CO-OPERATION IN CONTEXT: TWO STUDIES IN THE HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY OF CONSUMERS' CO-OPERATION IN BRITAIN AND EUROPE, CIRCA 1850 TO 1920

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WORKING PAPER 94/22

SCHOOL OF GEOGRAPHY • UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

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PREFACE

This working paper brings together two relatively short pieces originally presented as conference papers at the Co-operative History Workshop meeting "Towards the Co-operative Commonwealth: The First 150 Years" in July 1994 and subsequently written up for publication in a resultant collection of papers. Both are concerned with the study of consumers' co-operation during the periods of its growth either during the latter half of the 19th century or the early decades of the 20th century. However, the detail of their subject matter is rather different; the first deals with aspects of information diffusion and the dramatic growth of consumers' societies in England and Wales during the relatively short period from the late 1850s to the early 1860s, while the focus of the second paper is much broader in its attempt to survey elements of the engagement of consumer co-operation with other ideological forces shaping the development of Europe in the decades between the 1850s and the 1920s.

What unites the papers most strongly, however, is the aspiration which they share to locate the study of co-operation within a broader historical and geographical context. Co-operation has generated a rich but somewhat introverted historical record, largely written by and for co-operators themselves. Perhaps as a result it is much stronger in the local detail of institutional development than in the analysis of co-operation as an element within the changing economic, social, political and cultural systems of 19th and early 20th century Europe. In this respect the literature does not speak with particular power to a wider potential audience, as a demonstration of the significance of co-operation as a force motivating and uniting large elements within the working population. Nor is the analysis of co-operation informed by ideas circulating within the larger academic community. Two short papers can, of course, achieve little by themselves but it is hoped that they point in some small way to the mutual advantage that might accrue from a closer engagement between study of co-operation and broader academic interest in themes such as consumption and the communication of information.

CO-OPERATIVE GROWTH AND INFORMATION DISSEMINATION IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE LATE 1850s AND EARLY 1860s.

A NINETEENTH CENTURY INFORMATION REVOLUTION?

Improvements in transport and communications proved key aspects of change in 19th century Britain underpinning the transformation of economy, society and polity. Information dissemination played an essential part in the consolidation of industrial capitalism; but equally it was important in the development of forces attempting to resist or reshape this new world. For the century also saw the proliferation of popular institutions, many seeking to empower the masses within and against an industrial capitalist system. Through association people sought to resist social, economic and political establishments, asserting greater control over their own lives in the workplace, through political representation, in the provision of welfare without charity or social control and, particularly through co-operation, in domestic consumption.

Concern here is with aspects of the interaction between the increase in popular initiatives and the dissemination of information; information about disadvantages endured by the majority that bred common cause against prevailing systems, the potential of popular collectivity and specific new institutional forms. The development of consumers' co-operation cannot be understood without reference to the means by which people became aware of the idea and inspired by the specific prospects it offered of morality in trade and dividend on purchase leading perhaps to the general advancement of the masses. Individual co-operatives were distinctive in the details of their operations, shaped by the circumstances of their own community. Many were also strongly independent, resisting the centralisation of authority or resources. But co-operation was not reinvented de novo as each society was established; new foundations were inspired and advised by established counterparts. The geography and chronology of co-operative development reflects both the characteristics of particular places and the communication of ideas across space (cf Hagerstrand 1967; Robson 1973).

Ultimately co-operation owes much to developments including the railway and telegraphic systems, the national penny post, and innovations in printing that assisted the proliferation of newspapers

(Boyce et al 1978; Daunton 1985; Freeman & Aldcroft 1988; Gregory 1987; Lee 1976). Increasing literacy also impacted on the dissemination of written information (Stephens 1987). Moreover, state control over the circulation of information became less overtly repressive (Vincent 1985). Punitive newspaper taxation, which had forced radical papers of the 1820s and 1830s underground, was removed around mid-century releasing a popular press (Hollis 1970, Lee 1976). The new opportunities for the spread of the printed word complemented existing traditions of popular communication; through word of mouth, tracts and cheap publications, and evangelism, where the activities of Protestant nonconformity (Gilbert 1976) inspired others, including some co-operators. Such means of communication do not themselves explain co-operative growth, but an explanation cannot be constructed without them.

COMMUNICATING CO-OPERATIVE IDEAS: PERSONAL CONTACTS

The means by which co-operative ideas were communicated must be examined and their impact analysed. For the receipt of information, however positive, could not guarantee the establishment of societies in unfavourable local circumstances. Hence the survival of "co-operative deserts" despite co-ordinated propaganda campaigns during the late 19th century. Attention here, however, focuses on the late 1850s and early 1860s which saw a striking increase in foundations and significant geographical extension of co-operation, initiating lasting growth outside the existing northern heartlands (Purvis 1990). The surviving record, particularly regarding the geography of information dissemination is, however, partial. Although co-operative foundations were generally recorded, we lack comparable evidence about the extent to which ideas penetrated elsewhere without prompting practical experimentation.

It seems likely, however, that information and enthusiasm would circulate readily within early centres of co-operative interest and spread from there to the rest of the country. This might be facilitated by the circulation of population in the course of normal activity, including labour migration (O'Neil 1982;

Southall 1991; Turner 1983). A visitor from Bacup spurred co-operation in Nelson, while migrants from Rochdale helped establish societies in Bolton and Barnsley (Barnsley British Co-operative Society 1903; Hamilton 1910; Peaples 1909). Longer-distance links were also forged through labour migration and other economic connections between localities, particularly those with similar occupational structures. A new cotton mill in Kidderminster drew labour from northern textile districts, swelling an established migrant community associated with the carpet trade. Thus the town's co-operative was

> originated by a number of Lancashire and Yorkshire men resident here, and chiefly by the President Mr R Barker ... formerly of Bacup. [Four] ... of the committee are from Halifax, one from Bradford, one from Leeds, one from Rochdale and our storekeeper is from Todmorden (Co-operator 1866).

