

Communications, Culture, and Co-operatives: Liminal Organizations in a Liminal Age

Paper for “Mapping Co-operative Studies in the New Millennium: A Joint Congress of the International Co-operative Alliance Research Committee and the Canadian Association for Studies in Co-operation,” 27-31 May 2003 – University of Victoria, Canada

Revised, June 2003

by Brett Fairbairn, Professor of History

Director, Centre for the Study of Co-operatives
University of Saskatchewan
101 Diefenbaker Place
Saskatoon SK S7N 5B8 Canada

tel. (306) 966-8505 fax (306) 966-8517 e-mail brett.fairbairn@usask.ca

New Inspirations for Co-operative Studies

New understandings of co-operatives are vital in a changing world, not least of all because new understandings are opportunities to include new people and new groups in the project of Co-operative Studies. In this essay I offer some loosely connected thoughts about how co-operative studies might be enriched by perspectives and ideas drawn from the area of cultural studies, which I take to include studies of communications, postmodernism, postcolonialism, feminism, and other related fields. This is, of course, not the only source for new ideas about co-operatives; but it is an important source, precisely because cultural studies are active today and transgress the boundaries of many disciplines. A colleague remarked to me after hearing a version of this paper that it is striking how absent cultural-studies practitioners are from the field of co-operative studies, and how important it is that they be drawn in.

I do not aim to offer a survey of cultural studies and its elements; I am not qualified to do so. But in any case, I believe what is most important is to *show* how ideas from cultural studies can be woven into our academic studies of co-operatives — to show how selective ideas and insights can illuminate questions that already concern us, as theoreticians and practitioners of co-operatives: as well as raise new questions we might hardly have considered before. I believe, personally, that academic understandings of co-operatives are stale and could use some shaking up. Our words and categories for talking about co-operatives often conceal as much as they explain.

It may sound strange to say this when I am talking about something as esoteric as postmodernism, but I am very interested in co-operative practice — practical experience wedded with theoretical understanding, or “praxis” — and with empirical approaches to co-operative studies. I see cultural studies as a way towards praxis, experience, and empiricism because of its concern with *language* and the ideas embedded in language. Practitioners use language; concepts are critical to leaders and followers; culture is fundamental to organizations. Words (and the ideas behind them) are the most important tools for people who do things in the real world. Nothing is more practical.

In saying this, I have gone far beyond what I can accomplish in this essay. I aim in the following pages to sketch some hints and suggestive openings that I, personally, find valuable as indications of where we could go with experientially grounded, cultural and linguistic studies of co-operatives. My specific interest has to do with the “betweenness” of co-operatives, the ways in which they sit on the threshold (the *limen*, Latin) between categories, communities, and identities.

Co-operatives and Cultural-Economic Change

In a variety of ways, co-operatives as we know them belong to a definable historical era, the modern or industrial era of the 19th and 20th centuries. My colleague Murray Fulton has written and spoken of the ways in which the agricultural co-operatives of the 20th century reflected the “industrial” economy of that century. The “industrial” model stressed scale, hierarchy, and uniformity of organizational forms. We see this reflected in the growth of large corporations, the concentration on mass-produced or generic commodities, and in highly regulated and centralized planning and control structures epitomised by the managerial system some refer to as Fordism.¹ We also see parallel developments in co-operatives. The Canadian wheat pools of the 1920s are symbolic of the era: they focused on generic commodities; they organized those commodities on the widest possible scale through uniform local structures; they centralized management and decision-making to the greatest practicable degree. But other co-operatives, too, grew larger, amalgamated, became more centralized, and tried to capture efficiencies of scale in dealing with mass commodities. As Fulton has written, there seems to be a new economy emerging today that places greater weight on adaptability and flexibility, specialized or niche rather than generic commodities, vertical co-ordination along product or market chains through collaboration or partnership rather than necessarily through massive, integrated organizations. In writing about agriculture, Fulton argues that the emergence of new kinds and new structures of co-operatives reflects the new environment.²

¹ For an objection to the use of the term Fordism to describe the old economy, see Manuel Castells, *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban-Regional Process* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 17.

² See Murray Fulton and Julie Gibbings, “Response and Adaptation: Canadian Agricultural Co-operatives in the 21st Century,” pp. 45ff, on-line at <http://coop-studies.usask.ca/murray> (accessed 25 May 2003).

Fulton's argument about the industrial and the new economies is an instance of the transition from modernism to something else — postmodernism, for lack of a better word, or a wider new economy and information society.³ The following sections seek to uncover some of the cultural and psychological dimensions of these changes, beginning with the centrality of communications.

Communications and community

It has been customary to think about periods of human history, especially modern history, as defined by means and modes of production — hence discussions of agricultural revolutions and industrial revolutions as definitive events of eras of history. Without denying the importance of production, there is additional insight to be gained from looking at culture and at modes of communication as factors that help define eras and societies, and as pervasive influences on and expressions of people's thinking, attitudes, and behaviours. For Canada, historian Gerald Friesen has recently employed a new periodization of history. Friesen divides the experience of residents of Canada, and their relationship to larger entities such as the nation, into four periods based on the predominance of oral, textual, mass-printed, and “screen” communications.⁴

Oral culture and traditional knowledge

Oral cultures are ones rooted in story, memory, and tradition. Knowledge, in such cultures, is difficult to abstract or commodify; it is almost always embedded in some context, in a ritual perhaps, a situation, or a group. Individuals are also embedded, generally speaking, in such structures. Aboriginal scholars have emphasized that oral and traditional knowledge embody distinctive views of the individual the community, of time and space — conceptualizations radically different from those of modern, settler society. Friesen, reviewing Aboriginal accounts of decision-making and group action, is struck by “the remarkable inclusiveness with which Aboriginal people approached collective action.”⁵ The narratives he analyses “emphasize community-wide discussion, the necessity of collective readiness for action, the absence of coercion, and the evaluation of intangible as well as tangible factors that might shape events. [These processes] make thought, action, and relations with the environment inseparable.” These processes are less linear and less

³ For the record, when I use the term postmodern I mean it in a flexible and not particularly ideological way. I do not mean to associate myself with some who come across as extreme individualists or moral relativists. My colleague Isobel Findlay, to whom I owe a great deal for the understanding of this term, prefers to talk about postmodern and postcolonial understanding together — postcolonialism involving a committed moral and political stance that goes beyond relativism. Others dislike the term because of associations of “political correctness” and nasty infighting in university departments. But on balance, I see no alternative to it, and I conclude, for myself, that to be scared of the word is to be scared of the future.

⁴ Gerald Friesen, *Citizens and Nation: An Essay on History, Communication and Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

⁵ Friesen *Citizens and Nation*, p. 49 (and the same for the following quotation).

segmented than is usual in modern, Western cultures: in a loaded sense of the word, they are less “rational.” As a result, they take more into account.

As an aside, 20th-century government officials interpreted these characteristics as indicating that Aboriginal people were co-operative by nature. In some cases, notably in northern Saskatchewan, they attempted to promote co-operatives among First Nations and Métis communities, as a kind of bridge to modern economic activity. This attempt was only partly successful. In retrospect, it seems likely that the co-op form was too “modern” to suit the surviving oral-traditional culture: too based on individual calculation (open and voluntary membership), on formal organization, on professionalized, hierarchical, and specialized roles. More research is needed on why such attempts had only limited success.

Text and Colonization

The colonization of Canada depended fundamentally on text. As Friesen shows, it was by no means true that all people were literate; and yet, their lives were shaped by literacy and by the modes of thought it engendered. New organizations like the Hudson’s Bay Company and the colonial state functioned on the basis of text, of records and accounts, statutes and policies, correspondence and orders. Text made organization and created the potential for control. With the new forms of organization and international trade came agriculture, settlement, and the remaking of the land. Indeed, it is suggestive to think of the dominion land-survey system — a point not perhaps stressed adequately by Friesen — as the imposition of a text onto the land itself. To cite provocative anthropologist James C. Scott, systems of mapping, survey, information, and cataloguing are fundamental to the processes by which modern states seek to control and re-engineer their territories: they have to “simplify” local societies in order to render them “legible.” This is a necessary precursor to their sometimes “Utopian” schemes of social engineering.⁶

Despite the huge changes it wrought, Friesen sees the “textual-settler” era as having much in common with oral-traditional culture as well. Most early traders, trappers, fishers, and farmers lived simple lives on the land, with a continuity of family experience and a sense of place and time not totally different from Aboriginal conceptions. Rather than an era of radical cultural transformation, Friesen characterizes it as one of continuity and occasional crises, of “family chains and thunder gusts.”

