Rural Sociology 69(1), 2004, pp. 76–98

Democratizing Rural Economy: Institutional Friction, Sustainable Struggle and the Cooperative Movement*

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ABSTRACT Sustainable development demands institutions manage the conflicts and struggles that inevitably arise over material and ideal interests. While current cooperative theory privileges the economic element, a political economy of cooperation emphasizes cooperatives' tentative bridging of economic and political spheres with a democratic ethos. The cooperatives' democratic political structure exists in tension with a capitalist economic structure and other sites of friction. These contradictions are: in the realm of social relations, between production and consumption; in the realm of spatial relations, between the local and the global; and in the realm of collective action, between cooperatives as both traditional as well as new social movements. Where neo-classical economic models seek to eliminate or reduce these tensions, political economy views these tensions as functional to sustainability by creating an "institutional friction" that facilitates innovation, flexibility and long-term adaptability. This political economy of cooperation is intended as a step toward the development of a multidimensional sociology of cooperation.

In the early 20th century, North Dakota farmers staged one of the most serious challenges to the emergent monopoly capitalist economy when they gained control over the state legislature on the basis of an agrarian socialist agenda. However, they faced a dilemma. Should they use the state to build state-owned enterprises (e.g., banks, elevators, insurance) or should they use the state to lay the foundations of a cooperative economy? Following the dominant socialist framings of the time, they emphasized the creation of state socialist institutions rather than cooperative socialist institutions. Within a decade, their political power was severely eroded, and in that process, much of the institutional structure they created was subverted (Morlan 1955). The prophetic warnings of their allies were realized: political power alone was insufficient to sustain an opposition to the power of monopoly capitalism. Only a broader and more tightly woven cooperative commonwealth based on a tension-filled balance of both political power and economic interest could sustain their struggle.

* The author would like to acknowledge helpful comments from Thomas W. Gray; Wynne Wright; Jess Gilbert; faculty and students at the University of Kentucky and at Cornell University, who patiently listened to early formulations of these ideas; anonymous reviewers for this journal; and the various authors whose work I have tried to synthesize here. Direct correspondence to: Patrick H. Mooney, 1537 Patterson Office Tower, Department of Sociology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506-0027. Email: SOC168@uky.edu

Introduction

As we entered the 21st century, *sustainability* became a keyword in development discourse. This ambiguous term, claimed by many interests, might be understood as a disputed frame (Benford 1993). Sociologically, sustainability does not reduce to its narrower ecological framing. Rather, sustainable development entails what Buttel (1997:348) has referred to as "socio-ecological contradictions and limits" in the broader system of social, political, and economic institutions that structure our relationship with the physical environment. Development, sustainable or otherwise, will always entail the pursuit of distinct material and ideal interests between antagonistic opposing social forces. Given the necessity and ubiquity of such struggle, it is important that sustainable development be built upon institutions that can also sustain forms of struggle coincident with the value premises of our cultural heritage. Following Redclift (1997), it has been argued: "We should be spending more time sorting out the institutional fabric that might keep open sustainability options, so bequeathing institutions rather than environment to future generations" (LeHeron and Roche 1997:366). This is perhaps the most valuable contribution sociologists can make to the creation of a sustainable future.

Rather than a utopian vision of an ultimate end to struggle between social groups, what is needed are mechanisms and institutions that permit the sustainability of struggle in legitimate institutions. In the United States, one of the most important and commonly proclaimed values is that of democratic forms of participation. It is argued here that formal cooperation privileges a democratic structure within an economy that is generally driven by quite different social forces and forms of organization. In this sense, cooperatives can potentially pave the bridge between polity and economy with a democratic ethos. This corresponds to Busch's (2000:3) recent call to "extend networks of democracy to the workplace" as a means by which we can begin to "reclaim our moral responsibility . . ." from what he calls the Leviathans of statism, scientism, and, especially in this case, marketism.

This argument derives from two primary concerns. One concern follows Verta Taylor's (1989) interest in the need to understand mobilization as a long-term form of struggle, rather than the episodic manner in which it is often treated by both sociologists as well as historians (Mooney and Majka 1995; Mooney and Hunt 1996). A second concern involves the economic reductionism in most contemporary modeling of formal agricultural cooperation. Together, these form a point of departure for an original, alternative approach to the

analysis of cooperatives. This framework emphasizes cooperatives' capacity to generate a flexible and sustainable form of struggle by focusing on the importance of retaining a sense of contradiction and tension, even paradox, within the theorization of cooperation. The focus is on institutionalized cooperation in U.S. agriculture. The use of the term "institutionalized cooperation" is intended as a somewhat broader definition of cooperative than a purely legalistic conception would provide. Thus, to adapt Cobia's (1989) definition, we are speaking of patterned, formal or informal, economic activity that is user-owned, user-controlled, and distributes benefits on the basis of use. Implicit in this definition is the contention that retaining ownership, control, and benefit for the user-members is also an inherently political action in the context of a developed capitalist economy.

