

Twelve Cases of Early Co-operation and Mutuality

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While the origins of the modern co-operative model are well known, it is possible to situate that story within a longer set of tradition and practice around mutuality. Drawing on a looser definition than that of the modern co-operative business, of people working together equitably as members of a formal and open body that exists to meet their economic and wider needs, a range of initiatives across cultures and centuries emerge from relevant sources as possible cases of early co-operation and mutuality. This paper sets out twelve examples as illustrations of this.

The limits to an exercise such as this are considerable. While there may be evidence of the function or the rules governing the activities concerned in these cases, it is harder to find evidence of a culture of mutuality. The names used for different initiatives are varied and to look for consistency by applying modern labels retrospectively can be misleading. However, as a tentative conclusion, forms of co-operation appear both adaptable and capable of reinvention. If true, then today's co-operatives are perhaps expressive of a pattern of mutuality that is deep and recurrent in the ways that people choose to organise over time.

Introduction

In 1844, weavers and workers in Rochdale in the North of England — the ‘pioneers’ — started a food store in a venture that has come to be seen as the first co-operative in the world. There are hundreds of established histories of co-operative and mutual enterprise, whether biographies of individual businesses or analyses of wider co-operative sectors over time, national and international, that point back to 1844. At the same time, there were clearly precursors of co-operation and mutuality across cultures and across time. While fully recognising their achievements, I hope to acknowledge the risk of choosing one point or place as the start of everything that follows. In the words of historian Frank Trentmann, “the birth metaphor alerts us to the importance historians attach to origins, and to the tunnel vision this can produce” (2017: 22).

Co-operation is arguably at the heart of all social organisation. The human story over time is one, according to Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (2011), of a ‘co-operative species’ as from the earliest days there were increasing returns to scale from working together, for example in hunting, and developing patterns of co-operation, such as childcare and shelter, that could support that. There was conflict between groups, for sure, but deep-rooted informal co-operation within them.

The extent of co-operation has been considered by anthropologists for some time. In 1937, Margaret Mead distinguished between primitive societies that she saw as primarily co-operative, competitive or individualistic (Argyle, 1991). Fifty years later, the anthropologist Douglas Bethlehem undertook the same exercise, with a wider list, particularly of hunter-gatherer groups in Southern Africa. For both, co-operation marked key occasions in the life of a group, such as catching large animals or building houses. Such co-operation was sustained by education and enforced by rules and sanctions (Argyle, 1991). This concept of cultural patterns has been criticised by commentators and the approach taken by Bowles and Gintis (2011) goes well beyond this. They combine available evidence across different groups with the formulation of models of behaviour in line with contemporary approaches to game theory. What they find is not that co-operation emerges simply because people are willing to cast bread on the water, hoping that it will come back. It is more:

- Within groups, norms of fairness emerge not just where the benefits are shared, but where costs are incurred when they are not — i.e. where people take the trouble to enforce the rules, and punish others even at a cost to themselves.
- Between groups, trade and mutual exchange play a role, evidenced in the spread of tools such as hand axes across large distances.
- Conflict between groups also plays a role, and this in turn further encourages co-operation within groups. If you do not co-operate with those around you, what you share is the increased risk of violence or death.

In the era of early human evolution, our predecessors were organised over long periods of time into small-scale stateless societies. Such conditions appear to have cemented co-operation in our patterns of social interaction. Social co-operation is not just as a way to get ahead in individual terms, but is something deeper that is fostered by institutions and in culture, internalised over time as a set of norms and realised as a set of social emotions, from shame to joy (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). Their conclusion — that our roots as a species are in co-operative action and it is these pro-social strategies rather than models of pure competition that explain survival and success — is echoed in other settings over the last three decades: in biology since Bob Trivers ('inclusive fitness'); in game theory by Elinor Ostrom and others; and in political science by Robert Axelrod (Sloan Wilson, 2015). In a neat about-turn from his phrase 'the selfish gene', Richard Dawkins now points to models where 'nice guys finish first'. In the thirtieth anniversary edition of *The Selfish Gene*, he describes how a less misleading title for the book could have been *The Co-operative Gene* (Dawkins, 2006).