Print culture, capitalism, and power

Following Benedict Anderson, Friesen sees the creation of a more integrated nation-state and a national, industrial economy as part of an era of “print-capitalism” which made possible the “imagining” of the nation into existence.⁷ The significance of mass-distributed printed texts (such as newspapers) is enormous; so, too, is the role of publishers,

⁶ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale U. P., 1998), p. 3.

⁷ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991; orig. pub. 1983).

writers, and intellectuals in creating them. It is no accident that standardized national languages, national literatures, newspapers, and national schooling were major projects of 19th- and 20th-century nation-builders. People were redefined as citizens; the meanings of gender, of race, and of class were transformed. In this way, print-capitalism reordered society and justified the growing power of integrated states and integrated markets and organizations. The new, imagined community of the nation tended, over time, to usurp or undermine the autonomy of older and other concepts of community.⁸

It was also in this period that co-operatives emerged both as creatures of and reactions to this print-capitalist structuring of society. They are, of course, formal, modern organizations that use similar management and communication techniques to those of governments and corporations. Modern social movements reflected their era, both in what they fought against and how they did it. Important social movements of the 19th and 20th centuries — like the labour movement and farmers' unions, the co-operative movement, and women's and temperance movements — fought large-scale concentrations of power by assembling countervailing regional, national, or international forces. The centralized trade union or the centralized co-operative was in one sense the mirror-image of what it fought against (Fulton's point enlarged from the economic to the cultural).

“Screen” culture, networks, and the postmodern

There is a growing sense that new communications technologies are shaping a new kind of culture. Part of the newness has to do with broadcasting: the intensification of simultaneity, the transformation of time and distance. But it is really with television, with the arrival of broadcast *images*, that new cultural conditions were created — and a debate launched, concerning the effects of television on society, that has persisted to the present day. The growing importance of sounds and images was enhanced by the development of international film distribution, music videos, and cable television. With cable TV and then with computers and the Internet came another phenomenon: the development of “narrowcasting” and the fragmentation of globalized media into innumerable branches, along with the growing potential for interactivity of various kinds. This is the era that Friesen characterizes as “screen capitalism.” Do globalism, broadcast, narrowcast, images, sound, and computers constitute a new cultural order — a new way of thinking?

The cultural categories of traditional/oral, print-capitalist, and screen-capitalist society are analogous to the agrarian, industrial, and informational modes of development identified by Manuel Castells. He claimed that the new context “is characterized simultaneously by the emergence of a new mode of socio-technical organization (which we call the *informational mode of development*) and by the restructuring of capitalism, as the fundamental matrix of

⁸ It isn't clear whether Anderson's idea is a historical one that describes a certain stage for (mainly) European societies, or whether it is intended as a universal one. For a reaction against the possible universalism of the idea, and a consideration of how nationalism in developing countries might be different, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: P.U.P., 1993), esp. p. 9.

institutional and economic organization in our societies.”⁹ In other words, the issue is not just new technology, but new forms of organization and a restructuring of how capitalism works. According to Castells the key feature is “increased *flexibility* of organizations... Flexibility, in fact, emerges as a key characteristic of the new system taking shape; yet it takes place within a context of large-scale production, consumption, and management, generally associated with large organizations and/or extended organizational networks.”¹⁰ Though large corporations continue to be powerful, “a fundamental organizational characteristic of informationalism is the shift from *centralized* large corporations to *decentralized* networks made up of a plurality of sizes and forms of organizational units.”¹¹

It may also be that we can identify a different kind of popular culture and a different kind of postmodern person. A key to understanding the new popular culture is surely the concept of identities. As Castells puts it in a more recent book, “identity is becoming the main, and sometimes the only, source of meaning in a historical period characterized by widespread destructuring of organizations, delegitimation of institutions, fading away of major social movements, and ephemeral cultural expressions. People increasingly organize their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of what they are, or believe they are.”¹²

As is often the case, if we wish to see the future (indeed, the present) we can look to youth.

Youth, Culture, and the Future

It is commonplace now for teachers in my country to comment on the seemingly short attention spans of students, their desires for quick gratification in learning, their lack of deference to authority. It is not hard to see possible connections between these characteristics and the psycho-social world they inhabit, a world where global popular culture, music, videos, and the Internet are powerful common forces. People are bombarded with bursts of information and intense images; nothing in their local world looks absolute or unquestionable given the flood of images from outside. Corporate logos are the icons that adorn and give meaning — positive or negative — to their world.

It is easy for the non-youthful to see these changes in a negative light. A recurrent feature of modernity seems to be that each generation worries that the young are inadequate, are straying, are not properly trained or trainable. For these negative impressions always to have been true, we would have to have been regressing for a couple of centuries or more.

⁹ Castells, *The Informational City*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Castells, *The Informational City*, p. 16.

¹¹ Castells, *The Informational City*, p. 32.

¹² Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 3.

New literacies

One recent study of reading by young people in Canada stresses that “the relationship between televisual media and books is not merely a zero-sum game.”¹³ Bearing this out, a 1992 study concluded that “today's young people are the best informed teenagers in Canadian history,” because not only were they educated in the “three R’s,” but also by the “three T’s”: television, technology, and travel. “Television has revolutionized perception ... put young Canadians in contact with the entire world,” with the result that their broad general knowledge exceeds what any previous generation, as a whole, enjoyed.¹⁴ Television has revolutionized leisure and changed the way people read, creating a generation of “visual learners”: “young people, who are products of the television society, think differently than those who lived before the advent of television.” “The world and all that is in it is being conveyed directly to the eye and the ear.... To read well but not view well, to write well but not hear well, to memorize formulas without knowing when to use the procedures, is to be less than literate in the 1990s.”¹⁵

Henry A. Giroux, writing from a cultural-studies perspective, concludes that learning “is located elsewhere — in popular spheres that shape [young people’s] identities through forms of knowledge and desire that appear absent from what is taught in schools. The literacies of the post modern age are electronic, aural, and image based; and it is precisely within the diverse terrain of popular culture that pedagogical practices must be established as part of a broader politics of public life — practices that will aggressively subject dominant power to criticism, analysis, and transformation as part of a progressive reconstruction of democratic society.”¹⁶

Young Canadian activist Carly Stasko seemed to bear out Giroux’s ideas when she told interviewer Myrna Kostash, “I can’t stress how influential the media is for us. It’s the soup we grew up in... Music, radio, television, magazines, advertising. Everything is sponsored, all your fun things are linked to products or take place in a designated fun area where you consume products. It used to be that your peers were the people sitting in the desks beside you; now it’s equally the people you see on TV or the bodies you see in magazines. That's why we [culture jammers] emphasize making, not consuming, culture.”¹⁷

¹³ Robert Wright, *Youth Culture, Book Publishing, and the Greying of Canadian Nationalism* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2001), p. 94.

¹⁴ Reginald Bibby and Donald Posterski, *Teen Trends: A Nation in Motion* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1992), cited by Wright, *Youth Culture*, pp. 94, 96-7, and 174.

¹⁵ Bibby and Posterski, again, as cited by Wright, p. 97.

¹⁶ Henry A. Giroux, "Teenage Sexuality, Body Politics, and the Pedagogy of Display," in Jonathon S. Epstein (ed.), *Youth Culture: Identity in a Post-Modern World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

¹⁷ Myrna Kostash, *The Next Canada: In Search of Our Future Nation* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 2000), p. 219.

Economic uncertainty

At the same time young people are immersed in a soup of consumption and corporate images, they are also economically disadvantaged. Statistical studies of youth bear out the fact that the current generation of young adults face greater economic uncertainty, higher unemployment, and lower real wages than their elders. The result is “a paradox of enormous significance”: young people are seriously economically disadvantaged, forced into economic dependency on their parents, yet at the same time are treated as a lucrative market, and stigmatized as a source of crime and disorder.¹⁸ Kostash’s interviews also uncovered a situation of economic pressure for youth:

It occurred to me that there was no one among my interviewees who had not had his or her consciousness, and hopes for the future, shaped by this culture of white-knuckled anxiety about making a living, in which change can only be adapted to, never challenged or resisted. “Negativity” is all your own fault ...; “skill-acquisition” is a neverending process; and CEOs look for “personal flexibility, ingenuity, and leadership....”¹⁹

But young Canadians cope with this uncertain environment, sometimes in ways surprisingly different from those of their elders.