Railwaymen were another mobile group which recruited significantly from northern centres (McKenna 1980). They too were involved in co-operative foundations, as at Gloucester where the society of 1860 included railwaymen from Halifax, Huddersfield and Burnley (Purnell & Williams 1910).

Contacts between known individuals may indeed have proved effective not simply in transferring basic information, but also in communicating opinion and enthusiasm, creating a greater impression than impersonal, written sources (Rogers 1983). The message may also have strengthened with time as evidence of success accumulated, with growth thus becoming self-reinforcing. Momentum was short-lived, however, defused by economic downturn, particularly in districts adversely affected by the "cotton famine" (Henderson 1934), and by the inevitable pricking of over-optimism as some new co-operatives began to fail (Purvis 1987).

Face-to-face contacts were not, however, the only agency promoting co-operative extension. Indeed, they provide little explanation of the timing and speed of the upsurge of foundations, given that socio-economic and political influences upon co-operative success were not radically changed during these years. Such contacts were supplemented by correspondence, often initiated by fledgling co-operators seeking advice from existing counterparts. As one of the best-known co-operatives the Rochdale

Pioneers was a major recipient of enquiries and its Secretary William Cooper corresponded extensively. Figure 1 indicates the geographical range of contacts, but not their volume. Cooper advised on the framing of rules and the practicalities of trade; he also supplied business stationary and rule books, acting in some respects as a precursor to the Co-operative Union. Most large societies, however, did little actively to promote interest in co-operation outside their own district, concentrating rather on the development of services for their own membership. Devotion of resources to wider co-operative extension was seldom discussed. While a few individuals advertised their services as lecturers there is little evidence of campaigning as there had been during the late 1820s and early 1830s when bodies such as the British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge had flourished briefly, and national congresses had planned the division of Britain into circuits for co-operative mission work (Purvis 1987).

THE IMPACT OF THE PRINTED WORD

In the printed word, however, there existed a powerful agent for the widespread dissemination of information, even where literacy was not universal (Lee 1976). Reading was often a communal activity and the assembled company could form the basis for other popular initiatives. Moreover, trends in the availability of material in printed form interacted with wider co-operative fortunes. Several new sources of printed information contributed significantly to co-operative expansion from the late 1850s onwards.

As a single source, attention is demanded by G J Holyoake's book Self-Help by the People: A History of Co-operation in Rochdale (1858), which reinforced the Pioneers' reputation as an inspirational centre and doubtless prompted some of the correspondence they received. Sales necessitated a second edition within a year of publication and a fourth by 1860 (Goss 1980; Hibberd 1968). At York the book

> came amongst them as a revelation. The lamp of faith which had been glimmering for years at once became full and bright. It was a message of inspiration (Co-operator 1861a).

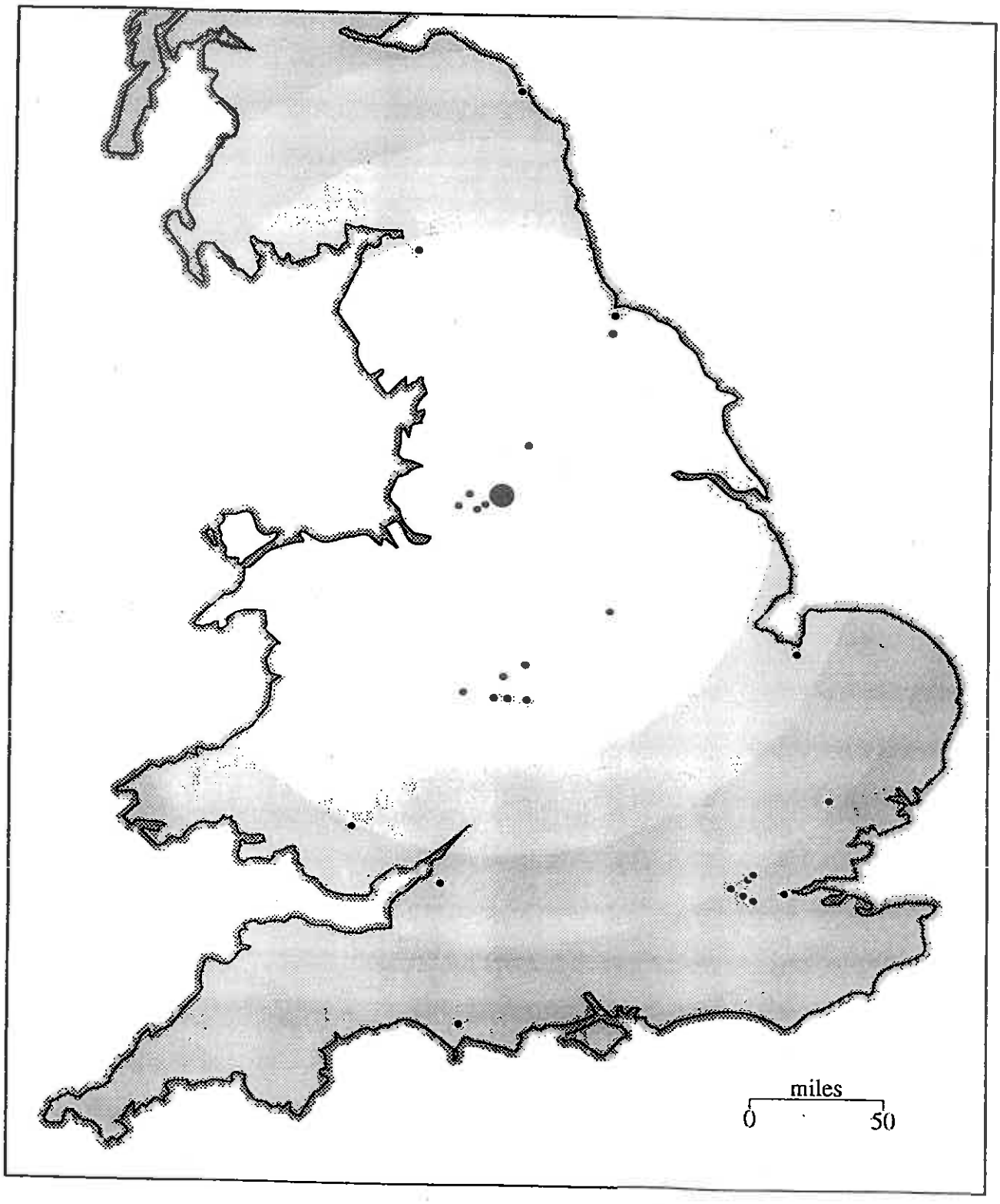

Figure 1: Information diffusion from Rochdale: examples of infant co-operatives advised by the Rochdale Pioneers society during the 1860s.

