

for Sheffield Co-operator 2018 edition

For a long time now, I have been conscious that the mainstream media, institutions, business, politics and all that makes up our social fabric, has narrowed into a pro corporate capitalist consensus. A culture which perpetuates the status quo. This is reflected in the microcosm, from individuals, to small groups and onwards to the whole of Society. It tempts one to believe that Mrs Thatcher was correct when saying that there “is no alternative”.

To take an example, are there really enough people who make a considered choice when buying a product or service. How many people first ask;

- Is this from a co-operative?
- What is the environmental impact of this product?
- What is the social cost of this product?
- What are the conditions of the people involved in making this product?
- Above all for a socialist, am I buying into the co-operative commonwealth or am I buying into the capitalist orthodoxy?

This article makes the assumption from the start that the reader is a democratic socialist, co-operator or at least left of centre. The starting point is an observation that the dominant culture of de-regulation and privatisation is the cause of a spiralling downhill of the well-being of people and the degradation of the environment.

I joined the Co-operative Party eighteen years ago because my enduring belief has been that without ownership and control, people have no power. Sadly the nationalised industries, services and utilities have been privatised and they are operated for the benefit of a small elite who are addicted to vast personal wealth. We no longer have truly public services. I have seen also the demise of civic pride and municipal socialism. Citizens used to own and control their services through their elected councils and ratepayers paid for direct labour without having to pay the profits of private contractors.

It is difficult to understand why so many people choose the services and products which are thrust upon them simply 'because that's the choice that everyone makes'. We really do have alternatives.

In September 2000 when I went to my first Co-op Party Meeting, I was enthused by another form of common ownership, that developed by the Co-operative Movement since 1844. But by then co-operative culture and awareness was in decline. Gone were the days when a vigorous co-operative

movement spent money and resources on member education. It was difficult to find answers to my many questions. If the co-operative alternative is to mean anything, it is essential to know all about it. A good starting point was the International Statement of Identity (Co-operative Values and Principles). Principle 5 is Co-operative Education, but where was it to be found?

An elderly co-op society director used to bring copies of Co-operative News, then a weekly newspaper for the Co-operative Movement, to the meetings and they formed the basis for learning more. In due course, I collected pamphlets and books about co-operation as well as saving Co-operative News. It became clear to me that there had been a time when there was a strong co-operative culture in Britain (and all over the world).

Up until the 1960's the Co-operative Movement, principally the Co-operative Union, the C.W.S. and retail societies, particularly the big ones like the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society in London, spent a great deal of money fulfilling the co-operative principle of education. The aspiration in the early days of co-operation was to spend 10% of the surplus on education. *In the 1930's and 40's the co-operative movement even went into film making.* Given that in those days there was a large membership because the benefits of co-operative ownership were a reality which included social and cultural life, profit sharing and other financial benefits, it is not surprising that there was a co-operative commonwealth in the making. Despite much talk in the last decade about a co-operative renaissance, the big co-op retail giants have offered little in the way of co-operative education and culture. But there is a great development in the making which is receiving support from the Co-operative Party and the Labour Party and being put into practise by local authorities like Preston – Community Wealth Building - which you will be able to read about elsewhere in this publication.

In Sheffield, in response to the dearth of co-operative education and awareness, I set up Principle 5 Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre which was incorporated as a co-operative and a company limited by guarantee in 2014. We can all play a part in reversing the decline in co-operative education by joining and using the facilities of our co-operative. We need new members to ensure financial sustainability into the future.

Principle 5 Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre

Principle 5 co-operative resource centre provides a facility for members to develop ideas about co-operation. How the Movement evolved the potential to transform society for the better, and how co-operatives are changing the world.

The lending library is full of books which tell stories of the successes and failures of co-operatives, practical information for people involved in co-ops and research materials for social historians. The Centre is a friendly and accessible place where anyone can learn more about the Co-operative Movement. We are based at Aizlewood's Mill, Sheffield, a co-operatively owned building and home of the Sheffield Co-operative Development Group. The Centre is open for anyone to use and appointments can be made by contacting Steve Thompson: steve@sheffield.coop
This service is funded by members subscriptions. In order to continue, we need more members. Please consider joining us.

These are our purposes and aims:

Protect and safeguard the books, publications and archival materials placed in trust for the use of the co-operative movement and for future generations.

Make these available to all members who would wish to use them.

Provide a focus for co-operative education and culture through talks, discussions, film screenings, social events, visits to other co-operative venues, study groups etc.

Work co-operatively with other organisations and individuals who have compatible aims.

Be proactive in helping to cultivate co-operative community.

Be as true as possible to the definition, values and principles of the International Co-operative Alliance. (Statement of Co-operative Identity).

Seek support from the wider co-operative movement.

Principle 5 is a supporter of Fairtrade.

Principle 5 of the
International Statement of Co-operative
Identity
“Education, Training and Information ”

Let us know when you would like to visit and I'll get the kettle on.

Steve Thompson

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