Background: The Significance of Cooperation in U.S. Agriculture

The cooperative movement in U.S. agriculture is well over one hundred years old, although its firm institutionalization might be established as just less than the century mark, coinciding with the achievements attained in the early 20th century and perhaps consolidated with the passage of the Capper-Volstead Act in 1922. By almost any definition, the cooperative movement in agriculture must be regarded as an eminently successful form of enterprise in terms of economic performance. Though not the dominant form of agribusiness (except in a few commodities) in the late 20th century, the cooperative market share is usually about one-third of marketed goods, and over one-fourth of input supplies (USDA-RD 1998). By 1999 U.S. cooperatives had a total net worth of $20 billion (USDA-RBCS 1999). From an historical point of view, this must be recognized as success, given the origins of the movement as a form of resistance to the oppressive conditions of monopoly and oligopoly at local, regional, and national levels faced by farmers at the end of the 19th century. Despite the hopes of cooperative theorists, such as Nourse, that cooperatives would simply rise, correct market imbalances, and then disappear after performing this function, such conditions have not disappeared in the face of cooperative development but have continued to provide the basis for sustaining a strong cooperative movement (Coffey 1992; Torgerson, Reynolds, and Gray 1997:3).

Toward a Political Economy of Agricultural Cooperation

Where North Dakota's Non-Partisan League mistakenly relied on an overly politicized cooperative strategy, most contemporary models, under the dominance of neo-classical economic theory, assume away

the political element. Mooney, Roahrig, and Gray (1996) provided a critique of this reductionist economic theorization of cooperation and called for a need to incorporate political elements. This paper aspires to take up that latter task: to simultaneously theorize cooperatives in terms of both their political as well as their economic functions. Recognizing that cooperatives are, of course, also economic entities means that the objective is not a purely political theorization of cooperation, but rather a political economy of agricultural cooperation. This addresses recently expressed interests in the need to redefine the relationship between "economy and society, institutions and markets, moral commitments and the rational pursuit of self-interest" (Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics 1999:1–2). This is in contrast to the predominant theorization of cooperation by neo-classical agricultural economics which has been directed toward eliminating paradoxical or contradictory qualities in the cooperative movement, primarily by redefining or theorizing cooperation from a purely economic and individually rational or "asocial" point of view. As Hendrickson et al. (2001:18) argue: "A growing chorus of voices . . . is beginning to challenge the ideology—the assumptions, beliefs and values—of neoclassical economic theory . . . Many feel that the loss of economic democracy may also lead to a loss of political democracy—and nowhere is that more apparent than in food."

This approach highlights and focuses on contradiction, rather than assuming it away by theorizing only one line of rationality in the sphere of cooperative action. To the contrary, it is contended that some tension within cooperatives has been a positive force in their development, an advantage rather than a liability, and that a new theorization of cooperation is needed that embraces, rather than fears, the existence of such tensions in cooperatives.

Levine (1985:8–9) has argued:

> In their quest for precision, social scientists have produced instruments that represent the facts of human life in one-dimensional terms. . . . Investigations that rely on such instruments produce representations of attitudes and relations that strike us time and again as gratuitously unrealistic. For the truth of the matter is that people have mixed feelings and confused opinions, and are subject to contradictory expectations and outcomes, in every sphere of existence.

Indeed, just as individuals embody contradiction and paradox, so do the institutions that we construct. Formal agricultural cooperation is a particularly significant and revealing site of such tensions. As Mooney, Roahrig, and Gray (1996) argued, by stripping away all but the

economic interest of cooperators, economists have built elaborate but insular models of cooperation, even when they transcend their inclination toward the individual as the only unit of analysis. In these models, other motives are absent and with them go the contradictions, the tensions, and the paradox of this form of collective action. Again, it is important to embrace such tensions, not only because they exist in the lived experience of cooperative members, but also because the theorization along a single dimension is the point of departure for the sort of rationalization process that ultimately leads to substantive irrationality. In this sense, the elaboration of the political dimension provides a check on the development of a substantive irrationality of economic rationalization, just as an exclusive focus on only the political dimension would lead to a substantive irrationality in relation to the economic interest also deeply embedded in cooperatives. Recent calls for interdisciplinary approaches to the study of cooperatives (Cook, et al. 1997) and various feminist demands for more holistic theorization suggest that we not seek to escape the ambiguities by the use of simplifying assumptions that "discipline" the reality. This theoretical disciplining of paradox emanates from a desire to be rid of such "troubling" empirical matters. To the extent that the disciplines have been successful in this expulsion, there has been a loss of integrity and holistic perspective.

This view of cooperatives has a unique potential to examine a variety of tensions that are captured in the cooperative form of interaction. Recent work by Flora et al. (1998:31) anticipate the significance of this tension when they observe that the new generation cooperatives "work best" as a form of community self-development when decision-making processes are "based on both substantive and formal rationality." I share a similar understanding of this notion of contradiction in that such oppositions are not mutually exclusive but in fact, form a unified, dynamic whole.

In an attempt to develop a political economy of the cooperative movement there is an overriding interest in the tensions present in the economic and political elements of cooperatives. As a **capitalist** economic form usually governed by a **democratic** principle, we immediately find two qualities that do not easily co-exist. In a related manner, the internal governance of cooperatives contains tensions between **democratic** impulses and **bureaucratic** tendencies in, for example, the need to accommodate the diversity of membership interests and the interest in developing a more governable homogeneous membership. In the realm of social relations, cooperatives provide an interesting site for the exploration of tensions noted by Friedmann (1995) and others in current work on the social relations of

Table 1. Contradictions within Cooperatives as Institutional Frictions

Level of Contradiction	Site of Institutional Friction
Capitalism/Democracy	Political economy
Production/Consumption	Social relations
Global/Local	Spatial relations
Traditional/New social movements	Collective action

production and social relations of **consumption**. In terms of spatial relations, cooperatives may illuminate the paradox associated with tensions between the **global** and the **local**. From an interest in collective action, the predominant representation of cooperatives would lead us to classify them as **traditional social movements.** However, there are at least latent elements of **"new" social movements** within even the most traditional cooperatives. In these and other ways, the cooperative organizational form encompasses those tensions that are often modeled in neo-classical economic analysis as obstacles to the pursuit of a single-minded economic interest (Torgerson, Reynolds, and Gray 1997). In contrast, the point made here is that those very tensions may, in fact, be a wellspring of strength, innovation, and flexibility that, in the long run, serve multiple and sometimes apparently contradictory functions quite well.