Holyoake's work stimulated the foundation of societies as far apart as Gateshead, Maryport, Merthyr Tydfil and Plymouth (Tyne & Wear Archives Department; Cumbria Record Office; Public Record Office; Briscoe 1960). Material from the book also circulated in other forms including the tract Co-operation in its Different Branches published by Chambers in 1860. This

> found its way to Bradford[-on-Avon]. It was read by a few and set us thinking. ... [O]n Saturday evening about fourteen or sixteen of us met together to discuss the practicability of opening a store here, and to make a beginning we subscribed £12 between us. Next week we spread the news amongst our shopmates and friends, and we collected nearly £12 more (Co-operator 1861b).

Press coverage of co-operation also increased markedly; the significance of which may be measured against the claim that

> The press in the nineteenth century was the most important single medium of communication of ideas... (Lee 1976).

Indeed the role of newspapers in generating a widespread, if superficial, awareness of co-operation was later acknowledged:

> in almost every village and town in the kingdom there are a few persons who have heard of co-operation, and have a slight notion of what it means. The word "co-operation" must have found its way everywhere through the press... (Co-operative News 1874a).

Specifically co-operative titles flourished during the late 1820s and early 1830s and there had been some subsequent attention in the wider radical press, but modern co-operative journalism dates from the foundation of the Co-operator in 1860 (Hollis 1970, Purvis 1987). Much of the paper's attention was devoted to the progress of established societies; however, such reports, along with articles on wider co-operative principles, also contributed to the Co-operator's other purpose, the promotion of new societies. The paper's editor Henry Pitman lectured extensively on co-operation (Figure 2); such visits, however, were chiefly to existing societies, rather than proposed foundations. More important in support of the latter may have been correspondence from those interested in establishing stores,

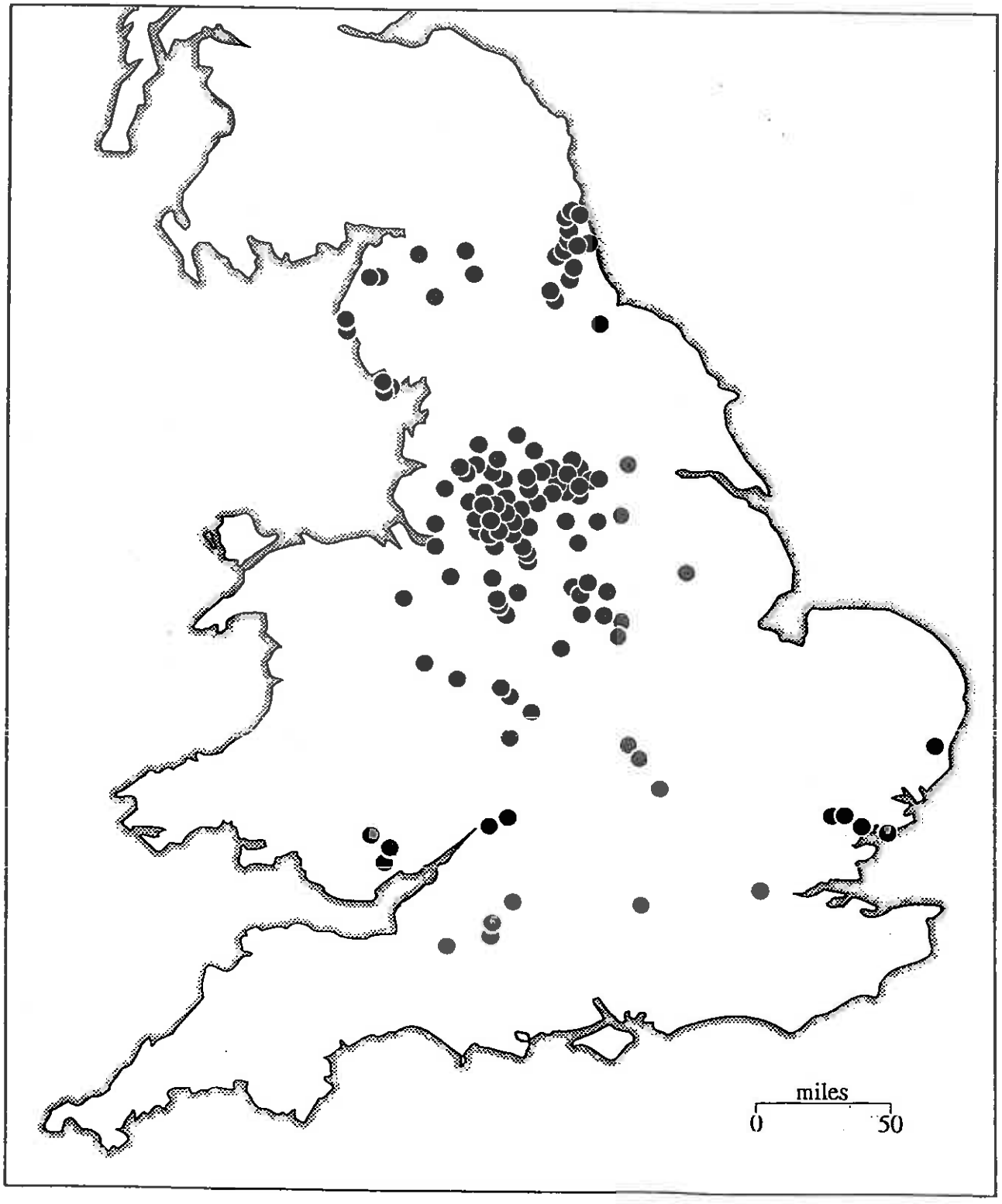

Figure 2: Lecturing engagements and visits in England and Wales by Henry Pitman, 1864-71.

