

New Book: Cooperatives at Work

by Matt Noyes

Members of the Japan Robert Owen Association—especially Ishizuka Hideo—may know of George Cheney, the author of the excellent book *Values at Work: Employee Participation Meets Market Pressure at Mondragon*. When I moved back to Colorado Springs in 2018, he was teaching at the University of Colorado; he has since retired. I was fortunate to get to know George and, in late 2018, he told me about an interesting opportunity: Emerald Publishers had asked him to write a short book on cooperatives for their Future of Work series. Would I like to co-write it? Without hesitation, I said, “yes!” I had no idea how big an undertaking this small book would be.

It was easy to brainstorm an exciting and wide-ranging list of topics—it is always easier to ask questions than to answer them—but even though George has written widely on the theory and practice of cooperativism, we soon realized we needed more help. I suggested we add a co-author, Emi Do, an experienced cooperative organizer from Canada who at the time was completing her PhD in agricultural economics at Tokyo University of Agriculture (she now works with Sustainability Solutions Group, a multinational worker cooperative). With George as our leader and principal author, we started planning our research.

We knew from the start that this book would be different from other books on worker cooperatives. We also knew it was not enough to focus on US and/or European examples. We knew we had to take seriously Naomi Klein’s argument

that the climate emergency “changes everything,” both the context within which worker cooperatives operate as well as their strategic role. *We* saw worker cooperatives as important vehicles for social, cultural, political, economic, and ecological change, but did cooperativists see their organizations that way? Had cooperatives changed their strategy or practice? In what ways? We decided that the best way to get answers to our questions was to focus our research on expert interviews with practitioners.

Over the course of two years we conducted more than 60 interviews with people working in the Americas (U.S., Canada, Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina), Africa (Kenya, Rwanda), Asia-Pacific (India, Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand), and Europe (Finland, UK, Spain, Italy). Several Japanese cooperativists, including Sagara Takao and Tanaka Shigeru, generously shared their knowledge and experience with us. We were not able to address the new worker cooperative law, unfortunately, but we hope our book will leave readers wanting to read more about Japanese cooperatives.

Our questions varied with each interview but there were some common themes:

- Why are you organized as a worker cooperative? Is the worker cooperative form important, why?
- What are your values or principles? Why are they important to your practice?
- Is your work connected to solidarity economy or other movements?
- What role does innovation play in your work?
- What are the main challenges you face?
- How are you responding to the climate emergency? Have your strategy or practices changed? How?
- What role does education play in your work?
- How do you see the future? Where do you hope to be in five or ten years?

Conducting, transcribing, and sometimes translating, the interviews was time consuming, but the real challenge was writing. How to do justice to the important, often ground-breaking work being done in so many different contexts, on the one hand, while taking into account academic literature on multiple themes in cooperative studies, on the other?

At George's suggestion, we recruited Marcelo Vieta, a prolific researcher and educator at the University of Toronto known for his writing on worker-recuperated and self-managed factories in Argentina and Italy. Marcelo generously shared his field research, as well. Reflecting our determination to make the climate emergency a central theme of our book, we recruited Joseba Azkarraga, currently a professor at the University of the Basque country who writes about solidarity economy, socioecological transition, and postgrowth/degrowth. Charlie Michel, a graduate student at St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, helped with general research and drafted the final chapter on cooperative education.

We initially divided up the writing work by themes, each of us taking primary responsibility for one or two chapters; my main responsibility was the chapter on innovation and entrepreneurship. But, as the work progressed, we increasingly collaborated across themes, co-writing most or all of each chapter. The work progressed slowly, in part because of Covid-19 and various demands on our attention, but we found the cooperative writing process rich and inspiring.

The central question of the book is how can worker cooperatives contribute to the fundamental social, economic, political and cultural transformation that is urgently needed, given the climate emergency and the multiple interwoven crises that are bound up with it? What we found is a cooperative movement in a moment of intense evolution, with shifting forms, practices, and visions.