New modes of action

The debates about the impact of television, of image and sound, on learning and thought processes have been heightened by the spread of computers and the internet. Kostash also talked to “Canada’s own techno-evangelist,” Don Tapscott, who describes the N-Geners (Net Generation) who have grown up with computers as a generation of people who are “‘wired’ for social and working relationships that depend on collaboration not hierarchy, innovation not obedience, economic justice — the view that ‘I should share in the wealth that I create’ — for themselves at least, and skepticism about corporate interest.”²⁰ According to this description, the postmodern generation of Canadians could be inclined toward co-operative values.

Activists schooled in the 1960s and 1970s — the anti-war movement, leftist nationalism, second-wave feminism — may be perplexed by the new generation. “The trap for people of my generation — of the 1960s and 1970s,” writes Kostash, “is the nostalgia for the political *solidarity* that the earlier social movements stood for, but feminists after us ... don’t present feminism as being *about* solidarity or even collectivity...”²¹ “My interviewees were optimistic, even visionary,” she reports, about the use of alternative media, e-zines, film production in pools, free zones where readers are citizens not consumers. “Global penetration of local and national cultures is a real and present danger, but the creative intelligence of young Canadians remains transfixed by the possibility of retribalizing, of

¹⁸ Wright, *Youth Culture*, pp. 64ff (summarizing a variety of studies) (“paradox,” p. 80).

¹⁹ Kostash, *The Next Canada*, p. 20.

²⁰ Kostash, *The Next Canada*, p. 87 (Kostash paraphrasing and quoting Tapscott).

²¹ Kostash, *The Next Canada*, p. 305.

drawing into circles of relatedness, even at the computer interface, by the power of their own story-telling.”²² Kostash quotes 25-year-old Tobi Lampard of Saskatchewan FilmPool (a co-operative) as saying matter-of-factly, “‘We’re American anyway... If we weren’t, we wouldn’t be going to their movies, wearing their clothes. I battle this at the same time I soak it up. My concern is to do my art. And whatever it is that I will make, driven by what *I* want to do, will reflect my culture.’ Spoken as a true postmodernist — her culture will be as she constructs it ...”²³

Nationalism, at least of conventional realities, may be one of the casualties of cultural change in Canada. Robert Wright’s analysis of young people’s attachment to national literature concludes:

In the brave new world of post-nationalist, postmodern identity formation, [youths] may reject the Canadian canon out of hand and not feel any less Canadian. Although these circumstances may mystify the keepers of the canon, some of whom cannot imagine a sense of place without reference to “national identities,” it is quite clear that young Canadians — and indeed a good number of older ones — are finding this ideological dissolution enormously liberating. This does not, by any means, imply that Canadians will cease to be interested in the literature of their native land, or that they will necessarily stop locating themselves imaginatively within it. But in a postmodern, globalized world of seemingly infinite choice, the idea of *the national* as the defining element in Canadian Lit appears to have had its day.²⁴

A new national survey conducted in 2003 confirms that the 3.9 million Canadians in their 20s “are the most fiercely educated generation ever produced by this country, yet evidence suggests that what drives them is not corporate success or material gain, so much as the goal of a balanced life.” While they generally defy the labels applied to them, “There is one label they do carry: They are the most deeply tolerant generation of adults produced in a nation known for tolerance.” They are diverse in ethnic and national origins, strong believers in multiculturalism, charter rights, and the possibility for people from different cultures to live in peace. They are “fiercely proud of their country, or at least of the idea of what they believe their country to be”; yet traditional language and national-unity issues — traditional politics generally — do not move them.²⁵

Choice and values

Part of what is going on is the increasing claim by people to define themselves in terms of lifestyles and values — in terms of *choices* — and not in terms of categorical concepts such

²² Kostash, *The Next Canada*, pp. 315-16.

²³ Kostash, *The Next Canada*, p. 107 (Kostash paraphrasing and quoting Lampard).

²⁴ Wright, *Youth Culture*, p. 218.

²⁵ “The New Canada,” *The Globe and Mail*, 7 June 2003, pp. A8-9. The poll was a random telephone survey of 2,000 Canadians conducted between 21 April and 4 May by the firm Ipsos-Reid. The comments about support for multiculturalism generally bear out other polls, but younger people appear to have fewer doubts and reservations. See Darrell Bricker and Edward Greenspon, *Searching for Certainty: Inside the New Canadian Mindset* (n.p.: Doubleday, 2001).

as nation and class. Janice Stein has mapped out what she sees as a tension in contemporary Canada — not only among youth, but also in the general political culture — between a growing “culture of choice” and the continuously unfolding “rights revolution.” By the culture of choice she means the growing perception that choice is a good in and of itself. This conception is “part of the larger tapestry of radical individualism... The culture of choice is growing as part of the rights revolution, but the two are not always compatible. This is a tension that is built into the post-industrial age as structures become less hierarchical and as citizens become less deferential.”²⁶ As part of these changes, “autonomy and self-assertion ... have replaced loyalty and deference to public authorities.” “Believing that we have a choice gives us a great deal that is important to us as human beings,” including making possible a view of oneself as a moral being, affirmation of autonomy and dignity, and creation of a sense of control.²⁷ Stein’s central point is that choice itself must be grounded in commitment; that concepts such as choice or efficiency are empty without values behind them. “Even as we assert our right to tell our own story, we must listen attentively and fairly to the stories of others. What is important is inclusive and reflective public conversation, first about values and only then about choice, first about ends and only then about means, and first about purpose and only then about instruments.”²⁸

Canadians do care about values, even in a changed world. A study of Canadians’ values published by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) in 2003 had some interesting conclusions that could be relevant to co-operatives . One significant area concerned “integrating market values and social equity”:

Citizens no longer see markets as separate from and even opposed to civil society (an assumption on which the modern welfare state was based). Instead, they see the market as serving public as well as private interests. Markets enable citizens to earn a living and to take care of their own; they enable communities to thrive. Healthy markets, in turn, depend on well-educated and trained people, stable communities and families, a basic level of trust reinforced by reliable systems of laws and accounting, supportive social policies, adequate market incomes and much more.... citizens see economic development as a bottom-up enterprise, requiring collaboration by governments, business, education institutions and communities...²⁹

Values played an important part in the groups’ vision of a future Canada, but they were “not willing to accept the expression ‘traditional values’ ... because it [implied] a paternalistic and hierarchical society, which they also reject.”³⁰ The values the groups reached consensus around were: shared community, equality and justice (“each person is

²⁶ Janice Gross Stein, *The Cult of Efficiency* (Toronto: Anansi, 2001), p. 82.

²⁷ Stein, *Cult of Efficiency*, pp. 201 and 219.

²⁸ Stein, *Cult of Efficiency*, p. 226.

²⁹ Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN), *Citizens’ Dialogue on Canada’s Future: A 21st Century Social Contract* (April 2003), p. 5. The study was based on ten one-day dialogue sessions with an invited, representative sample of Canadians.

³⁰ CPRN, *Citizens’ Dialogue*, p. 7.

respected, valued and treated equitably; fairness for all”), respect for diversity (“valuing contributions of all Canada’s cultures/traditions”), mutual responsibility (“getting and giving within community; balancing rights and responsibilities”), accountability (“taking responsibility for one’s actions; making actions more transparent”), and democracy.

What does being a co-operative mean in this new cultural environment? Economically, co-ops focusing on the old “industrial” model of commodities, standardization, and centralization are already sometimes in trouble. In a wider cultural sense, co-operatives that depended on some pre-existing sense of identity among their members (as workers, as farmers, etc.) are often finding that such categorical identities have become less relevant. Some co-operatives complain that their membership has become more fragmented, less unified, and less loyal. On the other hand, young people and Canadians in general are increasingly concerned about quality of life, are inclined to think outside old boxes, are looking for ways to reconcile economy and community. There are opportunities here for co-operatives as well as challenges.

Co-operatives From the Modern to the Postmodern

How embedded are co-operatives in “modern” social structures and ways of thinking? The purpose of the following section is to give some deeper sense of debates about what is modern and what is postmodern; to indicate what this may mean for the academic study of co-operatives; and to introduce a discussion of what this may mean for co-operatives.

Interdisciplinarity and criticism

Like other disciplines today, my own discipline of History is brimming over with new ideas — and being enriched and transformed by new ideas that have brimmed over from elsewhere. There has always been exchange between disciplines, but it has, perhaps, reached a new intensity: so much so that interdisciplinarity is emerging not only as a form of trading among disciplines, but even more strongly, as a critical perspective on what disciplines are and how knowledge is constructed.³¹ Disciplines are dissolving around the edges: at least intellectually — the institutional structures of power, rewards, journals, and institutions are well-entrenched and can be expected to take a generation or so to respond. The interdisciplinary field of the study of co-operatives is only one of many such fields. Like the others, to study co-operatives requires not only that we *apply* tools from various disciplines — if that were all that was needed, disciplines would already have done an adequate job of studying co-operatives (which they have not). To understand co-operatives requires that we adopt a critical perspective towards our disciplines, see our blind spots as it were, and accept or develop new and unconventional tools of understanding.