appealing to the Co-operator and its readers for assistance. The published letters were probably only a fraction of those received - Pitman claimed at least 5,000 letters of enquiry per year (Co-operator 1865a) - but perhaps significantly many originated outside existing regions of co-operative strength (Figure 3). Indeed, requests for assistance might best be addressed to a newspaper in the absence of more immediate advice.

This admittedly fragmentary evidence suggests that the limited circulation of the Co-operator - the print run of 9,000 copies per issue claimed in December 1865 exceeded actual sales (Co-operator 1865b) - and its financial difficulties did not preclude a significant contribution to co-operative extension. Indeed it seemed unnecessary to penetrate new territory in any depth or on a regular basis for the paper to have an impact. The society at Mitcheldean

> was originated by a single copy of the Co-operator reaching the place, and being read by two persons who felt an interest in its contents (Co-operator 1862).

The distribution of the paper became a project for co-operative enthusiasts, even if many operated on the modest scale of the secretary of the Hackleton society who reported that

> I always send my copy away, sometimes into one part of the country, and sometimes another (Co-operator 1862).

Attention did not, however, derive only from a co-operative press. The increasing "respectability" of co-operation fostered wider and more positive coverage in general newspapers. Indeed Holyoake's history of the Rochdale Pioneers was intended for serial publication in the Daily News, being displaced by coverage of the Indian Mutiny. Successful societies won the plaudits of influential liberals whose comments were reported in the press. Reports of a Commons speech of 1860 by Rochdale MP John Bright which noted the achievements of the town's co-operative contributed to interest in locations including Gloucester and Reading (Bing 1972, Lockwood 1949). Of still greater importance was the development of a new popular press around mid-century. Papers including Reynolds's Newspaper and Lloyd's Weekly paid sympathetic attention to popular causes. Reynolds's carried a regular column

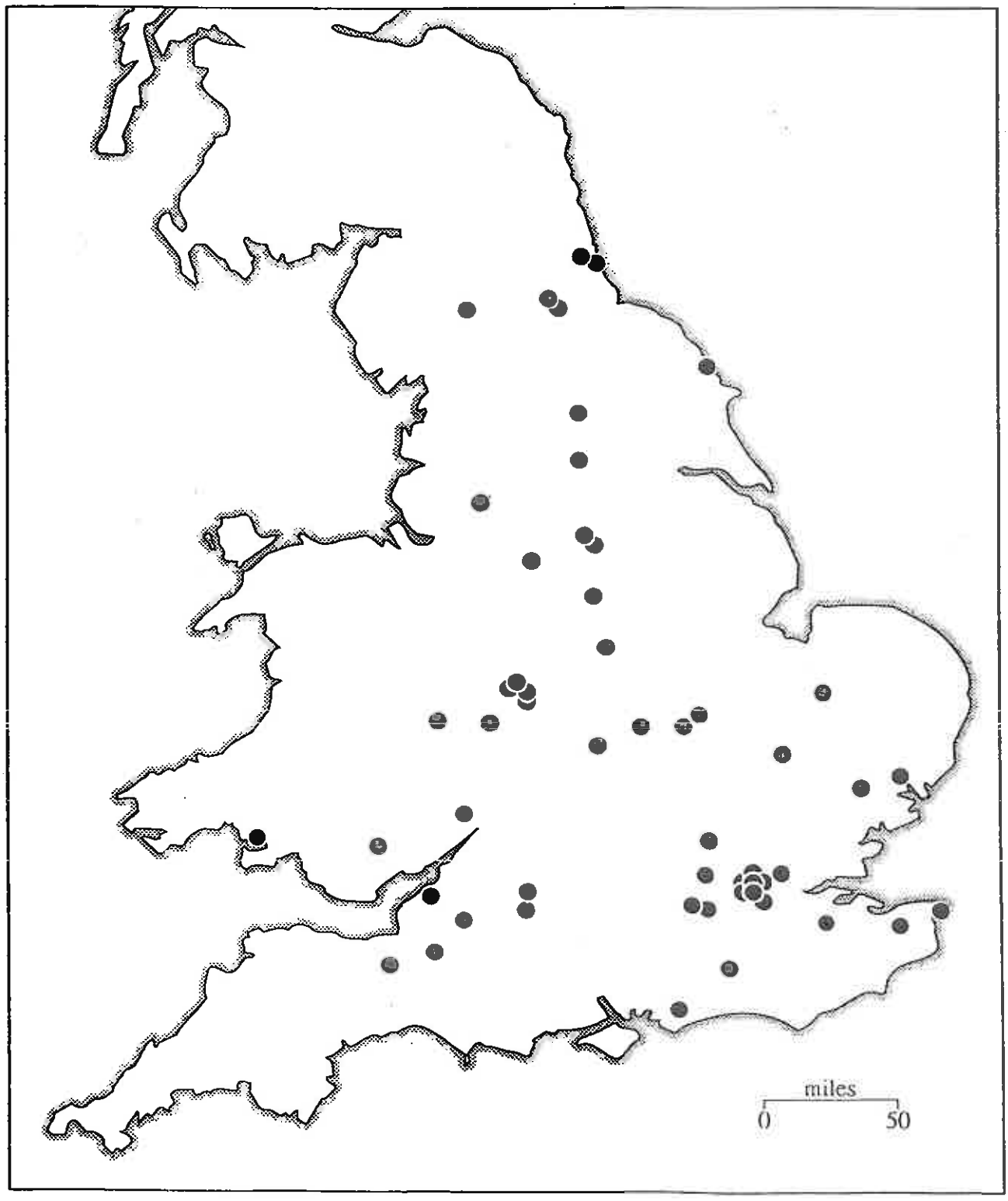

Figure 3: Information requests regarding the establishment of co-operatives made to the *Co-operator, circa* 1860-69.

between April 1858 and October 1860 initially devoted chiefly to friendly and benefit societies, but which quickly came to feature co-operative news.

