

The International Co-operative Alliance and the consumer co-operative movement in northern Europe, c. 1860 – 1939, by Mary Hilton, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018, ix + 194 pp., £????, ISBN: 978-1-5261-0080-1

Scandinavian models, whether of Swedish welfare, Norwegian trading relationships, or Danish quality of life, have attracted a good deal of interest throughout the twentieth century. During the severe dislocations of the inter-war period, international commentators looked to the Nordic countries for examples of a distinctive ‘middle way’. A central, and substantially overlooked, component of their scrutiny was the role of the co-operative movement, within and between Scandinavian countries, and their advocacy of a co-operative style of international relations. The development of, and interactions between, the main co-operative organisations in the Nordic countries, taken here as Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland; and their role in the formation and activities of the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), primarily during the first part of the twentieth century, form the two principal interweaving strands of this engaging study.

The level of analysis is primarily on the national co-ordinating organisations in each of the four countries, and a useful summary is provided on their emergence, acknowledging the common fault lines between agricultural producer and small rural co-ops, and the larger, urban consumer societies. With different cultures, traditions and outlooks, sometimes they could be accommodated together within an umbrella organisation, but could also give rise to alternative, and potentially rival bodies. These more nuanced accounts serve as useful correctives to the standard, rather celebratory, official historiography.

A parallel strand charts the emergence of the ICA out of informal personal contacts between leading co-operators from the late nineteenth century, initially in Britain and France, then incorporating a wider range of countries, especially after the First World War. Riding the wave of post-war internationalist optimism, and seizing the opportunities for re-building the economic framework after the devastation of war, the ICA sought to promote co-operation as an alternative to the broken capitalist system. Issues of nationalism were never far away, however, and there were debates about who could be represented, whether it was just national bodies, or local societies, and which regions counted as nations and therefore entitled to send representatives. Internationalism was increasingly strained by Soviet representatives, who wanted to incorporate the co-operative movement into the revolutionary

struggle, then by the rise of Nazism and questions about the extent to which co-operatives in Germany were still independent agencies. A key issue confronting the ICA was the grounds on which members could be admitted, or refused, which entailed some agreed understanding of what counted as co-operation. With the dominance of consumer co-operatives, featuring a largely working-class membership, many pressed for co-operation to become effectively the third strand of the labour movement. Others maintained that the co-operative movement should preserve a stance of political neutrality. Both sides appealed to the founding principles of the Rochdale Pioneers, and an investigation into the background and formulation of those principles was undertaken. There was no subsequent agreement and, by time the report was submitted in 1937, other matters were more urgent.

It was on this question that the Nordic organisations acquired a growing international reputation, in strongly maintaining the principle of political neutrality. In part, this was an ideological stance in preserving the ideal of co-operation as a means of promoting brotherhood across nations. Scandinavians were also prominent in the leadership of the ICA. Probably more important, was a commitment to the practicalities of developing active co-operation between countries. A pan-Scandinavian organisation was established which, not without its own internal divisions, successfully co-ordinated international buying of key staple food stuffs. Co-operative organisations within Denmark and Sweden became the focus of international attention, not least from President Roosevelt as he sought ideas for his New Deal, but also in their seeking to cross the divisions between producers and consumers, and in tackling the power of cartels by establishing factories of their own. The Nordic countries seemed on their way to forging a distinctive middle way out of the economic turmoil and social dislocations of the 1930s, which could stand as a model for other parts of the World.

Although a central argument of the book is that Scandinavian distinctiveness was founded on a concern for the everyday practicalities of life for the co-operative member, producer and consumer, it is readily acknowledged that the emphasis is on policy debates. The sources, although international in scope, are mainly those of the leadership, or produced by organisations. How transnationalism came home to people while they did their shopping remains hidden. That is work yet to do, but should not detract from the valuable contribution made in this study, in highlighting the centrality of co-operation to Nordic models, the importance of co-operation as an international movement, and the role played by Scandinavian countries during this pivotal period.

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