

Book Reviews

The Dictionary of Alternatives

By Martin Parker, Valérie Fournier and Patrick Reedy

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Reviewed by Len Arthur, Wales Institute for Research into Co-operatives, UWIC (Cardiff)

Reading this book I've re-discovered a long term attribute that I'd forgotten: I'm a natural auto-didact. You will have to read the book to discover the meaning so far if I've now lost you! It all started with a 1d – yes old money – 1933 copy of *Pears Cyclopaedia* from a Scout jumble sale in 1958, which led to my favourite Christmas present, a *Young Person's Encyclopaedia* and then a request for an updated *Pears* as Christmas present in 1962. How can I remember all of this? I have a copy of the last volume in front of me - so I am certainly the nerd to do this review.

The interest continued with *Towards Socialism* produced by *New Left Review* in 1965 and one of my prized possessions, *BAMN – Outlaw Manifestos and Ephemera 1965–1970* produced by Penguin. Finally, and this is the end, *The Chatto Book of Dissent* produced in 1994.

This *Dictionary of Alternatives* is in a good and strong tradition which still has relevance today. The competition is fierce. The net and in particular Wikipedia, is the first port of call for us auto-didacts who need some references and understanding in a rush or a starting point, so can a book still cope? The edge is the focus on where social movements are now and bringing together a collection of material, ideas, information that overcomes any sense of being eclectic by excellent cross referencing held together by the varieties of resistance and alternatives on display.

A quick glance at some of entries and it seems the point is being stretched: Amish; Agora; Bretheren Of the Free Spirit; Co-operatives; Facism; Management; Science Fiction; but the sense and the core is there with Anarchism; Revolution; Workers Self-Management; World Social

Forum; Marxism. This is an update and a starting point not a definitive piece of work and at the same time it does give an overall feel for the times we are in, where we have come from and where we could go.

Needless to say this is a dictionary and not to be read end to end and I've not done this – honest. But it is enjoyable following the cross references by starting off from an areas you know little about, and in my case it was the Greek references and the religious organisation and movements and moving through to the cross indexed connections. The entries read clearly and well, avoiding obscure jargon and in those areas I know something about the essence has been captured but would require further reading. The entries encourage this as they are written in a way which prompts further questioning. And this is where I have to declare an interest, as I thought the entry on Tower Colliery sounded familiar – I remember writing it with my colleagues in WIRC! Yes, permission to use the section was sought and given.

As the authors clearly state in the introduction "... the dictionary is therefore perhaps best described as a source book, pattern book or almanac of possibilities". In a review it can be said that it also has agitational properties in so far as it provides some clues to the question which often come back to activists when they have persuaded others that a problem is worth tackling, 'but what can you do about it?'. The 'pattern book' idea starts to work at this level. However, there are some key issues which are approached, but might have been better used to indicate where key differences and debates are taking place that could encourage readers to participate. The section on Revolution and on Socialism

is one example as perhaps is the absence of a section on Social Movements and Trotsky.

As the intention of the book is to whet the appetite there is an excellent contemporary thematic list of further reading at the end of the book. It might also have helped this process if reference were also available within the text, so that points made could more clearly be followed through. But, as ever, a balance has to be struck and this may have made the work look too forbidding and classically academic.

Clearly, the 200 odd entries in this book in volume terms is not a challenge for the vastness of Wikipedia – which is, incidentally, one of the entries – but

effectively achieves the aim of providing a well written focus on alternatives to the current domination of the neo-liberal orthodoxy. The book sits well in a strong tradition of radical dictionaries and readers, and will be useful to the student and activist alike and will have a shelf life so long as people are willing to resist both through mobilisation and building the future in the present. Finally, what about co-operatives? We are in the book and so are all our reasons for inspiration and values for keeping going. The book enriches the co-operative tradition and clearly provides many connections to movements and ideas moving in the same direction. Try it and see.