Grabher and Stark's (1998:55) recent work on "organizing diversity" argues that such "institutional friction" is a means of preserving diversity that:

> ... might later be recombined in new organizational forms ... Institutional legacies embody not only the persistence of the past but also resources for the future. Institutional friction that blocks transition to an already designated future keeps open a multiplicity of alternative paths to further exploration.

The function of such tensions is indicated by the relative success of the cooperative movement in agriculture when examined over the course of the 20th century. Retention of this institutional friction in cooperative organizations may prove a valuable resource for the 21st century.

The objective of this paper is to explore these sites of contradiction under the premise that contradiction is not necessarily dysfunctional. Instead, it is held that democratic relations may enable each of these sites of contradiction to generate functional adaptations in response to the tensions of paradoxical demands. Democratic relations within the cooperative movement function as a means of resisting the homogenization associated with the singular rationality of the neo-classical economic model. As Buttel (1997:347) has argued: "Modern

social science has accordingly tended to conjure up a highly dematerialized view of agro-food realities—a view that tends to regard the natural environment of agriculture as being essentially epiphenomenal." Similarly, neo-classical economics has constructed a highly deinstitutionalized view that treats the institutional context as merely epiphenomenal. The present model not only brings the institutional context back in, but recognizes that context as heterogeneous and permeated with tensions. Again, to follow Grabher and Stark (1998:54): although "institutional homogenization might foster *adaptation* in the short run, the consequent loss of institutional diversity will impede *adaptability* in the long run." Sustainable development demands this long-term adaptability of political and economic relations.

Democratic Capitalism in a Capitalist Democracy?

Referring to the late 20th century U.S. as a capitalist democracy, Cohen and Rogers (1983: 49–50) argue that:

> Capitalist democracy is not a system in which a capitalist economy persists alongside a democratic political system, each unaffected by the other . . . Capitalist democracy is neither just capitalism, nor just democracy, nor just some combination of the two that does not change its component parts. Indeed, even to think of such separate parts is to miss the vital integrity of the system.

Cohen and Rogers argue (1983:169) that these two forms are, in the last instance, incompatible: "For its realization, democracy requires the abolition of capitalism." Until that last instance comes, however, there is a need for mechanisms that can sustain democratic relations and processes. Thus, I focus on tensions that exist *within* this system of capitalist democracy with a view toward exploring the generation of cooperatives as institutions of democratic capitalism.

Perhaps the most apparent manner in which cooperatives reveal a contradictory tension is in the interface between the economic and political elements. As economic entities, cooperatives are capitalist enterprises created, in part, to meet needs (e.g., rural electrification) that are simply not met by the larger capitalist sector or, to compete with other, especially monopoly capitalist, enterprises. The historical conditions that gave rise to agricultural cooperatives in the U.S. led to a strong, though perhaps sometimes merely formal, democratic structure in their organization. Thus, unlike other capitalist enterprises, cooperatives have traditionally incorporated a democratic political principle (one member, one vote) with respect to their internal governance. Most agricultural cooperatives in the U.S. have historically

used the "one member, one vote" principle in which "all members have equal voting power, regardless of their investment in the cooperative" (Barton 1989:15). This aspect has always stood in contrast to the proportional voting typical of most "investor-oriented firms" (IOFs) in which voting privileges are based directly on levels of equity or shares of common stock owned.

The early cooperative associations of U.S. agriculture (e.g., Grange, Northern and Southern Alliance) were heavily grounded in the political sphere as well as the economic. Indeed, the economic and political functions were not clearly distinguished. Cooperation and "pooling" were economic class practices that complemented political class practices in opposing monopoly capital. The Alliance curriculum encouraged members to "assume political responsibility for the nation." To neglect the political sphere would lead to the loss of "individuality, influence, and power in our political institutions, and be wholly at the mercy of the soulless corporations that are now wielding such an influence over our government" (Mitchell 1987:79). In the populist era, this conflation of economic and political class interest was strong, extreme and radical (in the sense of getting at the root). Some of the early post Civil War political parties that were the predecessors of the Populist Party were self-identified as "Anti-Monopoly" parties (Saloutos and Hicks 1951). In the context of failing to establish successful cooperatives (due primarily to lack of economic resources to resist capital's opposition), the movement increasingly turned from the economic solution and temporarily elevated the political element, culminating in the Populist political campaigns of the 1890s, the defeat of which led back to an economic focus and the development of cooperatives in the agricultural prosperity of the early 20th century.

