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Alexia Blin, Stéphane Gacon, François Jarrige, and Xavier Vigna, *L'utopie au jour le jour. Une histoire des expériences coopératives (XIX^e-XXI^e siècle)*. Nancy: Arbre Bleu Éditions, 2020. 326 pp. Notes. €25.00 (pb). ISBN 9-79-1090129368.

Review by Donald Reid, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The editors of *L'utopie au jour le jour. Une histoire des expériences coopératives (XIX^e-XXI^e siècle)* recognize that a cooperative is generally thought of as a commercial venture that is co-owned by members who exercise democratic control of its operation. This definition is not wrong, but the articles in this excellent collection show that it is more revealing to work with the concept of “cooperative experiences” situated in changing historical contexts. Cooperatives are not the fabled third way beyond market capitalism and state socialism; on the contrary, they operate within and can play important roles in both. Nor are cooperatives harmonious entities in a storm-tossed world. Yet such ideas, realized and unrealized, themselves affect cooperative enterprises and the ways that they are understood. Boimondeau in the Drôme saw the production of community as being as important as the watch cases made in their workshops and rewarded members for both forms of production. However, such ambitions could appear to go too far. In the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century, the desire to place cooperation in a reformist genealogy led to dismissal of the radical, utopian elements of the original Owenite ventures. On the other hand, socialists in continental Europe critiqued cooperatives for not directly challenging the capitalist world in which they operated, and therefore not working toward a socialist future. But consumer cooperatives in Belgium worked closely with socialists and provided “the economic backbone of the socialist movement” (p. 127). In Lille and elsewhere in France, cooperatives and socialists worked together as well. The title of the collection reminds readers that the “day to day” of a utopia (a no-place) is composed of historical experiences at particular times and places of consumer, producer, and agricultural cooperatives, each with different goals, but sharing a sense that forms of cooperation would be necessary to achieve them. Half the articles in the collection examine cooperatives in France; the other half address cooperatives as they manifested themselves elsewhere in Europe, Russia and the Soviet Union, the United States, and Cuba. This allows for an exploration of commonalities and differences in the experiences of a wide diversity of cooperatives.

Reviewing past work on cooperatives, the editors note that “failure constitutes a sort of collective unconscious that largely underpins the great story which, since the end of the nineteenth century, exults the successes and glorifies the most devoted militants” (p. 117). Cooperatives participate in organizations of cooperatives, but members think of their experiences and their meaning largely with individual cooperatives rather than in an historical narrative like those of capitalism

or socialism. There is no place in the accounts that cooperators tell for the celebration of destruction, creative or otherwise, found in the accounts of capitalism, or the inspiring defeats of socialists, never written off as failures. It is emblematic that the collection begins with the history of a cooperative of diamond cutters in the Jura that lost control over its commercial representative, whose fraudulent dealings led to its demise. This is followed by the study of a consumer cooperative in Wisconsin that exploited its non-member employees, paying them less than competitors and demanding unpaid labor, all in the name of the revered values of cooperation. Other essays examine producer cooperatives where skilled-worker members manage less skilled non-member workers. In sum, cooperatives are not immune to the economic and social contexts in which they exist. However, one of the most innovative elements of the collection is that the essays do not present cooperatives operating solely or even primarily as responses to change initiated from the exterior. A number of the essays examine cooperatives as themselves agents of modernization, broadly conceived, in a variety of contexts.

Modernization initiated by cooperatives could take a variety of forms. Bakeries were the most widespread consumer cooperatives in nineteenth-century France. As François Jarrige shows, they played a central role in overcoming French antipathy to bread made using dough-making machines in place of human labor. Consumer cooperatives also credited themselves with the introduction of self-service in place of employees providing goods to the client. However, the most significant role of cooperatives as agents of modernization was in agriculture. A number of essays in the collection explore the ways in which cooperatives provided farmers in France and Italy access to land, machinery and markets, so they could participate in and forward social and economic modernization, rather than being solely subject to it.

Cooperatives ideally have some sort of democratic, self-management ethos and practice, but modernization requires change and this change often involved cooperatives bringing in or being given experts not drawn from the membership of the cooperative. This was the case of viticultural cooperatives that wanted to improve the quality of their production to respond to new consumer demand. In order to produce high quality AOC wine, the wine-grape growers of Buzet (Lot-et-Garonne), studied by Stéphane Le Bras, drew on the expertise and authority of oenologists to enforce new practices among their members. Bruno Prati analyses the very different situation of the Fonditori cooperative in Modena (Italy), created by fired Communist foundry workers in 1950. Close to two decades later, the replacement of union leaders with credentialed technicians shifted the focus from politics to productivity and broke the ties between sociability in the workplace and outside of it.