The timing of this attention may be significant, predating efforts to develop a co-operative press and arising early in the cycle of co-operative expansion. There were claims, particularly from William Watkins, author of the Reynolds's column, that such journalism inspired numerous co-operatives (Purvis 1993). The extent to which societies followed Watkins' own particular vision of co-operation offers some support to these assertions (Figure 4). Again it seems that the press was important in extending interest into areas previously without significant positive co-operative experience. Moreover, the new popular press achieved circulation figures well in excess of any previous paper. By the late 1850s Reynolds's Newspaper and Lloyd's Weekly both sold around 150,000 copies per issue and were widely read, especially in urban and industrial districts (Berridge 1978 & 1982). As a means of raising awareness of co-operation their impact, like their sales, may have been unprecedented.

CONTESTING THE CO-OPERATIVE MESSAGE

The circumstances of the foundation of most societies remain unknown, but it is no coincidence that the availability of information regarding co-operation and the rate of society foundations both increased markedly during the late 1850s and early 1860s. The co-operative message was disseminated widely through a variety of different and complementary forms; some providing a mass audience with an initial, if superficial, awareness, others linking only one locality with another but important because of the depth of knowledge or enthusiasm imparted. Such dissemination of ideas created the potential for the extension of co-operative practice but could not guarantee universal success. This is where the social, economic and political circumstances of particular places assume their rightful importance. Co-operative ideas were not everywhere received enthusiastically, nor did all communities have the social or financial resources successfully to develop a society. Indeed, the development of co-operation was often a contested process. As a popular initiative it was feared by many establishment representatives in addition to the private shopkeepers who felt their interests to be directly challenged. Some of the

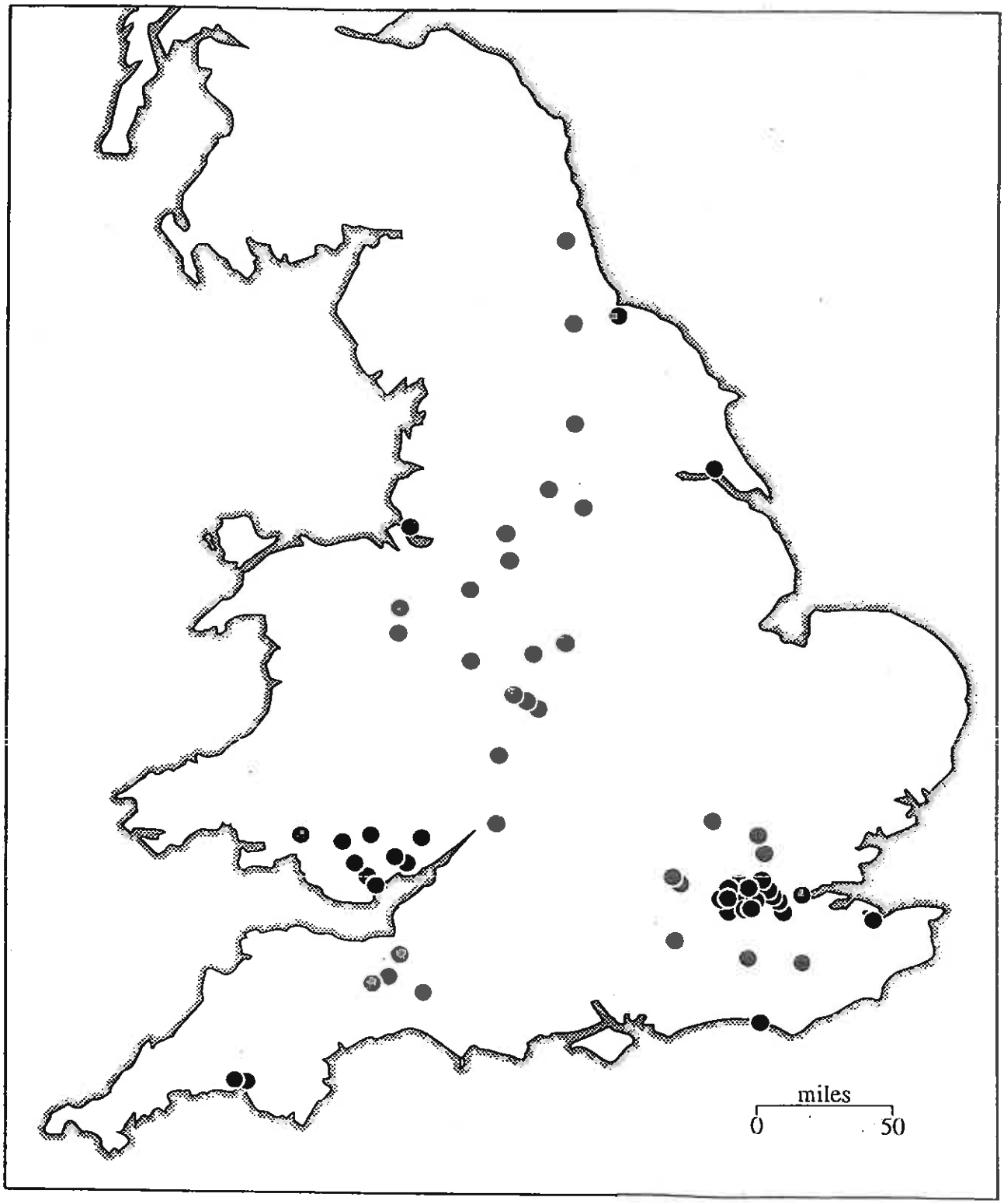

Figure 4: Stores in England and Wales affiliated to the National Industrial and Provident Co-operative Society, 1860-61.

weapons in this contest were direct; shopkeepers attempted to undercut co-operative prices or to incite wholesalers to refuse supplies to stores, some employers discriminated against co-operators in the workplace and landlords, who often included shopkeepers amongst their ranks, refused property to co-operatives or their members.