The Future of Co-operatives in a Growing Europe

Edited by Rafael Chaves, Jose Juis Monzon, Yohanan Stryjan, Roger Spear and Simeon Karafolas

Published by CIRIEC (<http://www.ciriec.es>) and University of Valencia, Faculty of Economics (<http://www.uv.es/iudescoop>)
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Reviewed by Rita Rhodes, Visiting Research Fellow, Co-operatives Research Unit, Open University and Review Editor of the Journal of Co-operative Studies

This is a weighty tome of nearly 800 pages. It is therefore well in keeping with its subject, co-operatives in a **growing** Europe. As befits its size its gestation took a long time appearing some three years after its papers were presented to a co-operative researchers' conference held in Segorbe, Spain in May 2004. It was jointly organised by the Research Committee of the International Co-operative Alliance, CIRIEC in Spain and the Institute of Economy, Society and Co-operatives of the University of Valencia. Over 90 co-operative researchers participated, the majority from Europe. Notable among these was Dr. Zofia Chyra-Rolicz from the University of Podlasic, Poland. Even before the Iron Curtain came down she participated in ICA Research Conferences. This, however, was the first she attended since Poland had become a full member of the European Union only a few days earlier. As a result, Zofia was able to travel to Valencia on one of the first coaches leaving Poland after accession and move freely through European borders en route. As well as being a familiar figure at ICA Co-operative Research Conferences Zofia had previously played a leading part in the production the International Directory of Co-operative Research in the 1980s along with co-operative colleagues in Hungary and the ICA. This was in the days before computers and the internet and the enterprise was therefore labour-intensive. Twenty years on the Segorbe Conference was the first that she and colleagues from Hungary, the Czech Republic and Lithuania could attend after their countries had become full members of the European Union.

Significant for them the Conference will also be important for the rest of us. Its papers will provide a snapshot of the point that European co-operative development

had reached as well as discussion of the problems and opportunities facing European co-operatives. Its Report includes some 43 papers which are divided into ten groups: Credit Unions, Wine and Olive Co-operatives; Co-operative Governance and Workers' Co-operatives; Paths in Innovation, Education and Co-operative Development Systems; Co-operatives and Social Enterprises; Mergers and Demutualisation; Co-operative Principles; Co-operatives, Law and Public Policy; Co-operatives and Women; and Historical Perspectives. A few presenters like those from Japan, Iran and Israel were non-European although their papers were relevant to European co-operatives. The bulk of participants came from Europe and papers were presented dealing with co-operatives in France, Spain, Greece, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Sweden, Portugal, Lithuania, Poland, Denmark, Belgium and United Kingdom. Two members of the UK Society of Co-operative Studies gave papers. Roger Spear's was on *A Study of Mergers in the UK Consumer Co-operative Sector* and appeared in the section dealing with Co-operatives and Social Enterprises while mine, entitled *Colonial Co-operatives through the Eyes of their Co-operative Registrars* and came in the Historical Perspectives Section.

A conference's opening paper is always important but it was particularly so in this case dealing as it did with a particular point in history, setting the tone and creating a framework for all that follows. The excellent paper by Juan F Julia Igual and Elena Melia Marti entitled *The Future of the Co-operative Movement in the Building of Europe* met all these needs. It also projected a conceptual framework within which European co-operatives and the social economy might

exist in the future. The authors flew the co-operative flag when they asserted:

Another aspect that should not be forgotten is that co-operatives, due to their internal cohesion with their values and principles, particularly solidarity as the most genuinely co-operative value and their well-known open-doors or voluntary membership principle, are social institutions which are very much identified with the processes of European integration and enlargement.

Their paper included a useful chronology showing stages in the building of the European Community's institutional and political framework from the 1980s until the early twenty-first century. It also showed how co-operatives fared within these developments and postulated ways in which they might be affected by new phenomena including globalisation. The introductory paper ended with a very useful statistical analysis of European co-operatives in the 1990s together with a warning that:

... the contributions co-operatives can and should stand for ... both in Europe and the world, require a greater

knowledge of their reality and identity and of how they work and are governed.

