newcastle and Malmö threatens to overwhelm the more general analytical points that could perhaps have been drawn from this material. Moreover, the main research questions driving the analysis could have been made clearer. The introduction presents an accurate summary of the major debate that has influenced the British literature on consumer co-operation in recent years, concerning the meaning of co-operation as a social movement. An earlier generation of scholars had pointed to a major ideological break between the Owenite co-operative societies of the early nineteenth century, and post-Rochdale co-operation after 1844. Whereas

the former was characterised by its broad social aspirations and vision of the New Moral World, they argued, Rochdale co-operation was narrow in its outlook, concerned with the prosaic activity of shopkeeping. According to Sidney Pollard, 'Nothing is more striking than the contrast between the firm outlines of the New Moral World and the shapeless yearnings of the latter-day co-operators, whether inspired by religion or not, as soon as they leave the firm ground of profitable shopkeeping.'<sup>2</sup> The popularity of consumer co-operation after about 1860 was thus symptomatic of the defeat and deradicalisation of the British working class following the decline of Chartism.

Against this, as Friberg notes in her introduction, the 'new view' of co-operation – to which Peter Gurney's 1996 book is undoubtedly the most important recent contribution – suggests that post-Rochdale co-operation retained at its heart a vision of the co-operative commonwealth and a commitment to social transformation. The Swedish co-operative movement was also inspired by a social vision, one that, according to Peder Al  x, was shaped principally by ideas of rational consumption. Both authors also make the case for the plurality of views within the co-operative movement, and as Friberg rightly points out, we still need to know more about this debate within the context of local societies. This question is indeed raised in the introduction (p 28): if co-operation was, as Gurney and indeed Al  x claim, a moral project challenging aspects of capitalist consumption, then to what extent did its members share this? Was this the view of all the members? Friberg also states – again accurately in my view – that the struggles about the meaning and diversity of co-operation can be seen as a struggle over resources. This raises the question of how these struggles, which are analysed in detail in part 4 of the thesis, illustrate the wider debate about the meaning of co-operation in the context of these two societies. More could have been made of this point in the empirical analysis. To be fair, this criticism may seem a little unjust, given that Friberg's stated aim turns out to be to investigate the ways in which debates were conducted in co-operative societies rather than the contents of these debates necessarily. But this focus needed to be made clearer in the introduction. Moreover, the discussion of the co-operative debates in part 4 hints at the possibility of drawing some conclusions about co-operative ideas, but these are left tantalisingly open. To take just two examples: firstly, this question was particularly relevant in the context of debates about co-operative education, much debated in both societies. Was co-operative education intended to transform society by educating rational consumers and the citizens of the future co-operative commonwealth, or was it merely to provide members with an opportunity for their personal self-improvement? Secondly, how did the experience of

2. Sidney Pollard, 'Nineteenth Century Co-operation. From Community Building to Shopkeeping', in A Briggs & J Saville (eds), *Essays in Labour History, 1886–1923*, London 1960, pp 74–112, 102.

shopping at the coop (discussed on pp 173ff) differ from that of shopping at commercial stores? Is Gurney's interpretation of co-operative shopping as influenced by the demand for fair prices, unadulterated goods, just conditions and social transformation, all of which gradually faded away during the inter-war period, relevant to the Newcastle and Malmö societies? In her discussion of two retailing issues – alcohol and South African goods – Friberg hints that these moral questions remained at the heart of co-operation, but again she seems somewhat reluctant to generalise from this to address the wider point about the meaning of co-operation.

Friberg is also concerned with the development of consumer co-operation over time. The wide scope of her thesis, encompassing the century between 1860 and 1960, is unusual and therefore welcome. Here again, however, I felt that it would have been possible to take the analysis beyond the local and the particular. The period after the Second World War was a watershed in the history of retailing and consumption. The British co-operative movement was most successful as a consumer organisation functioning in conditions of scarcity, but, in common with the British left more generally, it responded less well to mass prosperity and consumption after 1945.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the Swedish movement seemed to be able to manage this shift successfully. The international comparison of the two local cases presented here help to illuminate this point, but it is not taken up. Further, I would have welcomed more discussion of two other historical turning points which were undoubtedly influential and would have been interesting seen in a local context. The first of these concerns the important changes in the retailing sector in the late nineteenth century and in particular the extent to which co-ops were seen as a threat by small independent traders. In many areas this provoked serious conflict, and I felt that the introductory discussion of Newcastle and Malmö could have been more informative on this point. Secondly, the steep price rises and food shortages of the First World War presented problems for consumers in both Britain and Sweden, and the distribution of food became a highly politicised area. It seems that the co-operative societies examined here experienced a sharp rise in membership, but it would have been interesting to learn more about these changes.

In some ways, these limitations are a result of the limitations of the sources, and given the wide chronological scope of the thesis it would be unfair to demand even more empirical work. The minute books which form the main source for the study are not always as forthcoming on the intricacies of particular debates as one might wish, and sometimes seem to conceal more than they reveal, as Friberg is clearly aware. This must then raise a question about the usefulness of the min-

3. Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth Century Britain*, Cambridge 2003, pp 137f; Lawrence Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in Britain, 1951–1964. Old Labour, New Britain?*, Basingstoke 2003.

utes as sources for understanding how ordinary members experienced co-operation, given that only 11 percent of them on average attended member meetings in Sweden, though Friberg's method certainly takes us further in this direction than most previous studies. She also makes some limited use of oral history, specifically in her examination of consumer loyalty to the co-operative store in Newcastle through the example of three female generations of the same family. This could have illuminated the question of ordinary members' perception of the coop, but reasons of time and space meant that it could not be pursued further; it does however open up fascinating possibilities for future research.

Comparative history is not easy, and Friberg is to be congratulated on her success in marrying two exceptionally detailed local histories with the demands of the cross-national comparison. In this respect, too, the thesis undoubtedly breaks new ground. Comparative historians expose themselves to the criticism that they rely too heavily on generalisations, a criticism which it would be hard to apply in this case. Indeed, the opposite is perhaps true. Without wishing to question the particularity of the two cases studied here, I nonetheless felt that it would have been possible to draw some more general conclusions about the role and significance of consumer co-operation in Britain and Sweden seen over a long period. How typical were the Newcastle and Malmö societies, seen within their respective national contexts? Why did consumer co-operation have some difficulties in adapting to consumer affluence after the Second World War? Whereas the Rochdale model of co-operation had been a source of inspiration for co-operators across Europe during the late nineteenth century, especially in Sweden, after 1945 the flow of ideas was reversed and British co-operators looked to the Swedish movement as an example of success. What was the impact of this exchange of ideas for both cases? These questions will have to wait for further work, but the researcher embarking on that will benefit enormously from this original and ground-breaking thesis.

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