³¹ See the excellent analysis by Lisa R. Lattuca, *Creating Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching among College and University Faculty* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001).

Postmodernism as perspective on modernity

In the case of humanities disciplines, it is, especially, ideas related to culture, language, and communications that are challenging and transforming disciplinary understandings. This is evident in the important debates, growing over the last two decades, concerning the nature of modernity. The term *modernization*, borrowed originally from social sciences, has fallen into widespread disuse due to controversy surrounding the determinism it appeared to connote. But discussion of *modernity* continues, and with it a feeling that we are beginning to be able to look at the last two hundred years or so of European-dominated civilization as a period, a period with certain characteristics, trends, and attributes that seem to be becoming less descriptive of the present. We are, in a word, beginning to *historicize* the modern era: to place it into the past and gain a perspective on it. This is the sense in which the term postmodern is most appropriate: not that all characteristics of the “modern” have vanished, but rather that we are beginning to be able to look at them from new vantage points, and to see them as less automatic or unquestionable.

There are many lists and definitions of modernity, but one simple starting point is to say that modern societies have been characterized by the dominant institutions of the state and the market.³² There were governments and markets in earlier times and other cultures, of course; but nothing quite like the all-encompassing forms of modern times. The modern nation-state is a powerful, centralized, bureaucratic entity with the power, potentially, to regulate almost any aspect of society; by passing new laws, it can overturn customs and traditions, override local or particular interests, in the name of a nation or a people. The radical dynamic that can be associated with the modern state has been captured well by Scott, who sees catastrophes in development as having emanated from the efforts of states to remake societies in a Utopian image of “high modernism.”³³ The modern idea of a market — the “self-regulating market,” Karl Polanyi calls it — is no less radical and transformative.³⁴ What is modern is not that people trade, which they have always done, but rather the idea that the market itself is a force that can undermine and topple institutions, and that it can establish new institutional arrangements and equilibria for the economy.

Perhaps it is no accident that co-operatives borrow and mimic these larger modern structures: their self-governance imitates the democratic state, while their business enterprise operates using techniques of the market. Co-operatives can be seen as a specific combination and adaptation of modern ideas — a combination appropriate to certain, contingent circumstances, and which may have to be modified under others.

³² Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

³³ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*. Scott writes about state interventions like the Great Leap Forward in China, collectivization in the USSR, and compulsory villagization in Tanzania, Mozambique, and Ethiopia.

³⁴ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

Behind institutions like the state and the market lie a host of other concepts that are fundamental to the modern world view. These include the idea that individuals are autonomous and rational decision-makers; the ideas of contract and trade as autonomous processes largely unregulated by custom; the concept of civil liberties including the freedom of individuals to communicate and form organizations; the idea of *citizens* in a democratic nation-state; the idea of parliamentary democracy and representative government; and the idea of formal organizations that can be established by citizens, legally incorporated, and function as “legal persons.” All of these ideas have modern *values* underlying them, especially Enlightenment values about the nature and autonomy of individuals and the value of reason, science, and technology to progress. Many of these ideas seem commonplace to us. Precisely because of that, it may be that we have fundamentally misunderstood some of them, or interpreted them in ways that are far too narrow for the 21st century.

Postcolonial hybridity

Because the modern period was also the period of colonialism (and hence the creation of countries like Canada), rethinking the modern is related to postcolonial thought. Postcolonial thinking is of relevance not only to countries like Canada that continue to try to make sense of their colonial experience and of relations between Natives and newcomers, but in fact to all who struggle with the legacy of European ideas and institutions — at this point, this seems to include pretty much the whole world. As Edward Said has made clear, the origin of colonialism was cultural: it rested simply in the assumption that European institutions were superior. This simple, radical, largely unexamined notion was the rock on which exploration, conquest, settlement, and systems of commerce and government around the world were built.³⁵ Revisiting colonialism offers an opportunity to rethink institutions that have been developed on Western models and see them in new ways; postcolonial writers can hardly avoid doing so.

Numerous case studies appear to illustrate the idea that people who have experienced colonialism often exhibit a pattern of creating “hybrid” social structures and personal identities, borrowing from and combining the traditional and the European/modern. One study of peasants in south India found there is no clear transition to a new society, but instead a continuing “ability of societies to retain elements of existing cultures and absorb and articulate multiple cultural norms... [M]ultiple and sometimes conflicting cultural orientations co-exist.”³⁶ Another study of Kabre village life in northern Togo also found that society was hardly unchanging, and that, instead, tradition and Western ideas were being seamlessly blended. Charles Piot wrote that life in the Kabre villages:

is ... as cosmopolitan as the metropole itself, if by cosmopolitanism we mean that people partake in a social life characterized by flux, uncertainty, encounters with difference, and the experience of processes of transculturation ... Nor do those Kabre I know see their culture as

³⁵ Edward W. Said. *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

³⁶ A.R. Vasavi, *Harbingers of Rain: Land and Life in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 130.

antithetical to modernity. Indeed, and in spite of appearances, they welcome and appropriate many things western... Cultural mixing ... is seen not so much as a loss of culture as an addition to it.³⁷

But one feature the Kabre did not exhibit was a conflict between community and self-interested individualism; Piot argued that the Kabre have a relational, less bounded self that is inherently embedded in community relations and rituals. Provocatively, this Kabre self led him to criticize Western social science as misinterpreting even the West:

My own view is that individualistic theories not only misconstrue others but also misrepresent the West itself. Westerners appear to me far less individualistic and self-authoring than our ideology and our theories suggest. I would thus challenge orientalism's polarized and hierarchical conceptions not by showing how individualistic Others are — one of the strategies of orientalism's critics — but instead by pointing out how non-individualistic (non-'Western') Westerners are.³⁸

In other words, studying how people in developing countries and postcolonial environments combine tradition and modernism, how they adapt institutions of European origin, may be a way to learn about new possibilities and futures for Western societies, too. “Westerners” or “Europeans” may find themselves invited in, to understand themselves and their institutions more fully by sharing other points of view.

Kostash, in her study of Canadian youth, was struck by how Aboriginals were inviting non-Indians to participate in Aboriginal notions of belonging and place. “This is a far cry from the cultural-appropriation wars of the last decade. In fact, it's the reverse: the invitation to read ourselves as non-Aboriginals into a profoundly indigenous mentality. This is *not* about fusion or synthesis in which the specificity of the colliding cultures gets transmuted into a generic blend.”³⁹

Co-operatives and the modern

Co-operatives have belonged to the modern (and colonial) era in multiple ways. At a deep level, the concept of the duality of co-operatives as associations and enterprises (a concept well-developed in theory, and enshrined in the International Co-operative Alliance's definition of a co-op⁴⁰) rests on culturally framed and conditioned ideas of what an “association” is and what an “enterprise” is, concepts that I have suggested are dependent on larger models of state and market. The principle of open and voluntary membership is dependent on the modern idea of rational individualism and free choice, which as we have seen is an idea not shared by those who write about non-Western communities (or by some

³⁷ Charles Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) pp. 23-4.

³⁸ Piot, *Remotely Global*, p. 20.

³⁹ Kostash, *The Next Canada*, p. 199 (also citing the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, RCAP).

⁴⁰ Ian MacPherson, *Co-operative Principles for the 21st Century* (Geneva: International Co-operative Alliance, 1996), p. 1.

who write about Western ones). The co-operative concept of democracy is really a microcosm of prevailing Western theories of the state and of representative governance; it was imposed as part of colonialism. Co-operatives are highly dependent on socially constructed concepts of what a consumer or producer or a worker is; what a member or voter or leader may be. Changes in the wider social constructs, or cultural hybridizations involving co-ops, are sure to force a revisiting of basic ideas and assumptions in co-operatives. Their character as organizations that cross boundaries is sure to put them on the front lines of social and cultural change.

Co-operatives as Liminal Organizations

Co-operatives are constantly perched on a threshold between things: community and market, local and universal, self-help and group action. Today they also stand on the cultural threshold between modern and postmodern cultures, colonial and postcolonial ways of knowing.