The Segorbe Conference Report helps meet this need. It interweaves different types of co-operative with issues within their national economies and reveals different kinds of problems. For example we learn from a case study the difficulties Credit co-operatives had in the Czech Republic in rebuilding confidence after the collapse of communism. A paper from France examines challenges facing wine co-operatives from Fair Trade and ethical projects while a paper from Sweden gives a modern slant on the question that has been around the International Co-operative Movement from the early twentieth century, namely what should be the balance between men and women in co-operatives.

Written in English and well-edited *The Future of Co-operatives in a Growing Europe* provides a valuable snapshot of European co-operatives in the early twenty-first century. It will be of interest and benefit to co-operative practitioners and researchers. Possibly fifty years on co-operative historians will be grateful for the source material it provides. For all these reasons it is warmly recommended.

The Co-operative Party - Literature Feast and Famine

Following his review of contemporary Co-operative Party literature in the December 2007 Edition of the UK Journal of Co-operative Studies Jim Craigen, former Labour and Co-operative MP, now revisits earlier examples

In a Parliamentary Question and Answer session at the 2007 Co-operative Party Conference former Co-operative Party Secretary and MP now Life Peer Ted Graham warned delegates that “The Co-operative Party’s political influence is largely dependent on the success of the Movement’s commercial wing” and said “if co-operative retailing declined this would impact adversely on the Party’s effectiveness”.

Sure enough corporate affiliations by societies not individual party member numbers sustain the Co-operative Party.

In the December 2007 *UK Journal of Co-operative Studies* I reviewed two publications marking the Co-operative Party’s ninetieth anniversary. The splendidly evocative booklet *The Co-operative Movement in Greater Nottingham* by Christopher Richard described how privations during the First World War and trade discrimination by authorities ignited co-operators in 1917 into doing their own political thing. Greg Rosen in *Serving the People – Co-operative Party History from Fred Perry to Gordon Brown* covered the ensuing nine decades in his very good paperback read.

Operating in the larger Labour Party shadow did not confine the Co-operative Party to the shade but its first half century attracted more literary attention than has since been the case. Peter Shea, the British Federation of Young Co-operators’ National organising Secretary back in 1946 produced a short and enthralling *Times Past: Paragraphs on the History of the Co-operative Party* in 1955 which remains alive in capturing what the spirit of co-operative politics was all about. In commercial self-interest co-operative societies realised they needed political clout while co-operators in general had wider aspirations for improving society at large.

Geoffrey Rhodes who became a Labour and Co-operative MP did forensic study in *Co-operative Labour Relations 1900-1962* whilst tutor at the Co-operative College. He identifies a dilemma at the heart of the

relationship. Affiliating on a par with the trade unions under Labour’s 1918 Constitution was not on. The co-operative movement insisted on autonomy. Labour hoped for affiliation, if not integration. At the 1921 Labour Party Conference a delegate put his finger on the Co-operative problem when he spoke of “an organisation that does not yet know its own mind”. Labour too had unspoken concern lest a Co-operative Party affiliation weaken and not strengthen it. Rhodes provides sources and detailed background on the various phases and agreements. Passage of time shaped and reshaped the relationship and compromises somehow succeeded in giving the Co-operative Party ‘elbow room’ in an otherwise one-sided political alliance.

The Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society did affiliate directly in 1927 and by 1930 wanted to eat cake as well by joining the Co-operative Party. Rita Rhodes in *An Arsenal for Labour – the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society and Politics 1896-1996* gives expert account in her more geographically concentrated study which conveys that local sense of belonging for members through their society education classes, guilds and youth groups. RACS saw itself representing the Co-op within the Labour Party and for half a century sponsored candidates and held the socialist societies’ seat on Labour’s National Executive Committee.

In 1979 the London Co-operative Society affiliated directly and contested the National Executive Committee seat. Neither it nor RACS got it! Consumers seemed secondary to internecine politics while shops were closing left, right and centre in London Metropolis.