Viewed from an historical perspective, the continuities at some levels are quite interesting. Mitchell (1987:82) quotes one late 19th century Alliance lecturer as contending that: "capitalism places property above life, thereby declaring war on humanity. This war must not cease until capitalism is vanquished and property becomes the servant, not the master of man." More than a century later, we find Harriet Friedmann (1995) viewing broad historical cycles as a pendulum swinging back and forth between self-regulation by markets and subsequent self-protection by society in light of the economic and ecological crises that follow, making a statement which resonates with that Populist framing. As the pendulum is now swinging back toward self-regulation (from New Deal protections), she writes: "A new era is being constructed, in which people and the earth are forced to 'adjust' to the 'market', and it is the markets, not people, that require freedom." Today, of course, cooperatives are subject to this historical force.

The vast majority (93%) of agricultural cooperatives are still formally run by democratic principles (Reynolds, Gray, and Kraenzle 1997). However, this democratic quality is increasingly coming into question. Two forces seem to be largely responsible for this challenge. First, some cooperative theorists find cooperatives' democratic element to be at odds with purely economic interests and call for either wholesale restructuring of cooperatives as IOFs or for the elimination of the "one member, one vote" principle and for the substitution of proportional (to capital investment) representation (Schrader 1989; Smith 1988). Here the needs of capital are privileged relative to the needs of members of the cooperative. The path of conversion to an IOF is indicated by an analysis that reifies a formal rationality oriented toward exchange value as against a substantive rationality centered on use value (Collins 1991a, 1991b). Such an orientation toward cooperation contradicts traditional core cooperative principles that emphasize use value: *user-ownership, user-control, and user-benefit* (Barton 1989). The principle of democratic governance is, of course, the mechanism by which the centrality of such use value is secured against its usurpation by exchange value. The substitution of proportional voting (based on levels of financial investment) clearly subverts the democratic character of the cooperative form of organization and, with that erosion, other fundamental principles of cooperation are also threatened.

The second force opposing the democratic principle is the increasing bureaucratization of ever larger and more complex cooperative organizations. Control is usurped by management as members are increasingly defined as incapable of making decisions on "technical" matters that only experts are qualified to evaluate. Drawing on Lasley's (1981) analysis of cooperatives' inherent "dual objectives," Seipel and Heffernan (1997) argue that maintaining member involvement and the generation of profit necessary for survival in the economic marketplace are inherently contradictory. They contend that as authority has increasingly been delegated to hired management and staff, the formal rationality of the economic function has come to dominate the substantive rationality of democratic participation in cooperative decision making. It is this bureaucratic erosion of the democratic element that may be more threatening. The fact that cooperatives are not converting in droves to IOFs but are instead primarily simply consolidating or merging with other cooperatives constantly adds to the very complexity and scale of cooperative organizations (Wadsworth 1998; Mooney and Gray 2002). This consolidation encourages structural conditions under which the bureaucratic subversion of the democratic element takes place. The complexity and diversity of forms of consolidation both among co-ops as well as between co-ops and IOFs,

force Hendrickson et al. (2001:8) back to the fundamental question of such hybrids: "What is the management unit?"

Further, Seipel and Heffernan (1997:5–6) argue that cooperative management may develop a set of interests that are quite distinct from the interests of the cooperatives' members. Cooperative managers may tend to administer the cooperative as an IOF, single-mindedly focusing on "earnings or sales growth" to the "neglect of other activities that could enhance member service or meet other member goals" in order, for example, to enhance their own individual marketability as business managers. Monitoring this potentially autonomous interest is more difficult in the case of cooperatives than in IOFs where there is a more clearly defined and singular objective, and the stock market value provides a fundamental regulatory role. Since cooperatives have dual, if not multiple, objectives, the evaluation of managerial performance is rendered problematic. Further, as cooperatives "pursue business activities that are increasingly removed from their members' and directors' agricultural experience, oversight is weakened" (Seipel and Heffernan 1997:6). Thus, the board of directors, whose expertise is in production agriculture, may be subordinated to the expertise of management. In the extreme case, the board may become a "rubber stamp for management decisions" (Seipel and Heffernan 1997:6).

Active democratic participation is the means by which this autonomous interest of management can be countered. Democratic participation may ensure that multiple objectives, if they exist, remain "on the table"and are not reduced to single objectives. Retention of democratic principles facilitates the institutional friction which managerial interests tend to work against in the process of rationalization along singular dimensions.

The Social Relations of Production and Consumption

In arguing that power in the food system is increasingly shifting from the manufacturing sphere to the retailing sphere of the food system, Hendrickson et al. (2001), among others, raise questions concerning the place of both the farmer and the consumer in the emerging system. By this account, these seemingly fundamental actors in the food system appear to be increasingly marginalized in terms of their power in the agro-food complex. The distinctive rationalization of production and consumption spheres is driven by capitalist economies in terms of antagonistic interests in the realm of exchange. The paradox here is that this antagonism is also a relation of interdependency in which these interests can be viewed as unitary. Indeed, each sphere can only be meaningfully understood in relation to its other.

The pluralist political arena replicates this distinctive rationalization of an antagonistic economic relationship in its formulation of "producer groups" and "consumer groups" who simply carry on the battle in another sphere. The historical origins of the cooperative movement reflect an interest in overcoming this division. The vision of a cooperative commonwealth was one that recognized both the distinctive interests as well as the common interests of producers and consumers, seeking to create an organizational structure that unified these interests.

