Reclaiming the University for the Public Good: Experiments and Futures in Co-operative Higher Education Edited by Malcolm Noble and Cilla Ross.

Reviewed by Jan Myers

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Reclaiming the University for the Public Good: Experiments and Futures in Co-operative Higher Education

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In his foreword to this edited book, Sir Alan Tuckett OBE, professor of education at Wolverhampton University, sets a bleak context for further and higher education in the UK and asks where is there "space for the kind of education for democracy and exploration of alternatives that is needed to support people in addressing our challenges?" (p. v). In part, this collection — organised over 14 chapters — starts to explore and respond to this question and to bring some light, hope, and possibility of alternatives. The contributors bring a breadth of experience to the task, from educationalists, students, activists, researchers, community developers, and campaigners. Many of them are connected to the UK Co-operative College either through joint working or as part of the working group that is looking to transition the College to university standing. This is not a book about universities per se, although they do make appearance (for example, Mondragon University, Moshi Co-operative University and the Co-operative University of Kenya) and some of the contributors are in or, for various reasons, have moved out of university-based higher education provision. Rather, the focus is on higher education and, in the main, adult education, learning spaces and approaches — some transient and of the moment; some start-ups and place-based; and others with more longevity and 'formalisation'.

In their opening chapter, "Now is the time for co-operative higher education", Noble and Ross remark on events that point to the erosion of control and autonomy at further/higher education institutions, together with increased marketisation, performance and measurement frameworks expounded in neo-liberal and new public management policies. In contrast, co-operative higher education (CHE) is seen as an umbrella for alternative approaches whether within existing institutions or in alternative forms of tertiary education. The essence is, the authors suggest, in its "bundle of pedagogic approaches underpinned by specific values and methods: active learning, listening, researching, writing and thinking, participatory and action research, critical thinking, interdisciplinarity, solidaristic not competitive practice, collective, personal and individual reflection, self-awareness; inclusivity and collaboration" (p. 4 and pp. 7-8, list of CHE principles). 'Now' — as the time — is also reflected in changing experiences of work, and Noble and Ross highlight the growth of the gig economy and concomitant interest in social solidarity and co-operative forms of organising. As with most introductory chapters, this one also provides a useful overview of how each of the following chapters supports and extends exploration both conceptually and practically of CHE. From this, the reader can choose their route through the various offerings — whether the more practice-based examples (e.g., Chapters 6, 7, 9) or the more discursive chapters on different conceptualisations of CHE (e.g., 2, 5, 6). For the purpose of this review, each of the chapters will be considered in turn.

Tom Woodin's chapter is well situated in order to provide an historical overview which helps to place the development of co-operative education and training: the integration of vocation and liberal arts ideas of learning (p. 28), as well as the relationships between the consumer co-operative movement to universities, and contributions to continuing and life-long learning. It also provides a useful foundation for the following chapters and, as Woodin attests, demonstrates the usefulness of applied history in supporting an "understanding of previous co-operative educational initiatives" which then can 'inform the co-operative university today' (p. 24).

Woodin outlines the development of the university extension movement which through lectures and summer schools increased contact between and opportunities for co-operators. This was not without its tensions between those who saw such activities as ways of fostering social mobility and those who leaned towards learning and development as vehicles for strengthening the movement and a "motor for social change" (Woodin, 2019, p. 20); tensions which also fed into the establishment of the workers' educational association in 1903 as well as relationships with and around the Co-operative College. Woodin pays tribute to Albert Mansbridge in having the ability to bring together the discourse and traditional standpoints of co-operators, trade unionists, Christian socialists and Fabians in relation to universities and class, and in his conception of working-class education as co-operation between scholars, administrators and adult students. The WEA was often seen as more successful in attracting working people to classes than universities, but it did work with university extra-mural departments to provide classes in different localities, including, in 1911, helping to establish the North Staffordshire Miners' Higher Education Movement (Lawson & Silver, 1973/2013); part of a movement associated with a commitment to social change, emancipation, and democratisation of learning (Dewey, 1916/2001). For those wanting to explore historical accounts about education and co-operative movement there are many sources to choose from, see, for example, Jackson's microhistory on what was Lincoln Equitable Co-operative Industrial Society and the development of locally based co-operative education and learning (1861-1914); Woodin & Shaw (2019) provide a reflection on the history and potential of co-operative education in the centenary year of the Co-operative College.