What we learned

Worker cooperatives are responding to crisis, collectively and creatively.

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the tight connections between work, community, politics, healthcare, environment, and economics, as well as the stark inequalities dividing people. We found a wide range of cooperative responses, from local mutual aid groups that sprang up across the United States – including in my home town – to cooperative health care and food supply chains created in the mountains of Ecuador.

As expected, we found many worker co-ops responded to crises by forming or joining networks of cooperatives, as in Italy's Fuorimercato, the Mondragón co-ops, Latin America's Comparte Network, the co-op economy of Emilia Romagna, and the US's Industrial Commons. We also found cooperatives in broader alliances including mutual aid initiatives, social movement organizations, labor unions, commons, solidarity economy organizations, and so on.

Cooperatives like the Kola Nut Collaborative in Chicago, USA, are helping to create multiple types of organization – time banks, needs-and-offers exchanges, mutual aid projects – united by cooperative economics, popular education, and self-organization. Likewise, the Barcelona-based group FemProcomuns (“We Make Commons”) mixes commons and cooperative forms, including energy, transportation, communications, education, and platform cooperatives. Which form is used depends on the context, the people involved, and their needs and goals. As one of the most interesting co-ops we studied, Guerrilla Translation, puts it, “The crisis is a killer, but also a muse.” (<https://www.guerrillatranslation.org/the-guerrilla-translation-manifesto/>)

Worker cooperatives are deepening democracy.

Among the threats posed by this current complex of crises is a general crisis in democratic institutions, from the USA, to Brazil, to Myanmar. We found that worker cooperatives are exploring different meanings and practices of democracy. For example, Unicorn Grocery, in Manchester, UK has embraced sociocracy—a coordinated horizontal decision-making structure—as a way of efficiently organizing larger-scale operations without a traditional hierarchical structure. The large and long-standing Venezuelan cooperative CECOSOLA has a non-hierarchical approach to decision-making based on constant conversation among members that has produced a directly democratic and humane working culture.

Worker cooperatives like ChiFresh, in Chicago, USA, which works with formerly incarcerated people, use the cooperative form to build equity and social justice in communities that have suffered discrimination and exploitation over several generations. Incorporating DIEJ—diversity, inclusion, equity, and justice—is central to many worker cooperatives, as is the uplifting of youth activism. At the same time, in many parts of the world cooperatives play an important role in democratizing larger social relations, for example cooperatives like the coffee and honey producer Yomol ATel in the Mexican state of Chiapas.

Worker cooperatives are innovative, and more importantly, transformative.

In the U.S., worker cooperatives still have the image of being old-fashioned: like a bakery using medieval methods and tools. In fact, they are capable of technological innovation of the highest order, as seen in Mondragon's manufacturing cooperatives and the rise of platform and other tech cooperatives around the world. (We examine cooperatives' use of blockchain technology, for example.) Cooperatives like Loomio, in New Zealand, are pioneers in the

adoption of decentralized and distributed organization and flat management structures. As non-capitalist enterprises, worker cooperatives offer an alternative to the dominant capitalist economy, and its traditional management, ownership, and governance structures. But we found that the most innovative aspect of worker cooperatives is their capacity for contributing to radical social transformation: the creation of new social, economic, political and cultural relations. Members of the DisCO (Distributed Cooperative Organizations) network, for example, have adopted decolonial, feminist, and anti-capitalist principles and practices.

Moreover, we found that worker cooperatives are open to change and renewal, on every level, questioning their principles, strategy, organizational forms/practices, governance, development practices, education, technology, and even the co-op form itself. The return to cooperativism's radical roots while experimenting with new organizational forms and practices are at the heart of what is being called "New Cooperativism" (a concept featured in the latest special issue of the Journal of Cooperative Studies).

Worker cooperatives are contributing to community and building solidarity.