Voorhis (1961:83) expressed this longstanding desire to link production and consumption through cooperative structures: "... if a considerable proportion of farm crops could be sold directly by farmer-owned enterprises to consumer-owned ones, the 'spread' between what farmers receive and what consumers pay would amount simply to the costs of processing, transportation and sale." Further, Voorhis (1961:150) argued strongly for the development of consumer cooperatives:

> But only as major consumer needs are met cooperatively, only as the people come into ownership of businesses supplying the things on which their big expenditures are made—only then can the full influence of cooperative enterprise upon a nation's economy be brought to bear. Only then can "consumer preference" begin to have any meaning. And only then can the consumer interest begin to be asserted and defended as a salutary countervailing force to the overweening power of highly organized producers.

Even more recently, Friedmann's (1995) examination of the social relations of production and consumption allows us to advance an argument that the cooperative form is well suited to confront certain problems that she raises. Friedmann (1995:30) suggests that the real alternative to the dichotomy in production and consumption is "democratic regulation of regional food economies."

> If food is to be susceptible to democratic regulation, the links in the food chain must first be made visible. An environmentally and socially sensitive agriculture presupposes consumers whose food needs are effectively transmitted to farmers, as well as citizens whose environmental needs are effectively transmitted to farmers.

In this case, co-ops may have an advantage over IOFs. Cooperatives are characterized by a structural form that can encompass both the social relations of production (producer cooperatives) and consump-

tion (supply cooperatives) and share the capability of democratizing both spheres. While purely market driven social relations of production and consumption tend toward inequalities and hierarchal structures, cooperative structures that retain the democratic principle would have the potential to reduce the unequal economic influences on food production and consumption by elevating people's needs and desires, or substantive use values, perhaps even minimizing the process by which consumers' "minds are 'colonized' through advertising and merchandising" (Friedmann 1995:25). This is at least implicit in the cooperative movement's tradition of envisioning a cooperative commonwealth and in the principle of cooperation among cooperatives.

Friedmann (1995:21) also asks if there is some happy medium "between public regulation and private power." I suggest that the cooperative form has the advantage of providing a middle course in which regulation lies neither purely in the economic sphere (market regulation, or in a private, corporate regulation to be enforced by emergent transnational institutions) nor in the public sphere of state regulation. Rather, cooperative regulation would entail control by producers and consumers of food in economic organizations whose internal political structure is democratized. In this sense, again, the cooperative has the advantage, not the liability, of synthesizing the two spheres.

At the present moment, however, Friedmann (1995:24) argues that "strategic power has shifted from farmers to corporations." She contends that:

> Economists and corporate managers, who have considerable clout in setting political agendas, count the human costs of hunger and the ecological costs of monocultural farming as "external." Agricultural policy is at an impasse because it cannot address these social problems. New agents can in principle find unity through redefinition of issues centered on the production and consumption of food.

Community supported agriculture (CSA) groups might be seen as an embryonic form that overcomes this disjuncture and, in so doing, addresses many of the issues raised here. Most CSAs are effectively, if informally, a synthesis of production cooperative and consumer cooperative. Further, most CSAs contain mechanisms, again either formal or informal, for directly transmitting information between producers and consumers. CSAs also tend to be tied to place, rendering an affinity with Friedmann's argument that only food economies that are geographically bounded, i.e., regional, can be democratically regulated. She argues that "to create regional food economies requires

politics that re-embed land and labor in the needs and capacities of communities" (1995:30).

Even democratization via distinct (producer and consumer) co-operative structures would ameliorate the tendency to view many of the "costs" of the current food production and consumption as external costs. To the extent that co-ops are wedded to place more than IOFs, democratically organized co-ops would be more effective in dealing with these externalities; i.e., to those members in the cooperative community, health issues, environmental issues, and land use issues are **not** external, but constitute part of their everyday lifeworld.

This leads to a third site of contradictory tensions in which cooperatives share a unique position—spatial relations—particularly that tension that characterizes the relationship between the local and the global.

Local and Global

In the context of the globalization process, a parallel and contradictory process of "localization" also develops in the interstices (see, for example, McMichael 1996; Giddens 2002). Cooperatives have a distinct quality in terms of their spatial tensions. The equity retention principle in cooperatives effectively functions (though perhaps in latent, rather than manifest form) to tie the cooperative to a particular place. From the standpoint of capital, this may appear as an unnecessary constraint. Paradoxically, from the standpoint of the cooperator and the local community, it may be seen as a means of preventing the "problem" of capital flight which capital wishes to enjoy. Rationalization along the singular lines of economic logic at the level of the individual actor leads to calls for freeing this equity from its presumed "inefficient" lack of mobility. However, a more historical and holistic view reveals this as a long-term functional adaptation (an efficiency of a different sort) that shields cooperatives and the communities to which they are tied from those recessions that would drive private capital from the region.

Seipel and Heffernan (1997) argue that cooperatives' attempts to compete with investor-oriented transnational corporations (TNCs) in the global market are characterized by both specific constraints as well as unique opportunities. In addition to the bureaucratic hierarchy and technocratic tendencies that threaten member governance of cooperatives, so too does the possibility of overseas investment in which members are also separated by physical distance. Seipel and Heffernan's (1997) examination of recent efforts by several large cooperatives to operate globally reveals some interesting tensions.