This betweenness of co-operatives is reflected in the common language that they combine “social” and “economic” goals (a formulation with which, in its literal sense, I disagree — see below) or in the more academic formulation that they are characterized by their “association”-“enterprise” duality. Another way of seeing their betweenness is to say that they both exist and seek to perform practical jobs in society as it exists; and that they seek to change society in doing so: a duality that sometimes lead to distinctions between “pragmatic” and “Utopian” co-operators who stress one function more than the other. There is both truth and awkwardness in these formulations, which are surely one of the central concerns of co-operative theory.

The dichotomy of the social and the economic

At least when oversimplified, the attribution of separate “social” and “economic” goals to co-operatives burdens them both intellectually and in practice with severe handicaps. One tendency is to view co-operatives as organizations that must compete in the marketplace against (often) larger and highly efficient competitors; then also perform costly social tasks that those competitors do not have to worry about. This kind of understanding likely lies behind the views of many economists, community developers, and others who are not supportive of co-operatives: once you start thinking this way, it seems apparent that the best a co-operative can hope to do in the long run is to be a business like its competitors. To the extent it performs functions they do not, it will be undercapitalized, backward, and go into relative decline. To the extent it competes with them, it becomes less of a co-operative. Oddly, right-wing economists and left-wing community activists (if I may be permitted to characterize them this way) are united in this sort of view.

A special case of this type of thinking would be Oppenheimer’s Transformation thesis as it relates to worker co-operatives. Franz Oppenheimer’s argument — still influential in Germany and to a degree elsewhere — is that worker co-ops in a capitalist market economy will tend to be transitory forms: they will either succeed as co-ops and fail to compete as

businesses, or succeed as businesses and cease to be co-ops.⁴¹ It might be said that mainstream economists hold similar views about all co-ops, not just worker co-ops, to the extent they think about them at all — I would echo the comments of two researchers who stated a couple of years ago that too much research on (in their case) agricultural co-operatives focuses on weaknesses of the co-operative form, and not enough on its strengths and how to develop its unique advantages.⁴²

In this — may I call it conventional? — analysis, co-operatives are exceptions that can only be held together by some exceptional religious affiliation or ideology that creates strong member loyalty even in the face of the handicaps of the co-operative form. The most prominent success story of worker co-ops, the Mondragón co-operatives in Spain, can be explained as a special case of Basque nationalist and Catholic ideology combining to sustain the co-ops. If this view of co-operatives is correct, then their prospects may be poor in the transition from a modern or “print-capitalist” society to a postmodern or “screen-capitalist” one. The kinds of uniform, integrative, singular ideologies associated with 19th- and 20th-century labour, nationalist, and religious movements are very much part of the “print-capitalist” framework. New social movements and “screen-capitalist” affiliations are different, more individual, and more transitory. But an alternative view is to revisit our assumptions about the categories of “social” and “economic” as these relate to co-operatives, and see if there is an understanding of co-operatives — a theory — that is more compatible with the new cultural formations.

In a deliberately provocative way, I have elsewhere raised the question of whether we should think of co-operatives as having “social goals” at all.⁴³ I have argued that we can view the basic co-operative form — the generic co-operative, if you will — as being an organization with economic “goals,” using “goals” in the common organizational planning sense to denote specific objectives towards which the co-op deploys its resources. Co-ops do not necessarily deploy resources toward social “goals”: co-op directors do not sit around the table and ask, how can we reduce unemployment today? How can our co-op lower the crime rate? (Some co-ops may have these kinds of planning discussions, I am sure; the question here is whether it is essential to the co-operative form that they do so.) In Canada,

⁴¹ Oppenheimer’s original thesis of 1896 is restated and confirmed by Friedrich Fürstenberg, *Zur Soziologie des Genossenschaftswesens* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1995). It may surprise co-operators in countries that have thriving worker co-op sectors to know that this view is deeply held by German theorists.

⁴² Per Ove Røkholt and Svein Ole Borgen, “Cooperative Change and the Myth of Rationality,” *Journal of Rural Cooperation* 28, 2 (2000), pp. 149-60.

⁴³ Brett Fairbairn, “How ‘Social’ are Co-ops? Tensions, Transitions, and the Social Economy of Co-operatives in Canada.” *Économie et Solidarités* special issue on *L’Économie sociale au Canada*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2002, pp. 112-130. For an apparently contradictory view (but where the difference may hinge on what is meant by an “objective” of an organization) see Yair Levi, “The Ambiguous Position of Cooperatives vis-à-vis the Issue of ‘Difference,’” *Journal of Rural Cooperation* 28, 2 (2000), pp. 122-35. A view that tends to see economic activity as marginal to true co-operative character is put forward by Jack Quarter and Jorge Sousa, “Do Co-operatives Differ from Mutual Non-Profits? A Social Economy Perspective,” *Journal of Co-operative Studies* 34:3 (No. 103), December 2001, pp. 188-197.

the core of the co-operative is understood by most co-op leaders to be the pursuit of economic benefits for members. Like all businesses, co-operatives have social impacts, and these are different for a co-operative than for other forms of enterprise because of the nature of their membership. We can speak of co-operatives having social “functions,” or of their founders having longer-range social goals in mind; they have a social importance: but this does not mean the co-op carries a double burden of social tasks to fund in addition to economic ones. We can change the language, even the theory, to reflect better what people in co-ops actually do and think of themselves as doing.

Thinking through dualism

Various sites of cultural studies — notably postcolonialism and feminism — have long experience dealing with dualisms: and I would speculate that co-operatives, and those who study them, can learn from this experience.

A first observation concerns the way in which co-operatives are treated by mainstream disciplines (and by economic developers and governments) as exotic. That is, the conventional form (for example, the investor-orientated or profit-maximizing firm) is placed at the centre of analysis, and the co-operative is marginalized as a variation or an exception. This leads to scant treatment of co-operatives and the exaggeration of — perhaps even an obsessive concern with — their limitations and deficiencies. The exoticness of co-operatives may indeed be fascinating (and many researchers and developers are drawn to look at them at least briefly), but exoticism is a poor basis for understanding. Defining co-ops as exotic leads to hyper-concern with their *differences*, which are defined as fundamental to their character; yet at the same time, this defining is done in a way that leaves co-ops always with the short end of the stick. They are fascinating but they can't compete, or they start off well but always degenerate over time. Somehow they just never measure up; they can't cope in competition with the mainstream model. It is their inferiority and quaint primitiveness, ultimately, that is interesting and attracts a certain kind of researcher; or obversely, it is their nonviability in the market that is seized on by other researchers as proof of their truly noncapitalist character — praising them for their failures, so to speak.

Co-operatives (in the mainstream view) have a place, but a narrow one. They are good for farmers (or used to be), for cohesive religious-ideological communities, and for developing countries. But they should not venture outside these niches into the rough and tumble of the modern, public, competitive economy, which is too harsh for them and will damage their co-operative character. By staying pristine — Utopian, philosophical, principled — they remain real co-operatives. Those who become commercial become debased, fallen co-operatives so to speak. Co-ops are caught in a Catch-22 where they have to choose between being pure and ineffectual, or being economically active and (in the eyes of some at least) degenerate. This Catch-22 is reinscribed for them every time an expert, an authority, a leader, or an academic re-uses the existing language and categories. The language itself embodies the means of their marginalization. Simply breaking down a mental barrier or two — for example, to allow that co-ops can compete with other businesses — does not solve

the problem, because it leaves them still carrying the double burden of doing so while also being good co-ops in their social/Utopian roles.

Does this sound like a caricature of how co-ops are spoken of? It has gotten to the point where I hear traces of these linguistic forms in almost every discussion of co-operatives. The more neutral and apparently scientific studies are, to me, the worst, because it is only by putting the language and categories into question that we can free our minds effectively. Neutrality does not sufficiently put itself into question.

The way forward? First, to centre co-operatives as subjects of the stories we tell. Second, to radically disrupt our language for talking about them. Third, to set aside our mental categories as much as we can to focus on the lived experience of people in co-operatives — what do they (we) experience? Feel? Identify with? Believe? Fourth (the reason for the “(we)” in the previous question), to insert ourselves as persons into the stories we tell; to think about ourselves at the same time we think about others/co-ops. Fifth, to pay attention to differences among co-operatives, and resist (or at least complicate) our urges to pigeonhole them as good co-ops and bad ones. Sixth and finally, to share with our subjects the defining of who and what they are. Interactive research, in other words; research with attention to qualitative dimensions, to theory, to language, to culture as the lived and interpreted experience of ourselves and other people.⁴⁴

From need to self-expression?