As Noble and Ross point out CHE can and is taking numerous formal and non-formal forms from co-operatively organised and structured providers, such as Vaughan College registered as a community benefit society and Mondragon University drawing on a rich heritage of worker co-operativism and 'managed like a cooperative company' (https://www.mondragon.edu). Some offer mainstream courses or a combination of mainstream and co-operative management courses, others have more targeted provision towards the trade union movement, and charitable and non-profit institutes. While internationally there are, of course, scholars and practitioners scattered across higher education institutions and universities focusing on active and experiential learning, who embrace non-profit and co-operative structures and ways of organising, and who are involved in research on and with co-operatives as well as in programme delivery, these are not a significant feature in the collection (for readers who may be interested, see Cunliffe's excellent 2018 paper on being 'other' and embracing alterity). Additionally, their inclusion would most likely take the book in a different direction in relation to universities as a public good. Instead, the following chapters provide numerous examples of the realisation of or possibilities for CHE.

In Chapter 3, Benson and Ross point to approximately eight universities that self-identify as 'co-operative' from which they focus on three. The three examples all have a continuing relationship with the UK Co-operative College: Moshi Co-operative University (MCU), the Co-operative University of Kenya (CUK) and Mondragon University, Spain. The chapter outlines the challenges faced by each in their journeys to university. While each provides both conventional management and co-operative curricula, their governance structures differ with Mondragon as the most worked example of democratic practice and engagement.

In Chapter 4, Saunders introduces Chatterton and Pickerill's (2010) concept of autonomous spaces "wherein people can experiment and develop alternative forms of self-organisation and autonomous practices through a process of learning, trial and error" (p. 72; see also Pickerill

& Chatterton, 2006 for their discussion on autonomy and anti-capitalist and social justice movements, resistance and local activism). Based in part on empirical research as part of doctoral studies, Saunders uses examples of seven UK cases, namely: Birmingham Radical Education (2012-13; 2016), Free University Brighton, People's Political Economy (Oxford; 2012-13), Ragged University (Edinburgh), The IF Project (London; 2014-18), the Really Open University (Leeds; 2009-12) and the Social Science Centre (Lincoln; 2011-19). These emergent and 'pop-up' spaces offered a creative environment for expression and learning. That many are temporary is not a negative outcome. Both the needs and urgency of the times and context, the connection with grassroots (and in some instance student) movements allow flexibility to explore different approaches to collaborative learning; an out-of-academia learning space. It also raises questions about the pros and cons of institutionalising non-formal and situated learning. Of the two that remain — Free University Brighton who offer degree level courses ('freegrees'), and Ragged University, Edinburgh — it would be interesting to explore their relative longevity and sustainability.

Chapter 5 provides further insight to one of the examples referred to in the previous chapter. Written by members of SSC, the chapter describes the inspiration for the project drawing on the transition town movements and self-managed social centres in Italy initially in 1970s Milan (centri sociali) and a second wave in 1980s and 90s (see for example Membretti's 2007 article on Centro sociale Leoncavallo, and Mudu, 2004). It also describes the political and pedagogical project at Lincoln University — Student as Producer (https://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk/) as underpinning the move to set up SSC, bringing together students, academics and others economically excluded from traditional higher education. Both Chapters 4 and 5 use quotes from individuals involved in the project and it is interesting to see the diversity of views regarding autonomy and freedom. The authors (Stafford & Allsop) are open about the difficulties SCC was facing at the time they were writing, aiding a reflective process which for the reader also is meaningful and informative (SSC closed its doors in February 2019 after eight years; its internet archive is still available — https://socialsciencecentre.wordpress.com/).

In Chapter 6, Porter and Walsh provide an overview of RED Learning Co-operative (research, education and development for social change). RED Learning Co-operative has built relationships with trade unions through the provision of training courses. This chapter reflects on the opportunities and challenges as well as the core beliefs that underpin how the co-operative and its members work together. As such, the authors provide a brief history of the origins arising from experiences at Ruskin College, specifically in relation to the content and approach of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in International Labour and Trade Union Studies (ILTUS), and the founders' involvement in the trade union and allied social movements. As with other examples in the book (and particularly with the examples in Chapter 5), there is emphasis on Freirean approaches to critical and emancipatory pedagogies (Freire, 1973) and, in this case, Gramsci (Hoare & Nowell Smith, 1971) and Choudry (2015) to consider experience of trade union activism as a site of learning and knowledge (p. 117). The authors also explain the reasons behind their decision to register and organise as a co-operative and the tensions and challenges that this brings both in being an independent entity (separate from and without the boundaries and physical resources of Ruskin) and in re-establishing relations with the labour movement. Additionally, as is often the case with start-ups, are the challenges of building and sustaining financial viability.