Land O' Lakes, for instance, purchased a feed manufacturing plant in Poland which markets both through privately owned local farm

supply stores as well as through remnants of Poland's dairy cooperatives. At the time of Seipel and Heffernan's writing, Land o' Lakes was "grappling internally with the issue of whether or not the customers of the Polish feed mill should become members of the cooperative" (1997:7). Of course, the very purchase of such a plant in Poland immediately raises questions about how this provides a service to cooperative members or expands markets for members' products. Seipel and Heffernan conclude that management enjoyed considerable autonomy in making this investment decision on the basis of interests in growth and profitability, acting much as an IOF would in a similar situation. Should the Polish farmer-customers become members of the cooperative, we would have an interesting challenge to cooperatives' traditional identification with the boundaries of the nation state. Hendrickson et al. (2001) raise many questions concerning the economic and political relationship between the producer and the cooperative when cooperative enterprises expand beyond the locale of origin. Nevertheless, even if cooperatives are merely to be the Noursian cure for "market failure," to the extent that markets are global and thus subject to global failure, perhaps cooperatives must also be global. Analogous to the vision of labor unions uniting across state boundaries, transnational cooperative organization presents some very interesting issues with respect to state policy.

Hassanein (1999) has argued for the importance of developing local knowledge in response to processes of globalization. She details the advantages that can be obtained by familiarity with a locale and its specificity in competition with the forces of globalization and their inevitable demands for standardization and the subordination of unique local qualities. Hassanein shows clearly that democratic forms of organization are far more capable of retaining and even producing such indigenous or local knowledge related to agricultural production than the bureaucratically organized, hierarchical forms of knowledge production and exchange employed by IOFs or the public land grant college complex. It is perhaps especially in the alliance of the latter two institutional interests that we see the way in which the rationalization of production centers on the elimination of that local knowledge as both capital and science seek more universal conditions (see also Busch 2000).

Hassanein's analysis of the emergence of rotational grazing networks in the Wisconsin dairy sector reveals a weak role played by the cooperative sector as a whole (though she does note the role of one small, locally controlled cooperative performing this function) in facilitating this counterhegemonic production technique. Even though such cooperatives have both the "netness" (network) as well as the

"catness" (category inclusiveness) that Tilly (1978) points to as significant mechanisms of mobilization, these cooperatives apparently did not function to enhance the development of rotational grazing, instead forcing farmers to develop new, parallel networks to learn this technique. One must consider that the "interests of the cooperative" lay with more traditional high input, capital intensive production. For example, production cooperative management might desire higher volumes of product while service cooperative management would not wish to see sales volume cut into by this lower input cost form of production. This does not, of course, imply that cooperatives are necessarily driven to such responses. Again, the condition is that of democratic control by members or bureaucratic control by management. Under democratic principles, the cooperative would be structurally quite capable of facilitating the production and exchange of knowledge related to local production conditions. Indeed, such a function would be an advantage to the cooperative form that would be difficult for IOFs to duplicate, but one that also increases in importance with new interests in a decentralized agriculture as a defense against bioterrorist threats to our food security.

Seipel and Heffernan (1997:15) recognize this general cooperative advantage and that such innovation "may require flattening hierarchical managerial structures and returning more operational autonomy to local affiliates." They argue that: the federated structure of many regional cooperatives offers a model which could facilitate such decentralization but it will take a conscious effort by the upper levels of management to make it a reality. Relinquishing such control is difficult and often goes against the historical tendency toward centralization of decision making in cooperatives (1997:15).

In Seipel and Heffernan's (1997:15) account, this decentralization of control is predicated on high member involvement, i.e., the practice of democratic principles. Its promise is high in terms of developing the "permanent innovation," flexible specialization, and quality that "health- and food-safety-conscious consumers" are expected to demand in the future. Finally, Seipel and Heffernan (1997:15) contend that cooperatives may have an advantage in the development of "new, customized products ... marketed outside of traditional channels." Their suggestion that cooperatives seek out "new alliances with consumer groups" relates back to our previous discussion of the cooperative commonwealth vision of bridging social relations of production and consumption. Once again, CSAs may represent a prototype or possible embryonic form of this synthesis.

Hassanein's treatment of these forms of development of local knowledge is tied to issues raised by the literature on what are often

referred to as the "new social movements." This brings us to a consideration of a fourth site of contradiction upon which cooperatives seem uniquely situated: the tension between the "old" or traditional forms of social movements and the new social movements.

New and Traditional Social Movements

Beuchler (1995:442) notes that new social movement models look for "other logics of action ... based in politics, ideology and culture." Given our interest in the dual, if not multiple, purposes of cooperatives, the new social movement model provides a useful heuristic device for allowing us to examine some tensions within the cooperative movement regarding its paradoxical orientation as simultaneously both a new and a traditional social movement.

Castells (1983) resists the tendency to dichotomize the new and traditional social movements, pointing instead to the dialectical interplay between these forms. In this sense, I am arguing that cooperatives contain both orientations simultaneously. As a traditional social movement, cooperatives are readily viewed along class lines as a means of surplus value retention by direct producers. However, co-ops also have inherent structural qualities that permit a resistance to the process of its continued rationalization along purely class lines. The above discussion of the interest in eliminating cooperatives' democratic principle in favor of proportional voting exemplifies this drive toward eliminating diverse, competing class interests *within* the membership by rendering it more purely a class instrument of larger sized farm operations. Nevertheless, prior to such a decisive moment in the process of its rationalization along economic lines, cooperative forms of organization still retain characteristics of the new social movements or at least as potential incubators of new social movements. In this sense, the site of collective action reflects tensions within the cooperative movement that are indicated by contrasting models of new social movements and traditional social movements. We can look for forms of conflict within the cooperative movement that challenge the predominant economistic rationality or, in Melucci's (1994:103) terms: "engage the constitutive logic of the system."