“Co-operatives arise from need” is a frequently heard mantra of the movement. This phrase is often used to explain how co-operatives arise among the needy, and also to say that they deal with practical, felt needs that tend to be material and economic in nature. Some might think that this idea is at odds with the new global economy in various ways. Affluence is greater in some quarters; perhaps that means needs are fewer. More fundamentally, the “screen-capitalist” culture stresses self-expression rather than meeting just basic needs. Would a co-operative based on self-expression be frivolous?

In changing social conditions, it is important to unpack what we mean by “need.” First of all, not all needs have led to co-operatives. Many disadvantaged or impoverished groups have not formed co-operatives in large numbers. Indeed, it can be argued that co-ops are a poor tool for the most needy: they are better suited to those who have some property, some status, some purchasing power, and most of all, some stability in their lives. Also, there are indications that co-ops do not usually spread when times are toughest; rather, during tough times (like the Great Depression of the 1930s) some co-operative models are tested and established, and people learn the value of working together; but the movement spreads

⁴⁴ There is, in the preceding paragraphs, an unspoken research agenda to consider the ways in which co-operatives have been gendered, colonial-ized, etc., through the ways they are conceptualized and spoken about. Naturally this flows into a related area of research, namely to study the ways in which men and women, Aboriginals and non, have actually experienced co-ops and played different roles in respect to them.

fastest in the better times that follow.⁴⁵ Perhaps it would be more precise to say that co-operatives have arisen from people's experience of need and perception of opportunities for self-improvement.

A second qualification is that, while any isolated group of needy people may choose to form a co-operative, it is typical that there are broader patterns in evidence. Thus we see that large numbers of co-operatives and often the best-integrated co-operative systems were created by social movements, above all by working-class, farm, and ethnocultural movements. In other cases, usually more recently, women's, environmental, and other social movements have been implicated.⁴⁶ In other words, people's realization of need and opportunity was not only individual or local, but was also shaped by the thinking, perspectives, values, and ideology of large social movements. These were processes in which certain kinds of needs were interpreted, constructed, woven into a broader framework, and operationalized.

When we see the connections between co-operatives and social movements in the past, it becomes less difficult to imagine how they could be connected to social issues and transformations in the future. For one thing, the classic social movements of the past were not only about economic need. It has been argued — convincingly — that the labour and working-class co-operative movements in Britain were also about creating and affirming a common culture.⁴⁷ Similarly, agrarian populist movements were not only about selling crops at advantageous prices: they were, perhaps above all, about creating cultures of pride, dignity, and self-respect.⁴⁸ Not only did this pattern hold true in North America, but anthropologist James C. Scott found it among the desperately poor peasants in the village he studied in Malaysia, where “the struggle between rich and poor ... is not merely a struggle over work, property rights, grain, and cash. It is also a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and present shall be understood and labeled, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame...”⁴⁹ Scott appropriately cited E.P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory*: “every contradiction is a conflict of value as well as a conflict of interest; ... inside every ‘need’ there is an affect, or ‘want,’ on its way to

⁴⁵ See the statistical study by Paul McLaughlin, “Resource Mobilization and Density Dependence in Cooperative Purchasing Associations in Saskatchewan, Canada,” in *Rural Sociology* 61 (Summer 1996), pp. 326-48. It would be interesting to know whether similar patterns hold true in other regions, sectors, and time periods.

⁴⁶ Brett Fairbairn, “Social Movements and Co-operatives: Implications for History and Development.” *Review of International Co-operation* 94,1 (2001), pp. 24-34.

⁴⁷ See, especially, Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996). On the German social-cultural activities of the German labour movement (not just co-operatives): Vernon Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁴⁸ The reference is to Lawrence Goodwyn's analysis of the Farmers' Alliance co-operatives in the U.S.A. and their connection to the Populist movement in the 1880s-90s; see Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) — this is a shorter version of his book *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (1976).

⁴⁹ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. xvii.

becoming an ‘ought’ (and *vice versa*); ... every class struggle is at the same time a struggle over values.”

Thus the idea that co-op members and co-op movements have nonmaterial components, are about more than “need” narrowly defined in material terms, is not a strange idea. To the extent that the postmodern world is about values, identities, and self-affirmation, co-operatives can speak to these qualities, too. They might have to re-interpret their history (for example, “need”), but they have a rich historical repertoire that provides ample opportunities.

Seeking the co-operative advantage

I questioned, above, whether we should think of co-operatives as having “social goals” at all. A complementary way of viewing things — of escaping the dualism of the social and the economic — is to bring them together by talking of “marketing the co-operative advantage,” that is, of finding the forms of economic activity in which the co-operative character is a comparative advantage rather than a disadvantage. This includes using co-operative values as part of marketing, building member loyalty based on member identification with the co-operative, and exploiting efficiencies that are available because members trust the co-operative.⁵⁰ Literature in recent years on the importance of social capital and trust in business lends weight to these views. Using the terminology of the new institutional economics, we can say that where co-operatives have a trust advantage over their competitors, quantities economists call transaction costs and contract costs can be lower than for other forms of enterprise. (These costs essentially have to do with the costs of managing risk, uncertainty, and unpredictable behaviour.) In other words, there is reason to think co-operatives can be more efficient than other forms of business *because of* — not in spite of! — their character as co-ops: provided they deal with their members in ways that actually do take advantage of trust and social capital.

To realize the importance of trust and social capital to co-operatives — the importance of culture — is to some extent to return to the roots of co-operation. As Per Ove Røkholt and Svein Ole Borgen have noted, “the cooperative values and principles, as revised and stated by the ICA, aim at promoting loyalty founded on a culturally based group strategy and member solidarity. In our view, the competitive edge of the cooperative organizational form is captured by these two bases of loyalty.”⁵¹ Terms like “social capital” and reduced “transactions costs” do refer to things that co-operatives have always done. However, there is a tendency for terms to become reduced over time to narrow and superficial meanings; new terms are often a convenient way to recapture some of the richness of language that has been flattened and lost. From my own reading, I believe many 19th- and 20th-century co-operative leaders had a rich understanding of the issues when they used terms like *service at cost, not for profit, for service to the members*. However, I also believe that these concepts

⁵⁰ Excellently summarized by Roger Spear, “The Co-operative Advantage,” *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 71:4 (2000): 507–23.

⁵¹ Røkholt and Ole Borgen, p. 158.

have lost their richness of meaning. Social movements constantly struggle to invent language in which to articulate their ideas, and periodically they have to start over.

My own suggestions for new terms to guide strategic thinking in co-operatives are three: co-operatives should pursue *linkage*, *transparency*, and *cognition*. Linkage is the best term I have found so far for the old idea of service, or for what the German co-operative movement refers to as the promotion principle or *Förderauftrag* of co-operatives: the idea that a co-operative exists to promote the economic success of its members. “Linkage” takes this a small step further to emphasize the degree to which the economy of the co-operative and the economy of the member become interlinked, acting like a single unit. As the co-operative tailors its service to meet distinctive member needs, and members tailor their production, work, or purchasing to suit the co-operative’s scale and capacities, the transaction-cost benefits are achieved. Transparency refers to the structures and processes that create trust on the part of members. This includes not just education and communication functions, but how the enterprise is divided into units, how earnings are streamed and reported, how patronage is paid: in short, the whole package of information, options, and incentives members face. A third important concept, I have argued, is cognition — the co-operative’s processes of receiving and interpreting information and adapting to changing circumstances. Given the importance of linkage and transparency, the co-operative cannot change alone, but must instead adapt along with its members. A crucial role is played in this by the different ways in which members feel connected to the co-operative. To the extent they share identities or values with the co-operative, and experience cohesion with other members, the co-operative and its members can adapt to change as a co-ordinated entity. There is, in other words, a practical business importance to the psycho-social connection of the co-op with its members — this relationship could even be a matter of life or death for a co-op facing drastic change.⁵²

I believe it is possible for co-operatives to rethink and renew their traditional principles and approaches to suit a new kind of society and a new culture, though they will likely require more flexible thinking, open discussion, and new concepts and terminology to do it. Restating the official co-operative principles is not enough and indeed too often serves as a fig leaf to legitimate the lack of discussion of what it means to be a co-operative under contemporary circumstances. If co-operatives do not depend on old-fashioned ideologies; if they can achieve comparative advantages based on their co-operative character; then there are important ways in which they can take advantage of the new cultures of the information age. These potentially successful approaches revolve around finding new forms of cohesion and identification between members and the co-operative.

