

Co-operating @ the (Cutting) Edge: Innovating for Social Inclusion, Sustainability and Solidarity Economies

Guest Editorial

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As indicated above, this issue of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* is dedicated to the celebrated Canadian scholar of the co-operative movement, Dr Ian MacPherson, our friend, colleague and research partner and co-founder of Canadian Association of Studies in Co-operation (CASC) of which we have all been board members. The subject of this special issue would have been dear to Ian's heart. As Ian himself pointed out, the co-operative movement in Canada is a rich and complex contributor to the social history of Canada and to its current character.

Immigrants to Canada, from Britain but also from Finland, Italy and Ukraine, brought with them an experience of co-operative enterprise that they applied to the particular needs and resources they encountered in their new settings, especially in the mining towns from coast to coast. The oldest established co-operatives were mutual insurance companies founded in the 1840s. Today there are an estimated 9,000 co-operatives and credit unions supplying products and services to at least 18 million members across the country. They are found in almost every sector of the economy, from agriculture and financial services through to health care and renewable energy. On behalf of their members and communities, they hold more than 370 million Canadian dollars in assets, employing more than 150,000 in a population of about 35 million. Canada has the highest per-capita credit union membership in the world, with one-third of its population a member of at least one credit union.

That history and character of co-operative Canada is embodied in distinct ways in its various regions, building on Indigenous traditions of co-operation and long histories of social economy enterprise in the traditional economy. The Maritime provinces are the site of the oldest consumers' co-operative in North America, established by immigrant British coal miners in 1861. The Maritimes remain a strong co-operative presence, especially in agriculture and the fisheries but also in new areas such as health care. The co-operative movement is a significant contributor to the distinctive place of Quebec in the Canadian federation and has a unique character within the co-operative/credit union family of Canada. There is strong, community-based and government-supported co-operative presence in all sectors and its credit unions are part of the financial backbone of the province. Ontario's co-operative activity was historically strong in agriculture, where it remains a potent player, but its largest sector is currently housing co-operatives and its activity extends into a range of enterprise including such novel areas as renewable energy.

The co-operative movement on the prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta dates from at least the 1870s and quickly took root in the agricultural activity that was fundamental to the region. Marketing co-operatives were especially important in protecting the interests of farmers in relation to the profit-seeking corporations seeking to purchase their grain and livestock. With the depressed economy of the thirties, credit unions became a critical means for farmers to protect their interests and control their futures. Saskatchewan credit unions proved innovative sources of the first automated teller machine and the first debit card transaction in Canada. And in 1935, Saskatchewan became home to the first and only

Consumers' co-operative refinery. By the end of 2012 there were 1,196 co-operatives and 55 credit unions in Saskatchewan employing over 10,000 people and supporting over a million memberships in a province of a little over 1 million people.

As in the rest of Canada, British Columbia saw an early interest in agricultural co-operatives but also in the vital fishing industry. Both sectors sought to protect producers from the predatory interests of corporations wanting to capitalise on their production. Consumers' co-operatives also emerged early as an alternative to company stores in mining communities and credit unions sprang up to meet financial service needs. BC now has co-operatives in all sectors and the largest credit union base in English-speaking Canada. Today, approximately 75% of the huge BC apple crop is sold by one marketing co-operative whose members are four other co-operative packing houses.

In Canada as elsewhere, co-operatives took root in contexts of potential or actual oppression, of social conflict, injustice and upheaval, giving rise to its fundamental commitment to voluntary and open membership, to economic democracy and concern for community. Globally and locally, these are more than ever 'cutting edge' commitments in an economic arena dominated by multi-national corporations without real citizenship, required above all to produce attractive quarterly financial returns for their shareholders wherever they might be. In the co-operative vision, the participants in economic life are first of all community members with shared needs for livelihood, including social inclusion. Their lives as 'managers', 'workers', 'producers' and/or 'consumers' are meant to be firmly embedded in that reality. Positive social outcomes, in the form of goods such as inclusion, solidarity and sustainability, are not just 'positive externalities' of co-operative enterprise; they are part of its purpose.

The seven contributions to this special issue aim to contribute to the discussion of that dynamic as it is being played out in Canada. In the first paper Audebrand and Malo document the birth in Quebec of a young multi-stakeholder co-operative, a type of co-operative known as a "solidarity co-operative". It is striking that the founders and workers of the co-operative are philosophy graduate students and the co-operative is dedicated to the facilitation of "communities of inquiry". The formation of the co-operative is a response to the need of the students to create alternative careers; but, more importantly, it is a vehicle to give voice to values of active political citizenship, democracy, solidarity and equity.

The second paper, by Harris and McLeod Rogers, addresses one of the most important challenges for Canadian society: achieving justice and respect for Aboriginal peoples. In a vivid account of their experience, the authors explore the connections between co-operative principles and Aboriginal values. The connections are explored through an ongoing community/university intervention aimed at establishing a co-operative for justice for Aboriginal women. A key message from the authors in this ongoing research is the need to recognise the complexities that emerge from systemic oppression that incarcerated indigenous women face and the potential that indigenous/non-indigenous alliances can bring to the venture.

The third piece, by Diamantopoulos, expands on the importance of co-operative education. He sees education well beyond what takes place in universities, board training and member public relations and argues for an "alternative journalism" and for a project of "cultural mutualisation". Drawing on rich historical examples from the output of several agrarian, alternative media produced in Saskatchewan, he demonstrates that alternative journalists can play an important role — even fostering a cultural revolution — in nurturing mutualist values, supporting social inclusion and promoting co-operative mobilisation.

Co-operative studies at Canadian universities still face visibility challenges. In the fourth piece, Thériault "mines" (as he puts it) public data on graduate theses concerning co-operatives written at Canadian universities in the last 50 years. His piece offers an insightful quantitative and qualitative historical account of the disciplines, methodologies, geographical foci and industries and also of the authors themselves. As Thériault notes, the authors of the theses were born between 1928 and 1987. One of his findings sketches a profile of the "archetypal" Canadian

graduate student doing a thesis on co-operatives. No doubt his findings will be relevant to ongoing discussions about Canadian graduate education concerning co-operatives.

The UN International Year of Co-operatives in 2012 helped generate significant efforts to increase awareness on the part not of only academic audiences but the general public about the potential of the co-operatives. The fifth article, by Balkan, looks closely at the websites of Canadian co-operatives and asks whether their websites reflect the co-operative vision, mission and values, or whether those sites exist simply to further the co-operatives' line of business. As former communications manager for the Canadian Co-operative Association (now Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada), Balkan is well placed to conduct this enquiry. Her findings suggest that although most of the co-operatives in Canada, including credit unions, identify themselves as "co-operatives", there is a room for improvement in their mission of educating on co-operative principles and character.

In the sixth article, Berge and Caldwell consider a number of Ontarian food co-operatives of various kinds. They are particularly interested in the capacity for educational activities of co-operatives to address the disconnect created by the food industry between food as produced in the field and the stuff that ends up on the table.

We conclude with the views of a thoughtful practitioner of many years' experience in the co-operative and credit union movement in Canada. In an interview with Peredo, Patrice Pratt reflects on current trends, achievements and challenges in the co-operative and credit union sector in Canada.

The topics considered in this issue are clearly not meant to present a comprehensive picture of Canadian co-operative scene. They do, however, give a glimpse of some its most interesting current issues and — it is hoped — help stimulate an appetite for a fuller understanding of its unfolding story.

The Guest Editors

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