Melucci (1994:123) argues that "the features that render the challenge to the system most visible are organizational structure and internal power relations." The principle of "one member, one vote" is one such feature of cooperative organizational structure that democratizes the internal power relations of cooperatives in contradistinction to the "constitutive logic" of most business enterprises in advanced capitalism. Indeed, Melucci (1994:103) points out that: "the ability of

collective demands to expand and to find expression depends on the way in which political actors are able to translate them into democratic guarantees." This structuring of cooperative internal power relations is characteristic of what Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield (1994:7) note as the new social movements' interest in searching for "institutional reforms that enlarge the systems of members' participation in decision making." Following Castells (quoted in Beuchler 1995:298), this democratic extension structures the possibility of institutional friction functioning as a mechanism of resistance to "the standardization and homogenization associated with bureaucratic forms of organization by establishing and defending genuine forms of community." On the one hand, that resistance may take place, as we have noted earlier, as a defense of self-management and autonomy in the cooperatives' unique ties to place or locale. This, in turn, lends to the decentralization, diffuseness, and segmentation (Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield 1994) also said to be characteristic of the new social movements. Further, to the extent that cooperatives retain an emphasis on providing services to a community of members, rather than providing simply an investment function, this follows Castells' emphasis on the new social movements' challenge to the singular capitalist logic of exchange value by emphasizing a plurality of use values in the context of a diverse community.

This sphere of use values determined by democratic relations opens the door to the "other logics of action" that characterize new social movements. This may be especially important in new social movements' tendency toward what Boggs (1986) calls "prefigurative action" (or what Melucci refers to as prophecy). Here the new social movements perspective calls attention to the possibility that cooperation might be valued for its own sake. No longer seen as merely a means to a given end, the means and ends of cooperation are understood as fused; or stated differently, the process of cooperation prefigures an interest or value in the cooperation itself as an objective that inheres in the very process of cooperating. Similarly, we can conceive of the democratic principle being valuable in itself, rather than being subordinated to its relative instrumental utility in obtaining economic rewards. Not unlike the economistic model, the rationalization of cooperation along traditional movement lines as only a class interest eliminates the possibility of understanding cooperative members' interest in democracy or cooperation as forms of interaction that might be valued for their own sake. For that matter, any other value-based or substantive rationality that might contradict this singular interest is excluded from consideration. In this manner, we see that while some co-ops may be more oriented toward the new social movement model than the traditional social movement model, the contrasting conceptualizations

permit an hypothesis that stresses the potential role of postmaterialist, or other than materialist, values in opposition to a reduction of the movement to a concern with only economic matters.

Following Touraine (1988), it might be argued that cooperatives present an antagonism that corresponds with what he sees as the predominant conflict in contemporary society: i.e., that conflict between consumer/clients as the popular class and managers/technocrats as the dominant class. Scipel and Heffernan (1997) noted this same tension in the conflict within cooperatives between principals and agents. For Touraine, the new social movements are located between these two logics: "a system seeking to maximize production, money, power, and information and that of subjects seeking to defend and expand their individuality." Similarly, Habermas examines the extent to which those forces that contribute to the development of new social movements will condition the resistance to the colonization of the instrumental logic of the system "that detaches media of money and power from any responsibility or accountability" (quoted in Beuchler 1995:445).

Resistance to the concentration of decision-making and control in the hands of experts and administrative apparatus would reflect a new social movement influence within the cooperative movement. Cooperatives uniquely sit "at the seams between system and lifeworld" where managerial interests reflecting systemic demands of growth conflict with lifeworld interests of members in their own goals of service and participation. In this sense, cooperatives would seem to be a site for a new social movement defensive posture. Yet the dual objectives of the cooperative also suggest that the continued role of "the system" should exist alongside and in tension with other demands or interests given by the members' lifeworld. Only in the context of continued democratic governance, however, is it possible to conceive of cooperatives holding this tension. Melucci's approach suggests that those cooperatives reflecting new social movement interests in conflict with this instrumental rationality will increasingly render visible the power structure and managerial/administrative interests of the rest of the cooperative movement. Inherent in cooperatives' organizational structure is a mechanism that "prevents the channels of representation and decision making in pluralist societies from adopting instrumental rationality as the only logic with which to govern complexity" (Melucci 1994:102). The retention and practice of the democratic principle in cooperative organizations permits the possibility of revealing that "the neutral rationality of means masks interests and forms of power" (Melucci 1994:102). Indeed, there is perhaps no better example of the colonization of the cooperative lifeworld by systemic interests than in demands for the elimination of this democratic principle.