In general, we practice social co-operation today when we walk through crowds or form a queue, or when we are in social institutions, such as friendship groups or family; the Hindu family for example that is traditionally "joint in food, worship and estate" (Craig, 1993). In a formal setting, our co-operation can be coerced or directed — soldiers in an army operate under instructions designed to coordinate how they should act together in the context of a battle. Or co-operation can be voluntary, in forms of association and using formal institutions, which is the focus here. But even here, co-operation can remain elusive. What, for example, is 'an institution'? Elinor Ostrom, the revered co-operative theorist and co-winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2009, characterised institutions as the bodies that we use to organise repetitive and structured interactions — where those involved operate in situations shaped by rules and face choices as to what they do, with consequences for themselves and others (Ostrom, 2005).

One of Ostrom's last books, looking back over a life of research on different governance systems for natural resources, was an attempt to provide a vocabulary of and set of design principles for institutions, in all of their diversity. That was complex and ambitious enough, but the challenge of understanding, let alone classifying institutions, is compounded when looking at history. The function of an institution may be evident to those who follow. Sometimes, if we are lucky, the rules are preserved. We typically have far less to go on when it comes to the other variables that Ostrom highlights for understanding institutions — the context and environment in which they participate and the characteristics of the community of which they are part. A further health warning is that although I use relatively open terms such as co-operation and mutuality, any labels over time, across cultures and from the informal to the formal, can be problematic. In particular, the intention in the examples given is not to seek to create new legends before that birth by anointing this or that initiative, whether fourth century BCE China, first century Rome or seventeenth century Paris as the first 'co-operative'. The working definition used, therefore, in this article, is that at its core, co-operative and mutual action is about people working together equitably as members of a formal and open body that exists to meet their economic and wider needs. What follows are examples of co-operative and mutual action.

Co-operative and Mutual Action Over Time

The Town Market

The Confucian Mencius, or Meng Ke, lived in China in the fourth century BCE. Sayings attributed to him, from his book *Mencius*, refer to market traders who would exchange together, with officials to oversee the process (Legge, 2010).

The Rural Commons

In India, communities long collaborated to sustain local assets such as village tanks or forests. The 'Phads' of Kolhapur saw farmers taking control of water resources collectively, for fair access, and collaborating around harvest and the transport of produce to market (Co-op Society, 2017). In Karnataka, most of the rains that the state sees come in the monsoon season. If the rains fail, the effect of farming is crippling, so the rationale for rainwater harvesting has always been strong. An inscription dated to 1371 in Karnataka describes the contribution of villagers in Nanjapura in the form of the upkeep of four bullock carts, for the maintenance of a water tank (Iyengar, 2004).

The College

The term *collegia* (the root of the modern word 'college' of course) translates from Latin as 'joined together'. Across the Roman Empire, *collegia* might be arts troupes or they might be groups of silver workers, rag dealers or woodsmen. Some were burial societies, supporting members at a time of financial cost as well as religious and cultural significance. We know of associations from inscriptions, papyri, and the writings of contemporaries in the Hellenistic period from the fifth century BCE. But the terms used, the members involved and the purposes set were extraordinarily varied — the number of different associations listed over the period stands at 2,500 on some counts and that is only the ones we know of today (Kobel, 2011). Included would have been religious confraternities, chapters of priests, sodalities, Judean synagogai and, on some characterisations, the earliest Christian associations (Ascough et al., 2012).

We can paint a picture of *collegia* through the example of one case study, a stone's throw from the walls of Rome, the statutes of which are preserved in inscriptions. The Collegium of Aesculapius and Hygia was founded in around 153 AD by a wealthy Roman woman named Salvia Marcellina (Donahue, 2004). This served as a dining club for its sixty members, and a burial society. The college lent money to its members, using the interest to pay its expenses. As a member, you were guaranteed a burial, including all of the costs associated with a funeral. The college had a President, the officers were 'caretakers' and the body of regular members was termed the 'the people' (Donahue, 2004).