The Left, a symposium edited by Gerald Kaufman, has a contribution on *The Co-ops in Politics* which was written by then Fabian Society Deputy Secretary, R L Leonard: it is salutary reading.

Thomas F Carbery provides a definitive account of the first half century in his highly readable book *Consumers and Politics – A*

History & General Review of the Co-operative Party based on research for a PhD Emeritus Professor Carbery is an Honorary President of the Society for Co-operative Studies. He notes "right from the start there was some confusion of identity" as immediately on being elected in 1918 A E Waterson (Kettering) took the Labour Party whip. Waterson, a Labour man, had stood in both the Labour and Co-operative interest.

The author takes the story to the late 1960s and brings personalities and politics of the day into play. He cites Hugh Gaitskell then opposition Leader voice concern to Party Secretary Sir Jack Bailey lest Co-operative MPs create "A Party within a Party". Trading interests at times created friction for a Co-operative Group within the Parliamentary Party as happened over the eventually dropped post-war plans for insurance industry nationalisation. Differing views on a political issue could arise as was the case on unilateral disarmament a decade later.

Carbery points out how in the 1960s co-operative retailing was failing to attract a younger generation which had more spending power than its elders had enjoyed and where the movement was losing out over consumerism to the middle class Consumers' Association. He examines the background of candidates being sponsored by the Co-operative Party. Several were said to have "wandered in" as he puts it to Co-operative politics, but most had their roots in the movement and if anything tended to be younger than trade union nominees.

The Wilson Report on Labour Party Organisation following the 1955 General Election defeat called for higher trade union fees and direct Co-operative Party affiliation on the lines of RACS. The Co-operative Party could have wielded a larger card vote than all the unions put together. Barbara Smith and Geoffrey Ostergaard in *Constitutional Relations between the Labour and Co-operative Parties: an Historical Review*, examine the shock decision by Labour's National Executive Committee early in 1957 to seek a new basis for the relationship. Several high profile trade union nominees had lost out to co-operative ones in Labour selection conferences. There

were then 96 sponsored trade union MPs and 20 Co-operative MPs. There was envy too of a Co-operative Party with more money and party organisers in the field. In the event co-operative sponsorships were limited to 30 seats (including marginal and hopeless ones). That limit was removed in 1996.

Today the Co-operative Party financially sponsors 29 MPs at Westminster, nine MSPs in the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh and four AMs in the Welsh Assembly at Cardiff. All got elected as Labour and Co-operative because since 1927 and the expedient of the Cheltenham Agreement the Party has not contested elections independently. Gordon Brown is the first Prime Minister to be an individual Co-operative Party member (though not sponsored). Co-operative MPs at Westminster form the fourth largest party but from 1945 to 1997 outnumbered Liberal MPs.

A dearth of writing on the Co-operative Party in the past four decades is noticeable. Then again co-operative retailing no longer enjoys the presence it once had. Success is often written on sand while failure gets carved in marble. Time was when co-operative societies boasted 13 million share members. As well as the wider work of the Co-operative Parliamentary Group individual Co-operative MPs have assisted co-operative interests at local or regional level. This past decade has seen more political emphasis on a social economy and new co-operative forms. Indeed we now have so-called New Conservatism rediscovering self-help and co-operatives paradoxically arguing that politics be taken out of co-operation.

The literature of the first 50 years is more often on Co-operative and Labour relations. The past forty years have seen greater interface between Co-operation and State. Greg Rosen is to be thanked for profiling the Co-operative Party in its ninetieth year. My review suggested he be booked for the Centennial. I already have doubts if there will be one! 2008 hardly began when Peter Hunt announced his departure as General Secretary to set up a Westminster public affairs consultancy while remaining Chief Executive of MUTUO, the mutual think tank. A new appointment was set in train and has

recently been made. Lobbying and public relations are a feature of contemporary politics and entail neither party organisation nor fighting elections. In 1969 when concluding there was a role for the

Co-operative Party in contemporary Britain Tom Carbery wrote, "The short-term picture is clear and fine: the long-term much less certain". *Plus ca change!*

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