Leicester Vaughan College (LVC), a community benefit society is, as the title of Chapter 7 describes, a phoenix from the ashes of the disestablishment of the Vaughan Centre for Lifelong Learning. This experience echoes those of many adult education and extension colleges as universities have retreated from resourcing this provision. It is a story that tracks a lack of understanding of the value of such resource, withdrawal of funds, empty promises, and a combination of many other factors leading to voluntary and compulsory redundancies and closure of the Centre. The good news provided by Faire and Gill is that LVC working in connection with Leicester Adult Education College in whose building LVC run their, as yet non-accredited part-time university level courses, are working towards fully accredited degrees in

arts, humanities and social sciences. It is still very much early days for LVC and there is some way to go to achieving its ambitions. Yet in many ways, it is following in and extending social and educational reformer Reverend David Vaughan's vision in whose memory a building for the new College was funded by public subscription (1905) and for the benefit of the community (Butt, 2013) and home since 1926 of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) now the Learning and Work Institute (https://learningandwork.org.uk/).

Chapter 8 moves us to Glasgow and the experience of Scotland's Centre for Human Ecology. Devlin et al. provide an overview of history of the Centre from its founding in 1972, and I particularly like the foundational ethos of challenging COWDUNG ("the conventional wisdom of the dominant group" — p. 147). The Centre's move to be an education co-operative is acknowledged to have been a "complex, conflicted and messy evolution" (p. 146). It had been part of Edinburgh University and suffered a similar fate to LVC when it was closed down by the University in 1996 only to re-establish itself as an independent entity in 1997, partnering with the Open University (OU) to offer accredited courses. The relationship with the OU ended in 2005 and the Centre migrated for a short time to Strathclyde University. Like the earlier example on Mondragon, the Centre's strengths were seen to be in its sense of place, culture and purpose, and since 2010 the Centre's location has been Govan, which the authors describe as one of the more deprived areas in Europe. Here, it has been running a series of education events, workshops and roundtables as well as being part of Govan Folk University ("a partnership of educational, arts, religious, community and social enterprise organisations which began in 2011" — p. 161). It has also, it seems, given ample time to thinking and re-thinking its ethos and purpose, and to reflect on the influence of different incarnations. For example, Devlin et al. present the concept of "co-operative intellect" (p. 154) which focuses on creating collective wisdom (education for the whole person; from the world for and for the world) and organised around social, experiential and action research theories and pedagogical/andragogical approaches linked to cognitive, affective and psychomotor learning domains (head, heart, hands) although here the concepts relate to education for co-operation (head), education with co-operation (heart) and hand (education as co-operation). The following sections then go on the provide more detail on each and concludes with a look to a future rooted in community (building curiosity (head), compassion (heart), courage (hand), and co-operation (community) — pp. 166-7).

Chapter 9 provides an example of situated learning and an earlier, short paper based on the Edinburgh Student Housing Co-operative was featured in the Journal (Macías & Ruiz, 2018), so it good to see a more developed contribution as part of this collection. The focus is an issue that affects all students — good standard, affordable housing in an increasing marketised sector as universities privatise or sell off student accommodation. Purpose-built student accommodation might seem enticing with self-contained studio facilities but can also lead to isolation and loneliness. As the authors (Ruiz & Shaw) suggest, the answer could partially lie in student housing co-operatives and that additionally the experience that "students acquire in being part of a co-operative [could equip] them with the skills they need to participate fully in the management and design of their own education in a co-operative university" (p. 171). By describing the experience of the founder members of the housing co-operative, the chapter provides insight into the setting up, organisation and running of the co-operative and the learning as part of being an active member.

Chapter 10 shifts focus from teaching to research and Swann asks and seeks to address several questions in this chapter, including: how can co-operative values of democracy, equality, equity and solidarity inspire research; how would a co-operative structure support research; and how in a Higher Education landscape of increasing precarity would a co-operative structure provide employment and financial security not only for teachers but also for researchers? (p. 186). As with teaching, the value and focus on research in mainstream universities is linked to research excellence measurements and benchmarking, attracting funding and producing high quality publications (for high quality read high star-rated journals). This is the context against which the chapter is set, and Swann looks at a co-operative model to "inspire the

practice and initialisation of research" (p. 188). Swann then considers the necessary principles and frameworks that could support co-operative research and provide possible ways forward, before which he usually provides examples including, Experiment a crowd-funding platform for scientific research (https://experiment.com/about); Byline.com — a crowdfunded platform where writers are commissioned and paid for by readers along with Byline Festival to help fund investigative journalism (https://byline.com/); Ferret — a Scottish media co-operative which amongst other things as its name suggests ferrets out fake news with a fact checking service (https://theferret.scot/); and Edge Fund providing funding to grassroots groups organising for social and ecological change (https://www.edgefund.org.uk/). He continues by discussing online platforms such as Edge Fund, and platform co-operativism as a mechanism for co-operative research.