Perhaps the most profound shift in meaning and practice we discovered among worker cooperatives has to do with the idea of community. Going far beyond the simple call to practice concern for community, as the ICA's Principle 7 has it, we found cooperatives extending their commitment to democracy beyond the boundaries of the enterprise. In Rwanda, "cooperatives of trust" are being used to overcome the legacies of genocide. In Madison, Wisconsin, USA Community Pharmacy supported the Black Lives Matter movement, by providing low-cost first aid supplies.

There is also an "ontological shift" underway, as David Bollier and Silke Helfrich term it. Under the watchword "Buen Vivir" (good life), cooperatives

organized by indigenous peoples across South America are merging ancestral ways of doing and knowing with contemporary solidarity-based and even market-based economic practices. This is not just a matter of deploying cooperative structures; it is a cultural shift away from the dominant paradigms of linear progress and endless growth.

We saw how solidarity, which is increasingly understood as an economic framework (solidarity economy), is also a factor of production that is key to cooperative success: Luis Razeto's "C Factor." Inspired by feminist economics, worker cooperatives are placing care at the center of their work. Movements for food sovereignty, led by groups like La Via Campesina and worker cooperatives like Equal Exchange are challenging the basic paradigm of capitalist agriculture on a global level.

Too few worker cooperatives have truly internalized the climate emergency.

In Chapter 5, on Cooperative Ecology, we question the paradigms of growth and development from the standpoint of ecological crisis. The cooperatives we studied are responding to the increasing demands created by the climate crisis in practice, and yet only a few have explicitly altered their strategic vision or operational priorities to reflect these deep and dangerous changes. Broadly speaking, conventional cooperative organizations such as Mondragón Corporation emphasize distributive justice for members and communities yet do not question the continuous accumulation of capital and its destructive implications. We did find some notable exceptions.

For Sustainability Solutions Group (SSG), a multinational environmental consultancy that advises local governments on climate policy and practices, addressing climate change is baked into its mission and operations. The organization prides itself on being a worker cooperative that prioritizes breaking the cycle of social dynamics that disenfranchise and sideline marginalized

communities.

Australia's Earthworker Cooperative was started by veteran labor and environmental movement organizers who decided that "there simply is not time" to pursue change through traditional channels of advocacy and electoral politics. Workers themselves, they concluded, must start building and installing the alternative energy system we need, now. To that end Earthworker created Earthworker Energy Manufacturing Cooperative, which produces and installs solar-powered water heaters. They have worked with labor unions like the Building Labor Federation to promote conversion to solar energy and are now partnering with a worker recuperated factory in Argentina to start similar cooperatives there.

Education remains vital to cooperative regeneration.

We found worker cooperatives employing an impressive array of innovative educational practices. In addition to Mondragon's LEINN (Leadership, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship) program, which is now a global business, we highlight the work of the Kenyan student theater cooperative Chipukizi: Voice of Drama that brings cooperative values to the general public through didactic plays. We also look at other forms of educational play: from cooperative board games to a cooperative writing group—of which I was a part—that authored a speculative fiction radio play about cooperatives. Combining formal, informal, and non-formal learning, worker cooperatives continue to prove Arizmendiarieta's maxim that they are as much educational projects taking a business form, as business projects that take an educational form.

The book ends with a "Prologue to the Possible."

The crises in front of us now are multiple and grave. Where both the

health of democracy and the health of our planet are concerned, we are running out of time...

We have no illusions that the economic landscape will suddenly be sprouting with millions of worker co-ops. Nor do we assume that most readers will become members of worker co-ops. But instead of focusing on the typical, we would like to shift discussions toward the special cases that have the tried and tested capacity to be much more. We hope you find the cases and initiatives in this book as inspiring as we do. We welcome your feedback and dialogue.

Researching and writing this book has been deeply inspiring. I hope it will be useful to English-reading scholars and practitioners in Japan and look forward to your criticism and feedback.

Book information:

Cooperatives at Work (Cheney, Noyes, Do, Vieta, Azkarraga, & Michel, 2023), in a series entitled "The Future of Work" by Emerald Press (UK). <http://cooperativesatwork.wordpress.com>