Undoubtedly, if cooperatives are to rejuvenate any such oppositional force as existed in their historical origins, there is a good deal of identity work to be done. This would involve, as suggested by Torgerson, Reynolds, and Gray (1997), an amplification of traditional cooperative values and beliefs as a means of enhancing cooperative members' identification with cooperative history as an alternative economic institution with an explicit political agenda. As Johnston et al. (1994:8) note, new social movements involve the "emergence of new or formerly weak dimensions of identity ... They are associated with a set of beliefs, symbols, values, and meanings related to sentiments of belonging to a differentiated social group." Once again, the democratic reclamation is key to this boundary maintenance insofar as collective identity results from a process of "negotiation and 'laborious adjustment' of different elements relating to the ends and means of collective action and its relation to the environment . . . by this process of interaction, negotiation and conflict over the definition of the situation, and the movement's reference frame, members construct the collective 'we'" (Johnston et al. 1994:14). In this process, as in new social movements, "the relation between the individual and the collective is blurred" (Johnston et al. 1994:8) and to the extent that this occurs, the individually rational actor at the center of neo-classical economic models becomes even less adequate for explaining the uniqueness of cooperative forms of organization.

Conclusion

This analysis was guided by an interest in the process of institutional democratization. The democratic tradition of cooperatives is threatened. This is related, in part, to the eclipse of institutional economic analysis of cooperatives by the neo-classical economic tradition. The predominance of this theorization is recognized in its practical effects. This unidimensional modeling creates a vacuum that gives rise to critique of its narrow rationality, as in Etzioni's (1993:27) complaint that: "The moral patrimony of the eighties has been the proliferation of cost-benefit analysis into realms in which it has no place ..." Further, all of this comes at a time when political and sociological theorists and practitioners are increasingly decrying the absence of just such kinds of associations in terms of their function in building both community and a more democratic civil society. Indeed, this focus has clearly been a theme of several recent Rural Sociological Society Presidential addresses (e.g., Busch 1999; Lacy 2000; and Swanson 2001). Cohen and Rogers (1995:8–9) also call for the development of a "dense social infrastructure of secondary association" that would focus on encouraging "forms of group

representation that stand less sharply in tension with the norms of democratic governance." Thus, this analysis may have far broader implications for our understanding of democratizing the development process in other rural social organizations. As economic entities, cooperatives are among the few institutions in the late 20th century U.S. that retain even a semblance of democratic governance. In this way, they might constitute an important building block of a more democratic society. Similarly, cooperatives' ties to place hold potential for the renewal of community. Following Etzioni (1993:136): "Communities congeal around such institutions. And when these institutions of several communities are 'consolidated' in the name of greater efficiency, communities are often undermined." In the context of an increasingly global economy, cooperatives provide opportunities to participate in local economic life and can even function to lay the sort of moral claims upon members that Etzioni cites as fundamental to the construction of community (for example: long-term commitment to the community, the practice of stewardship, the recognition of equality of voice despite variation by class, race, gender, age, etc.). Such moral claims are, of course, excluded from those economic models grounded in individual self-interest that have come increasingly to direct cooperative development.

Even the business management literature reflects trends moving in another direction. Seiling (1997:6), for instance, makes an argument that employees of IOFs should be directed toward an organizational model in which they are referred to as *members*, and that the workplace should encourage them to "assume *ownership* of and responsibility for the organization's performance and success." In this sense, cooperatives are already ahead of the game. For cooperatives, this is not just rhetoric. This is the structural nature of the cooperative form of organization. Members are already "members." They do, in fact, have ownership, at least formally, of the cooperative. Again, somewhat ironically, it may often be necessary for these member/owners to reassert this structural role in the face of its eclipse by the managers that are, in fact, *the employees* of the cooperative.

Such promises demand an adherence to the long-standing basic principles of the cooperative movement. I have followed the recent position taken by Torgerson, Reynolds, and Gray (1997:3) who wrote: "Cooperatives are strategically adjusting and repositioning their operations, but to maintain a role of acting in the interests of producers, they will need to use fundamental cooperative principles as their primary logic and discipline of organization." I have focused on the democratic aspect of cooperatives as a principle that is fundamental to the continued success of cooperatives both internally with respect to effective management and externally with respect to the role that various

associations can play in revitalizing and sustaining a democratic society and culture. Cooperatives may function as a form of sustainable struggle insofar as it bridges political and economic interests, if not broader social and cultural concerns, with the amplification of democracy as a common value. In short, it is difficult to envision the construction of such a democratic society while the economy sits outside of that structure governed by antithetical social relations in production and consumption. Recent events also force us to take notice that cooperatives' inherent structural ties to the local suggest their strategic advantage in adaptability to the need for a more decentralized agro-food system as a means of ensuring food safety and security. We must be aware that the centralized and standardized monoculture historically associated with globalization forces in corporate agriculture are an invitation to bioterrorist threats.

Here too, I have noted the potential to democratize our food economy with contemporary re-envisioning of a cooperative commonwealth. Just such a vision seems to have inspired Torgerson, Reynolds, and Gray (USDA 1997) to point to the increasing difficulty of recognizing differences in cooperative behavior from IOF behavior. They note the trend toward bureaucratization, centralized decision-making, and the predominance of neo-classical economic theory over social theory as a development that "paradoxically" drives the cooperative "away from cooperative logic form." This process of "goal inversion" in which cooperative members may become merely "residual claimants" in their own cooperative reflects a Weberian sense of the process by which we construct the "ironic cage" of modernity. I hope that the approach I have taken in this essay begins to address their call for a "more holistic and multidisciplinary approach to theory" and research on cooperation in agriculture. As a movement toward a political economy of cooperation, perhaps this can inspire further work toward the development of a multi-level and multidimensional theorization in the form of a sociology of cooperation.

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