Information and propagandism were, however, also important in the contest. Opponents could attempt to exclude or ignore the positive co-operative message, denying it publicity in any form. But as the potential of co-operation became apparent there were direct attacks on its principles and practice. Anti-co-operative campaigning developed most strongly in the decades prior to the First World War, but shopkeepers had previously attempted to influence consumer opinion (Purvis 1987). Efforts to counter the co-operative message cannot be discussed fully here. But an example, although slightly later than much of the material previously considered, does reveal many dimensions of initial shopkeeper efforts to undermine co-operation. One of the members of what indeed proved to be a short-lived society in Brecon noted that

> when it became known in the town that a co-operative store was being started ... the tradesmen ... published several letters in the local papers, stating that such a thing was not required in Brecon, whatever it might be in other places, and adding that if started it would not stand a month, or three months at the furthest.... They showed that a similar society in Liverpool was about to go through the bankruptcy court... (Co-operative News 1874b).

There are parallels here with the efforts of co-operators; shopkeepers too appreciated the value of the press to spread their message, they stressed the particular circumstances of the individual community and they appealed to precedents - of co-operative failure rather than success - elsewhere.

CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT: THE LOCALITY IN CONTEXT

To end with reference to competing forces of information dissemination reinforces the central themes of this paper. Co-operation was not simply a good idea whose time had come, although it had undoubted attractions. Its growth represented an active and contested process, not wholly contained

within the individual locality from which perspective most co-operative society histories are written. Co-operative growth reflected the deployment, albeit often unco-ordinated, of resources to the spread of information across space; efforts at propagandism by existing co-operators to carry the message into areas where it was wholly or partially unknown and an active search for more information by potential co-operators. As such it was a product of its time, part not only of the flowering of popular initiatives in 19th century Britain, but also of the social and information "revolutions" that allowed a new voice to defenders of the rights of the masses.

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CO-OPERATION, CONSUMPTION AND POLITICS:

CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE CIRCA 1850-1920

CONSUMPTION AND CONSCIOUS COLLECTIVITY

This paper aims to promote engagement between specific examination of co-operation and broader developments in historical studies. An attempt is made to develop this through reference to co-operative initiatives in Europe during the 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing particularly on aspects of consumers' co-operation.

It should be acknowledged, however, that many diverse projects have been labelled "co-operative". Such variation reflects differing foci of association: as consumers, as producers in craft, industry or agriculture, as savers and borrowers, as purchasers of machinery and capital items, or as suppliers of a finished product. Moreover, even societies established for similar purposes displayed differences in the detail of their form, immediate aims, long-term goals and relationships with larger ideological forces shaping 19th century Europe. Consumers' societies thus formed only a part of co-operative activity, not dominant except in mainland Britain, but numerous by the early 20th century and present in most European states (Table 1).

Variations in the form and incidence of co-operation reflect in part the local rootedness of its development, with the basic idea of collective self-help displaying almost infinite adaptability as it spread throughout a continent where conditions ranged from the urban industrialized communities of the north-west to the peasant economies of central and eastern Europe. Indeed the economic, social and political circumstances of particular localities became more disparate over time as the pace of change was geographically far from even. Overall, however, Europe in 1920 was very different from the place which it had been a century earlier and co-operative developments contributed to this change. Indeed it is important to explore this co-operative presence in the face of the relative silence of "mainstream" historical analysis. Even as studies over the past few decades have shown increasing interest in, and identification with, the position of ordinary people they have retained established biases towards the treatment of particular themes. The struggle of the masses is equated with economic reward and control over labour in the workplace on the one hand and with democratic rights and

TABLE ONE: CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE CIRCA 1910

State/ Territory	Total number of co-operatives	Total number of consumer co-operatives	% of consumer co-operatives
Spain[1]	274	186	67.9
United Kingdom	2500	1464	58.6
Russia	16000	5500	34.4
Sweden[2]	2100	600	28.6
Finland	1929	512	26.5
Denmark[2]	5033	1300	25.8
Italy	7564	1897	25.1
France	10983	2554	23.3
Hungary	6000	1200	20.0
Netherlands	2679	481	18.0
Belgium	2270	400	17.6
Norway	3078	450	14.6
Austria	16563	1382	8.3
Serbia[2]	1252	100	8.0
Germany	30555	2311	7.6
Bulgaria[2]	727	49	6.7
Switzerland	7827	516	6.6
Roumania[2]	2904	15	0.5

(1) The most recent available data for Spain relate to 1904.

(2) The most recent available data for Sweden, Denmark, Serbia, Bulgaria and Roumania relate to 1909.

Source: International Co-operative Alliance (1913) *Yearbook of International Co-operation* (ICA, London)

representation on the other. Thus popular collective initiative is presented chiefly as labour protest and unionism, or as labour politics, at the expense of detailed study of other forms, including co-operation.