⁵² These ideas are developed a little more fully in Brett Fairbairn, *Three Strategic Concepts for the Guidance of Co-operatives: Linkage, Transparency, and Cognition* (Saskatoon: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives booklet, January 2003). As stressed in the text, I am proposing these terms to stimulate theoretical discussion and to provide conceptual tools for people who are leading co-operatives. There may be better terms, or additional ones; I would be happy to see more discussion along such lines.

Exploring Identity and Social Cohesion

The essential thing, in a postmodern age, is that members *identify* with their co-operative. Identities very important components of culture, and may be the keys to understanding the “screen-capitalist” world. Increasingly, identities are based on individual choice and affirmation on the basis of lifestyle, values, or affinities. They overlap and they conflict or reinforce one another. It is in this environment that co-operatives, increasingly, have to win members and draw those members in to identify with and participate in the co-operative. The challenge for co-operatives lies in the fact that different members will have different identities; there is no cookie-cutter. It will require wisdom and shrewdness for co-operatives to know which values they should stress, in what way, to activate and solidify the various identities that build cohesion among their members.

Voluntary membership in the culture of choice

I have referred in the preceding pages to the concept of *choice* as an aspect of modern consumerism that has become deeply rooted in the psyche of many people. It is a comforting concept, because it holds out the prospect of ordinary people having some power over decisions in their lives; it is also a difficult concept, because choices are constrained and may indeed be in some sense illusory. The important point is to appreciate the subjective importance of choice to the individual.

To some extent this can be seen as a victory of consumerism, of the special culture of capitalism that began to take shape through advertising and promotion in the early 20th century. James Leach has said that “the cardinal features of this culture were acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society.” In the process, “this highly individualistic conception of democracy emphasized self-pleasure and self-fulfillment over community or civic well-being.”⁵³ Certainly co-operatives perceived such trends as negative, as evidenced in their early principles of eschewing advertising and sales promotions. To a remarkable degree, however, the idea that people form or affirm their identities by how or what they consume has become a fundamental aspect of culture. It is one of the features that seems most unlikely to go away. But precisely because identities are so important in the contemporary context, they provide a point of attachment for co-operatives in the consumer culture.

Choice can be good or bad for co-operatives. On the one hand, as organizations dedicated to open and voluntary membership, co-operatives have always held that their support, indeed their very existence, rests on individually made choices. This aspect of co-operatives is surely consonant with the culture of choice and potentially appealing to many individuals. But at the same time, generational change catches co-operatives in an awkward situation. Older generations of members may have learned to be loyal to the co-operative for a variety

⁵³ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), pp. 3 and 6 for the two quotation.

of reasons that do not need constant repetition; but younger members need to know what's in it for them, either in a material or a social-psychological sense. Their voluntary membership needs to be *won*, not expected. By and large co-operatives cannot afford to sit back and wait for people to discover them: there are too many causes, too many issues, too many images competing for people's attention.

Values-based attachments

There are already numerous examples of businesses and co-operatives that stress common values as the basis for an attachment with customers or members. The international personal-care products chain The Body Shop cultivates a particular connection with customers through its policies of marketing environment-friendly, socially responsible, and cruelty-free products, and through targeted charitable donations and partnerships in local communities.⁵⁴ Among Canadian co-operatives, Mountain Equipment Co-op is a large nation-wide co-operative whose appeal is based significantly on its prominent environmental and social policies.⁵⁵ It is a particularly interesting example because, as a co-op headquartered in Vancouver with over a million members from coast to coast, many members have little opportunity for face-to-face involvement in governance, discussions, or as volunteers. To some extent, the lifestyle and values of the co-operative represent a form of attachment for members that has to take the place of formal participation.

The cultural significance of changes in society seems to be that such attachments will become of increasing importance. It will be less and less desirable for co-operatives to be active in businesses where the key issue is simply the price of generic commodities — and where commodities used to be things like wheat or milk, they are now also things like mortgages that are similarly standardized and sold interchangeably over vast trading networks. Perhaps where markets are underdeveloped, or for example in remote locations, co-ops can still serve functions of connecting people to commodity networks; but it seems increasingly that the opportunities in business lie in developing relationships with customers. Interestingly, it is not just that competition on commodities is tough: it certainly is, but it is perhaps a more serious problem for co-operatives that there does not seem to be any *meaning* in dealing in commodities. If a mortgage is a commodity on a competitive market, why is it important to obtain one from your credit union as opposed to from another business? A problem with commodification, for co-operatives, is that transactions lose their meaning. A values-based approach can be an answer to this trend.

Interestingly, values-based business does not need to be seen as an additional cost burden borne by co-operatives. As the Body Shop example illustrates, the products handled by

⁵⁴ See the international website at www.bodyshop.com, and follow the link to “Explore and understand our values” where the values listed include “against animal testing, support community trade, activate self esteem, defend human rights, protect our planet” (as accessed 25 May 2003).

⁵⁵ See the website at www.mec.ca, particularly the links and items highlighting environmental activities such as the “Enviro Fund” (which receives a donation equal to 0.4% of sales) (as accessed 25 May 2003).

such businesses are perceived differently by consumers — they *are* different products — because of their relational qualities. Where social responsibility, environmental responsibility, and so forth are true marketing advantages, it is because they create new products, not just add costs to old ones.

A large majority of co-operatives are likely tied to specific geographic communities — they are local businesses with membership rooted in a bounded population. This local character is another variety of relational characteristic that can cause members to identify with the co-operative. In a way this is good news, because traditional forms of member identification with co-operatives as community-based businesses remain relevant. However, as the discussion of modernity and postmodernity has indicated, the meaning of “local” is changing and cannot be taken for granted. Globalization changes the meaning of what is local, without making it irrelevant. Where co-ops have grown up with members seeing them as institutions for “us”, for “our town” and so on, it likely cannot be taken for granted that these categories mean the same things to new members. To take advantage of member identification with locality, co-operatives may have to participate actively in articulating or defining what “local” means — to give it a more specific content of values, lifestyle, and identity. Where co-operatives are merging to cover larger regions, this task becomes even more significant: to earn members’ identification, the co-operative might have to articulate a regional character where no such regional character was previously perceived.

Co-operatives can have advantages in relational marketing because they already have a relationship with members and tend to be trusted by members. In a business sense, we can see the democratic control structures, the distribution of patronage refunds, member education, support for the community, and so on, as co-operative practices whose *purpose* is to create trust and therefore a privileged relationship with members.

The semiotics of co-operatives

One of the ways in which our understanding of co-operatives has been much too bounded by the logic of industrialism, modernism, and “print-capitalism” is likely in our understanding of their democratic, education, and member-involvement activities. In focusing on the formal texts of co-op - member relations (things like resolutions, newsletters, and reports) we may be capturing only a small and perhaps decreasing aspect of how members actually feel or could feel connected to their co-operative. If members spend thirty seconds reading a newsletter but thirty minutes interacting with a store and its staff, than the latter may be conveying the more important messages: but what messages, exactly, are these? Instead of bemoaning the (apparent) facts that co-op newspapers are uneconomical, that members don’t read, and that people don’t like attending meetings — observations that engender a kind of helplessness — it might be worth asking instead what messages members *are* getting.

The nonverbal communications of co-ops with members, and the indirect and informal texts of communication, are hugely underexplored. Co-operatives make statements with architecture, design, colours, signage, merchandising, advertising, and not least of all with the

behaviour of their staff. These statements communicate important things about the co-operative, which members evaluate. Arguably — I am tempted to say certainly — this less-formal and less-examined kind of communication may be the most important aspect of co-operative education and co-operative relationship-building.

To cite one example: for a research project I have recently been traveling throughout Western Canada visiting local retail co-operatives that are members of what is known as the Co-operative Retailing System, and interviewing their managers and elected leaders. When I ask about these co-operatives' activities, about what makes a difference to their members and their local communities, about what makes people sit up and take notice of the co-op, two things stand out. First is people's pride in attractive new or renovated facilities. Many of the store designs used by the co-ops are highly innovative, based on extensive study of stores in other countries and research on consumer and member preferences. These store designs are bright, open, pleasant, and inviting, even creating some "retail theatre" to use one of the buzzwords. Such designs are market-leading in almost all of the markets the co-ops are in. What does it *say* to local members when they see their co-op invest in such facilities? The message is certainly one of neighborhood pride. This is clearest to see in small and medium-sized towns. You can drive into these towns, down decaying main streets with poorly maintained buildings, and suddenly find a bright new Co-op store. That bright new store is an investment in the community. Its architecture is a statement about local roots, community involvement, and pride of ownership. And yet it is also possible for the same design to be perceived in a different community as foreign and inappropriate.⁵⁶

The second example of a nonverbal (or partly nonverbal) statement by the consumer co-operatives is their patronage refunds — not just the fact of the refunds, but the form they take. Instead of distributing refunds anonymously or gradually (as with the postage-stamp systems introduced in some other countries), a number of the co-ops make important events out of the annual refund. Calgary Co-op (the largest locally owned consumer co-op in North America) puts up billboards in the city and banners in its stores to celebrate the refund, as part of a message to nonmembers about why they should join. In a number of smaller cities, the patronage refund cheques are handed out in the stores over a period of several days, personally by the directors. The cheque, the handshake, the photograph for the member newsletter are all tokens of communication: in this case, about the benefits of being an owner and of being a loyal member.