We stay 'online' with Chapter 11, which considers the use of massive open online courses (MOOCs). Winther et al. describe their adoption of the US-based Massachusetts Institute of Technology u.lab course. Over 1,500 people have taken part in Scotland since 2015 and u.lab Scotland (a self-organising network) has hosted two international residential programmes (p. 213). Since 2014, it has been supported by the Scottish government, including commissioning of impact research (see Pomeroy & Oliver, 2018). Additionally, one of the authors (Valerie Jackman) protoyped an adaptation to the Scottish context — u.explore — a personal development online learning course co-produced with students from Edinburgh College. As with u.lab, u.explore is underpinned by Theory U, linking personal development to social change leadership through a combination of experiential, reflective and action learning, social learning, commitment to social justice and systems thinking (for further details, see https://www.presencing.org/aboutus/theory-u). Students were involved in identifying themes for the content of the course (e.g., teamwork, managing stress, problem-solving), and then rated themselves in relation to their perceived competence levels. The flexibility built into the design allowed both for directed and self-directed as well as peer-to-peer supported learning. This section also describes some of the tools and techniques used and the feelings of vulnerability for tutors in moving away from teaching to facilitation. There is no detail of the size of the cohort — it would be difficult to get the type of intimacy reported with one tutor and a MOOC-sized offering, so I'm guessing a smaller cohort than would take part in u.lab (see Sacks & Myers, 2014 for discussion of MOOCs and their variations, including mini-MOOCs and collectivist or cMOOCs — which would be more akin to what Valerie describes here; see also Semetsky, 2005; and the experience of Cape Breton University).

In Chapter 12, Hannah Bland reports on findings from qualitative comparative research at and with members from Lincoln Social Science Centre, Leicester Vaughan College and Free University Brighton. Some of the discussion arising from the findings aims to seek and understanding of how might diverging approaches to CHE and of organisational forms come together as a federated entity (in a co-operative university). What's interesting is also the arts-based methods employed in providing an iterative and creative process and "stimulating rich and unpredictable discussion" (p. 232), that in turn produced 11 visual collages as well as audio-recordings. Both discussion and collaging were focused on questions of meaning and identify (guided by the question: what does [name of co-op] mean to you?) from which emerged strong in-common themes of freedom (from constraints) and freedom (to act, to be), experimentation (becoming), mutuality and community. And an alter-education that echoes Freire (1973, p. 40) in his distinction between systematic education 'which can only be changed by political power' and educational projects (Bland speaks of social projects).

Chapter 13 sees a return to the question of education as a public good and acts as a concluding and rounding up chapter before the afterword provided by Birch (Chapter 14). In doing so, Noble and Ross set out the intention of the Co-operative College in its transition to Co-operative University with degree awarding powers which will then enable it to offer a "range of services to enable small-scale co-operatives to deliver CHE, access student loan finance, and provide central support ranging from back-office functions through to quality and pedagogic support" (p. 249); a federation of CHE providers with the College taking a lead on supporting and

facilitating the pedagogic and professional development of those involved (p. 256). CHE, Noble and Ross conclude, provides hope in leaning for a different future. This is echoed in the final chapter provided Sally Birch — a student and also a member of LVC who was actively involved in the campaign to save Vaughan Centre of Lifelong Learning. It is a fitting final testament to the power of adult learning.

Overall, this collection offers some uplifting examples of the ways in which individuals and collectives are striving to create pockets of Freire's libertarian education in relation to the 'teacher-student contradiction [whereby] both are simultaneously teachers and students (p.59; italics in original); a 'quest for mutual humanisation' (p. 62). Examining the different pasts of co-operative education and indeed in exploring contemporary projects may indeed as Woodin (2019, p. 19) suggests "provide the groundwork for understanding our present predicament and, in turn, [fashion] the future". This is no easy task and the authors do not shy away from some of the difficulties they have encountered. I am also slightly weighed down by contemplating the complexity of the tasks ahead in realising the concept of 'co-operative university' and balancing both systematic education and education projects; in managing the various threads of direct delivery of accredited and degree level programmes, and of supporting and providing continuing professional development to a dynamic ecosystem of small providers. But I guess that part of the ongoing journey and emergence of what's next and what if. As Freire has been a central character behind some of the discussions, it seems fitting to borrow his proposition in that co-operative education is "constantly remade in the praxis. In order to be it must become. Its 'duration' (in the Bergsonian meaning of the word) is found in the interplay of the opposites *permanence* and *change* … looking at the past must be … a means of understanding more clearly … [in order to] more wisely build the future" (1973, p. 72, italics in the orginal).

The Reviewer

Dr. Jan Myers is Editor of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies.*

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