A further twist to this argument arises from a new interest in the study of consumption (Brewer & Porter 1993). Rather than following established arguments that consumption and living standards are secondary to the "real" economic issues of work, wages and capital deriving from the realm of production, recent writings have asserted the economic, social, cultural and political importance of consumption in its own right (McCracken 1988). Historical changes in consumption practices are argued to have propelled processes of economic transformation and industrialisation from at least the 17th century onwards. Moreover, in a new era characterised by mass-consumption as well as mass-production the former played its part both in the construction of social status and self-identity as people were increasingly judged by what they possessed and consumed, and in the negotiation of relations between labour and capital (Agnew 1993; Appleby 1993; Campbell 1987; Lemire 1984; McKendrick, Brewer & Plumb 1982). The opposition between capital and labour that is so central to our understanding of social stratification and class divisions extends beyond the arena of production. As Baudrillard, whose seminal writings in the 1970s did much to extend our consciousness of the importance of consumption in a capitalist society, notes

> Having socialized the masses into a labor force, the industrial system had to go further in order to fulfil itself and to socialize the masses (that is control them) into a force of consumption (Baudrillard in Poster 1988, 50).

Resistance to the control of the masses by capital is fundamental to the purpose of consumers' co-operation and its existence should be asserted more strongly in the new historical analysis of consumption, demonstrating that the emergence of our contemporary consumer society was not an uncontested process (Furlough 1987). Consumers co-operated to resist the immediate manifestations of capitalist exploitation, be they the overt excesses of short weight, adulteration, overcharging and punitive credit or the more subtle manipulative forces of advertising which created new and insatiable

demands for an increasing variety of goods (Burnett 1989; Johnson 1983; Richards 1990). This last maintained the enslavement of the individual, as consumer and as worker perpetually chasing income to feed the craving to possess (Xenos 1989). But there were also alternative visions of the purpose of consumption. Liberated from the control of an exploitative establishment, it might become a focus of association and of power that could be directed to the benefit of the masses. For some, consumers' co-operation was a means towards total socio-economic and political transformation. Hence its engagement with other ideologies, particularly socialism and nationalism, seeking change in 19th and early 20th century Europe.

Viewed in this context the assertion of the importance of consumers' co-operation and the ambitious purpose of some of its membership becomes more than a matter of extending the empirical content of historical study. There are also implications for the development of more theoretically informed social and political understandings. For the potential force of collective action by consumers recognised by champions of the co-operative cause, and indeed by some of those who feared the consequences of the empowerment of the masses, contrasts with the analysis of influential social theorists. Thus Baudrillard, while acknowledging the exploitation of the masses by capital in both production and consumption, considered that there was a vital qualitative difference between these two experiences

> As a producer, and as a consequence of the division of labor, each laborer presupposes all other: exploitation is for everyone. As a consumer, humans become again solitary, cellular, and at best gregarious .... In general then consumers, as such, are unconscious and unorganized ... (Baudrillard in Poster 1988, 54 emphasis in original).

As consumers the masses are deemed to be weaker by far than as labour, for while the latter creates a conscious collectivity and thus a basis for challenging the power of capital, consumption is credited with no such potential. But this understanding of the structures of industrial society does not deserve to go unchallenged, even if we ultimately conclude that the potential of collective authority some see as invested in consumers remains only partially fulfilled (cf Winward 1994). For there is much in the

practice and principles of co-operation in 19th and early 20th century Europe that runs counter to Baudrillard's argument.

THE POWER OF THE CONSUMER

For some 19th century co-operative theorists the identity of the masses as consumers formed a uniquely powerful basis for association. Consumption implied a universal participation unmatched in the productive sphere where the notional solidarity of labour was fragmented by the particularities of individual trades, associations or workplaces. Moreover, the search for increased reward by labour penalised not capital but other workers who as consumers suffered higher prices for goods and services. Such arguments are particularly associated with Britain where consumers' societies dominated co-operation as a whole, but similar cases were advanced elsewhere (Backstrom 1974, 99-118). The constitution of a consumers' co-operative formed in Lyon during the French Second Republic identified association as the only effective means for the advancement of workers, but

> Association by corporation or by industry carries a stamp of exclusivism .... General association ... is the only one which offers ... the advantages a worker lacks ... (Stewart-McDougall 1984, 118).

This general association was seen as residing in the identity which all shared as consumers. Its power could be directed to the development of an alternative to capitalist commerce and by extension to the creation of a whole new economic, social and political order. Thus co-operators in Milan in 1919 noted the aim of their new society as being the substitution for competitive capitalism of

> a regime in which production would be organized for consumers collectively and not for profit, and to acquire gradually the means of production and sale for the associated consumers, so that they may have in future the surplus riches they have created (Coffey 1922, 76).

It remains for us to explore the basis of power claimed for associations of consumers in the century before 1920, yet denied by Baudrillard and other theorists. On one level, control over the supply of essential goods, particularly foodstuffs, provides a powerful argument for the strength of association

amongst consumers:

> it is impossible for a society which supplies the daily bread not to take an important place in the members' lives, and to create a solid bond between them... (Gide 1921, 96).

But an engagement with trade might also generate funds that could be devoted to popular causes. Co-operatives supplied goods which most households needed, at prices similar to private retailers so that consumers incurred no additional expense (Co-operative Magazine 1827). But trading surpluses which, under capitalist commerce, would have solely benefited the shopkeeper, instead accrued to consumers who collectively owned and controlled their store. Some was returned, mostly as dividend on purchase; but surpluses were also used to increase the collective resources of a society and to extend its functions, thereby claiming increasing territory from the existing inequitable social and economic order. From the innovative co-operative theorist Dr William King onwards, enthusiasts in early 19th century Britain envisaged the accelerating generation and investment of funds necessary to develop from retailing, through the employment of members to produce goods, to the purchase of land and withdrawal from the established order to resettle within a co-operative community (Co-operator 1828). Even those who doubted the practicality of this last step considered that the masses might be liberated socially and politically, as well as economically, by association as consumers and the resources that such co-operation would create. Thus Robert Lowery, a radical leader of the late 1830s, looked beyond the advantages of the supply of "good unadulterated provisions" to the power of consumers' co-operation to unite workers

> in the firmest bonds of brotherhood, and raise them from the destitute and degraded condition they are in. If properly supported and minded, it will change the face of society: we may become builders, cultivators, merchants, and producers for ourselves, ... none making us afraid. We shall no longer be under the galling bondage we are under at present, with want continually before us, while we toil for profit-mongers who value neither men's bodies nor souls, except as material to barter for gain: who hold us in political bondage, and arrogantly claim dominion over our minds, denying to us the right to think for ourselves, and express our opinions (Lowery in Harrison & Hollis 1979, 202).