We need to expand our imagination about co-operative education to include such nonverbal or indirect examples, to encompass advertising and architecture and everything that helps shape the critical co-op - member relationship. This is a call for a *semiotics* of co-operation: a deeper, more theoretically grounded understanding of the signs and symbols exchanged between co-ops and their members.

⁵⁶ Thus some co-operators on the mountainous west coast complained that the co-ops' design for peaked entrance portals looked too much like Prairie grain elevators! What they wanted in a co-op, to show it belonged, was the use of natural wood.

Democracy without voting?

Why are co-operatives democratic organizations — and what do we mean by this?

Democracy is another aspect of co-operatives that merits deep rethinking in a postmodern and postcolonial age.

It has often been assumed or argued that democracy is the fundamental feature of co-operatives.⁵⁷ Occasionally it has seemed to me that academics and intellectuals go too far with this, and write as though the purpose of co-operatives is to institute democracy. This may be true in some cases; but how many people, really, sit down around a kitchen table and say, “what this town needs is more democracy — let’s create a co-op”? There may be some value in seeing democracy as only one piece of a larger picture, an organizational characteristic that is important because of what it does for the co-op and not just because of what it is in itself. This is particularly true in the light of postcolonialism, when we may wish to revisit the meaning of democracy and the methods of instituting it.

What democracy *does* for a co-operative is two things: it helps ensure good governance by providing scrutiny, accountability, and a way to change officers. *And* its existence helps create greater trust on the part of the membership — the fact that they know the co-op is democratic is one of the reasons they tend to trust it. Interestingly, both these purposes of democracy can be served, for particular members, regardless of whether those members attend a meeting and vote. Direct personal participation may *not* be what is important, or what members are looking for, in contemporary co-operative democracy. If I am right in my surmise, what many members want, in the postmodern mode, is something more like a “latent” democracy (one that is there if they ever need it), or perhaps a “virtual” or symbolic democracy (one that involves them through images, symbols, and identification, so that they feel involved in the co-op and connected to it). Perhaps, instead of bemoaning low attendance at annual meetings, co-operatives should live with it and concentrate on other, different ways in which they can make connections with their members and invite their members to feel and be involved. Democracy does not lie in a rule, but is something more like a set of values and ideals that take different institutional forms in different contexts.

It is interesting to note that, in a recent volume on globalization published in advance of the 2002 summit of the G8 countries at Kananaskis, Alberta, Canada, two contributions *questioned* current Canadian practices of democracy. Instead of pitting global corporate power (bad) against democracy (good) as polar opposites (old categories), these writers positioned democracy as part of the globalizing culture that needs to be questioned. Reverend Margaret Waterchief reminded readers that First Nations pioneered democracy in the Americas with “a system of government based on religion, which the Europeans neglected to study or respect... Our systems of traditional government guaranteed the protection of every man, woman and child.” Perhaps, she mused, if that system of government had continued (and been combined with genuine Christianity) the high rate of

⁵⁷ An advocate of this view: Paul Lambert, *Studies in the Social Philosophy of Co-operation* (Manchester etc.: Co-operative Union, 1963).

Aboriginal social problems might have been avoided.⁵⁸ In other words, democracy as we have it was a poorly thought-out, ethnocentric imposition, perhaps not even the best version available at that time, and certainly now dated and discredited for its complicity in social ills. Later in the same volume, Len Findlay questions the value of democracy as “the latest Canadian staple” offered for export to the world. “Education I take to be the best source of ethical community, whereas democracy has increasingly become the creature of free market ideology and key to the latest phases of ‘structural adjustment with a human face.’”⁵⁹

Perhaps democracy, unqualified, and encumbered by the institutional forms in which it is practised, is no longer an untarnished good. Doubts about democratic practice require us to go back to the concepts and values behind democracy: belonging, personal dignity, spirituality, and security (to paraphrase Waterchief); participation, ethics, personal development and engagement (Findlay). Somehow “one member, one vote” seems like only a fossilized fragment of the larger democratic dream; hardly enough to distinguish and legitimate co-operatives. A real test is whether we can imagine a co-operative democracy that does not rely on voting. I suspect it is possible, and that Aboriginal organizations and youthful environmental and social-justice movements already have some of the techniques for it. Perhaps most co-ops will stick by their tried and true methods; but if we see some of them experimenting with strikingly different alternatives, then it will be one sign that co-operatives have grasped the postmodern.

Conclusions

The purpose of this essay has been speculative: to consider ways in which society may be changing, and to explore how the rethinking of co-operative ideas could facilitate their reinvention within the new culture. My main conclusion is of course that more thought and discussion are needed, including a serious engagement by researchers with the thoughts and experiences and self-definitions of people in co-ops. But beyond that, it seems to me that there are important opportunities for co-operatives that are consistent with new cultural trends and circumstances. Language and culture are *practical* tools for people and organizations to use in rethinking and reorienting their efforts. I am aware that my comments apply mostly to the co-ops I know, which are primarily in affluent, developed countries. But the nature of globalization and global culture leads me to suspect that my perceptions of the issues are not unconnected to what will happen in other countries.

I have argued that reflections about culture and about cultural change should have practical implications for co-operatives. What might some of these be? It would be truly

⁵⁸ Reverend Margaret Waterchief, pp. 63-7 (no title) in Marsha P. Hanen, Alex Barber, and David Cassels, *Community Values in an Age of Globalization* (n.p.: The Sheldon M. Chumir Foundation, 2002); quotation, p. 66.

⁵⁹ Len Findlay, “The Cunning of Education or the Democracy Staple? Which Should Canada be Promoting in its Communities and the World?”, in Hanen et al. (eds.), pp. 171-191; quotation, p. 171. The phrase “structural adjustment with a human face” is quoted by Findlay from Stephen Lewis.

postmodern of me to decline to make a statement, but perhaps it is postmodern enough to end with an open-ended list:

- Some co-operatives may have to rethink some of their “industrial”-era structures, such as centralization, hierarchy, standardization, and dealing in generic commodities. They may need to become more flexible and decentralized to match the structures of the new economy, and concentrate on niche or relational goods delivered within secure relationships.
- They will need to refocus upon — not be distracted from — their central missions, which I have argued are economic in nature.
- Without ceasing to offer material benefits, they will have to be more clear about communicating values as part of more systematically developing their relationships with members.
- Co-operatives will need to speak to the new culture of rights, choice, and values, not to old categorical identities of workers, farmers, interests, or nationalities. There is a huge challenge here that goes beyond communications to the basic strategy and identity of the firm (its cognitive processes). The implication of cultural change is that co-ops must not cater only to average or typical members. They need ways to deal differently with different members, to ensure that people can see themselves reflected in various aspects of the co-operative.
- Co-operatives will have to understand how members’ experience of the co-operative is affected by gender, by Aboriginal cultural understandings, and by many other factors relevant in any given milieu. The purpose of doing so is to ensure that the co-op elicits positive responses from different member groups, and also to learn from those groups to do things in new ways that all members may appreciate.
- Some co-ops may be bound up in the modes of textual communication suited to the industrial age: sending out the same texts to be read by all the members at the same time; expecting them all to attend the same meeting at the same time — simultaneity and standardization. Possibly a key challenge for some co-operatives — particularly large ones — will be to find ways to communicate asynchronously, continuously, in changing forms, and interactively.
- Co-operatives need to broaden their conception of communications with members to encompass architecture, design of facilities, behaviour of staff... in fact, to see and cultivate all aspects of the member relationship as the members actually experience it.
- Co-operatives either need to decrease the extent to which they justify themselves on the basis of how democratic they are, or they need to rethink and redefine democracy. “One member, one vote” looks increasingly like a 19th-century ideal that is taken for granted in the 21st century. There must be more to democracy if it really is important.