If the introduction of experts could challenge the *autogestionnaire* culture of the model cooperative, the important role of the state in the histories of a diversity of cooperatives in *L'utopie au jour le jour* complements and complicates a narrative of cooperatives as institutions nominally outside the purview of the state. In some cases, the initiative to involve state institutions came from organizations of cooperatives and their supporters themselves. In public schools in France, teachers taught about cooperatives in the classroom and fostered the practice of cooperation by establishing student-run cooperatives. Other partisans promoted cooperation as a means for public schools to acquire and to share materials otherwise inaccessible. France and Italy employed a variety of forms of state interventions to favor the creation and development of agricultural cooperatives in the decades after 1945 as a means of fostering change while maintaining elements of the existing farming population.

Cooperatives outside of democratic capitalist polities have been created and promoted by the state as a means to control populations. Although British imperial officials spoke of cooperatives established in the Empire for the indigenous populations as agents of civilization and modernization, Mo Moulton shows that these cooperatives were directed by officials appointed by the imperial authorities. When the cocoa growers in Ghana created a cooperative on their own, the Empire took control of it. The cooperatives set up for the indigenous—unlike those of European-origin settlers (which excluded the native populations)—were not democratic in governance. They functioned as a means to discipline and control members and to orient production to satisfy global markets.

State socialist polities created cooperatives, but never saw them as an end in themselves. In 1989, state farms occupied 82% of the agricultural land in Cuba; in 2019, close to 80% of this land was in the hands of cooperatives. As Marie Aureille shows, Communist Cuba initially saw cooperatives as training grounds to prepare farmers for entry into farms operated by the state, but with the crisis precipitated by the end of Soviet assistance to Cuba, land was transferred from state farms to cooperatives. However, these cooperatives had to obtain supplies from the state, purchase the machinery of the state farms, and sell what they produced to the state to market. Farmers who were directors in the cooperatives were replaced by professional cadres from the state farms. In sum, cooperatives in Cuba were given responsibility for what the state farms could no longer handle, but with the expectation that when the situation improved, the cooperatives would give way to state farms.

In France and elsewhere in Europe, the highpoint of the cooperative movement was from the late nineteenth century until the 1960s. During this period, some consumer cooperatives used revenue that would otherwise have gone to member dividends to operate mutual aid funds for members. This too was an innovative form of modernization. After World War II, provision of extensive social welfare benefits by European states removed the need for this important benefit consumer cooperatives had offered members. Ironically, this change was achieved through the actions of socialists, who had received financial backing from consumer cooperatives. More important in the history of consumer cooperatives, however, was the appearance of large supermarkets with which cooperatives had difficulty competing. In this situation, a new generation of consumer cooperatives has emerged in recent decades. They are the work of a socially diverse membership in search of higher quality food in smaller stores with, as Amélie Artis, Anaïs Bovet, and Alain Mélo recognize, “the question of socio-economic justice at the heart of their project” (p. 292). These cooperatives are different from others examined in *L’utopie au jour le jour* because cooperatives today confront a political economy which creates consumers with needs and dissatisfactions unlike those in the past.

Producers’ cooperatives have changed as well. Many new cooperatives have been created by workers in enterprises whose owners had shut them down, often in order to move production elsewhere in the world. In line with the new wave of consumer cooperatives concerned with creating and fostering community in an anomic social world, the first goal of these producer cooperatives is to create employment for an existing labor force. This reverses the standard business mantra where production and marketing take precedence and creating employment is seen as a way of meeting these goals. The most successful of these cooperatives, like FraLib, a producer of tea in the Bouches-du-Rhône examined by Olivier Lemort, has both improved the product sold and successfully marketed their community as well as their tea to those seeking community in places like new consumer cooperatives.

Successful cooperatives in the past have been predicated on a level of commitment and concomitant geographical stability of members. By their nature, producer cooperatives today are threatened by, and are a response to, the situation and needs of the precariat of today's economy. If E. P. Thompson's "moral economy" was a driving force in creation of the initial cooperatives two centuries ago, it has reemerged in the new cooperative ventures of the contemporary period, offering a critique and alternative to the workings of financial capitalism and of globalization. As the internet changes what stability means and offers new avenues of communication and of bringing producers and consumers together, cooperatives will continue to evolve in this new historical context.

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