THE IDEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT OF CONSUMPTION

Lowery's words derive from a radical tradition that set a particular stamp upon British co-operation during the 1820s and 1830s. He himself was a Chartist, hence the emphasis on political liberation. But Lowery's vision also has elements in common with the Owenite Socialist project for a co-operative commonwealth (Garnett 1972). Such overt identification with particular political causes is, however, less apparent in British co-operation by mid-century and amidst new proclamations of political and religious neutrality the aim of the advancement of the rights and privileges of the masses as consumers became more diffuse.

This is not to suggest that British co-operation entirely lost its political edge amidst the routine concerns of retailing. Co-operation had to co-exist with competitive commerce but it retained its opposition to capitalism and a desire to extend the bounds of its own activities as an alternative. However, a distinction may be drawn between the experience of British consumers' societies and those of many other European countries where co-operation continued to develop in overt alliance with particular political causes and thus particular, and sometimes competing, programmes aiming to shape the destiny of the mass of the population. As Gide noted

> one can see conservatives or revolutionists, bourgeois or workmen, collectivists or anarchists, Protestants or Catholics, preach co-operation in turn, although with very different objects (Gide 1921, 3).

There is here a paradox in that the supposedly universal collectivity of consumers became fragmented by identification with sectarian causes. The observation made of Italian co-operation that it was

> divided into political, religious and social sections which do not work in harmony (Coffey 1922, 71)

might be applied to several other European states. But what such interaction between co-operation and other ideological visions does suggest is a widespread recognition by contemporaries of the potential power invested in an association of consumers; a power which might be recruited to advance their particular cause.

Consumers' co-operation was not only associated with "progressive" elements in 19th century Europe, particularly the emergent forces of socialism and nationalism, but also with opposition to change. Indeed attempts by conservatives to engage the power that derived from co-operation, or at least to deny it to their opponents, testify further to an appreciation of the potential authority of an organised collectivity of consumers. In areas including Belgium, France and Italy consumers' co-operatives were numerous by the late 19th century, but they were also divided between those allied to the socialist cause on the one hand, and others which, while proclaiming their neutrality, were often agencies of conservatism and the Catholic church (Furlough 1987). Socialist co-operatives strove to be more than a source of funds for political campaigning, aiming to reinforce popular solidarity through the devotion of a significant proportion of resources to projects for collective welfare rather than individual dividend. Thus, particularly in Belgium and northern France, co-operative premises were not just stores but Maison du Peuple housing the local socialist party offices along with a range of facilities including libraries, halls, theatres, dispensaries and welfare services such as pensions, legal advice and death benefits (Fay 1908; Furlough 1987; Gide 1921). However, the provision of such material advantages could be seen as a two-edged weapon; there was ambivalence in relationships between co-operatives and socialist purists who argued that the former were a diversion from, rather than a means towards, the revolutionary transformation of society and economy. Moreover, conservative forces, particularly Social Catholicism, promoted their own view of collectivism to sustain rather than challenge the established order. Under conservative leadership co-operation was perceived as a means to provide economic stability and palliative welfare provision thus reinforcing social order and steering the masses away from militant socialism and syndicalism (Nord 1986).

Elsewhere, in central Europe socialist consumers' co-operatives were established in Austria, Croatia and Slovenia during the early 20th century (Coffey 1922; Cujes 1980). Here, however, co-operation became enmeshed with other ideological tensions; particularly those associated with nationalism. Consumption and co-operation, along with co-operation in other spheres including production and marketing, were seen as potentially powerful agencies promoting economic growth and thus weapons

in the struggle for self-control by subjugated national groupings within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They provided a means to extend nationalism beyond an initial intellectual circle and it has been claimed that co-operatives developed earlier amongst subject peoples including Poles, Slovaks, Czechs and Slovenes than they did amongst the ruling nationalities of Germans and Hungarians (Cujes 1980; Pluta 1980). As a contemporary observer noted

> both the Croats and Serbs wished to use every organization they possessed to prevent themselves becoming Magyarized, and for this reason the co-operative movements always had a semi-political basis... (Coffey 1922).

Moreover, the potential of co-operation again seems to have been recognised by the forces of reaction, who sought to neutralise it by bringing co-operatives under their own control. Thus, as part of the imperial authorities' project of Magyarisation there were attempts from 1898 to centralise co-operation under the direction of two state-sponsored organisations, responsible respectively for consumers' societies and credit unions (Kirschbaum 1980).

EXPLORING FURTHER

The argument here is necessarily skeletal; its exemplification even more so. Much remains incomplete in the exploration of the variety of co-operative experience in Europe and in the analysis of relationships between co-operation and other ideological currents that reshaped European socio-economic and political structures. But some justification has been offered for the extension of research in these directions. This reflects the desirability of extending the empirical historical record, but crucially also, the potential for productive engagement with theoretically informed debate about the socio-economic bases of collective action and power. An exploration of the potential of consumers' co-operation as a basis of popular or populist authority assumes additional importance in the face of the apparent denial of that potential by accepted social theory. We must also question the extent to which belief in the potential of consumer collectivity is matched by actual demonstrations of authority. Participation in such debate is all the more timely now, given increased attention to the supposed sovereignty of consumers and the social cleavages that revolve around consumption in our own

contemporary circumstances of post-modernism (eg Shields 1992, Warde 1994). Moreover, the approach advocated here prompts new questions about the nature of co-operation and in encouraging the location of its study within a broader context of social, economic and political change we may erode the introspection that has characterised some previous co-operative history.

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Produced By
School of Geography
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT
From Whom Copies May Be Ordered

December 1994