The Collegium of Aesculapius and Hygia and its ilk were self-organising associations, concerned with equity among members, but not necessarily or typically egalitarian — whether they were formed for banquets by groups of aristocrats or indeed burials by groups of slaves (Schumacher, 2011). The sceptical views of Pliny the Younger in his letters might have held for many. As he put it, nothing could possibly be more "distressingly inequitable" than unflinching equality for all (Peachin, 2011). Just as seats in the theatres in Rome were organised by rank (in Augustan times), so the *collegia*, whether based on trades or cults, whether with members of military veterans or diners and drinkers, tended to operate with levels of status and rank. Some boasted an elaborate array of punishments for transgressions (Peachin, 2011).

The Maritime Partnership

From the late eighth century, a range of partnership models for enterprise and trade emerged in the Islamic world, allowing people to co-invest and share returns on an agreed basis, to share losses including acting as surety for other partners and to act on a mutual basis across the partners (Udovitch, 1970). The term typically used, *Sharikah*, or *al-Shirkah*, means in effect

a sharing, co-partnership. The most comprehensive form, *Sharikat al Mufawadah*, offered members equal rights in economic terms and an equal say in terms of the ability to act on behalf of the partnership. As one commentator, Abraham Udovitch argues, some of the institutions, practices and concepts in Islamic legal sources of the late eighth century did not emerge in Europe until several centuries later (Udovitch, 1970).

Early West European companies, such as the *Compagnie de la Nouvelle France* formed in 1627 to pursue trade in furs with North America, also operated on the basis of one member, one vote (Marianopolis College, 2005). The regulated companies set up by merchants in England in the 15th century followed the one member, one vote rule and, according to Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, also operated an open-door principle, where firms were obliged to admit any person, properly qualified, upon paying a certain fine (Battilani, 2014).

The Workshop

The Ahi ('brotherhood' or 'generous, open-handed') movement in Anatolia, modern Turkey was started in the thirteenth century by Pir Ahi Evran-e Veli, a master leather craftsman and scholar, born in Iran in 1169. He envisaged a world of guilds, connected and operating in a context of ethics and faith that could enable peaceful collaboration across the economy and society (Faroqhi, 2009). The context was warfare. People arriving in Anatolia from Turkestan were escaping Mongolian invasion (and indeed Ahi Evran himself would die at the hands of Mongols encroaching further in, in 1261). The vision was one of both enterprise and of faith. The formation of craft and commercial organisations was probably a practical way to maintain their solidarity, compete with local Byzantine craftsmen and to build the quality and reputation of their work. Nonetheless, they also integrated religious and moral precepts throughout.

The first leather workshop established by Ahi Evran was in Kayseri in Central Anatolia, a model that spread to other craftsmen and other towns. While the evidence is scanty, it appears that at its core was an economic base typical to guilds, such as controlling quality on the materials to be used and techniques for production, running inspections and setting prices. Trades, crafts and arts (thirty-two of them, in a later classification) were grouped together in bazaars, each one given over to one profession (along with a baker and barbershop allowed for each) and each with its own symbol: an atlas quilt for quilt makers, a silver horseshoe for farriers, a gilded sugar cone for sweet makers (Confederation of Turkish Tradesmen and Craftsmen, undated). Fatma Bacı, the wife of Ahi Evran, established a bazaar for women, the *Bacıyani Rum*, allowing them to group together and to sell the goods that they produced (Confederation of Turkish Tradesmen and Craftsmen, undated).

Underlying this was a linked and rigorous faith and social philosophy — possibly in the form of the seven hundred and forty principles set by *futuwwanamas* (the constitutions of the guilds), originating from the Qur'an. People were expected to behave with values such as being honest, generous, modest, encouraging, forgiving, selfless and realistic. The guild elder was the *Ahi Baba* — a title that found its way across to Jerusalem in later, medieval years (Faroqhi, 2009).

The Lending Circle

The idea of lending circles can also be traced back to thirteenth century Japan, in the form of *Ko* or *Mujin*, where groups of rural villagers, between twenty and fifty people, pooled savings and took turns to win credit. These may have been adapted from, or adapted into the *Hui* model from Southern China. This was smaller scale but, similar in terms of running until all have saved and borrowed before closing. In rural Korea, *Kye* emerged in the sixteenth century, providing a similar function. Rotating savings and credit associations such as these have a long history by different names in different countries: *Tontines* in West Africa, *Muzikis* or *Likelambas* in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, *Ekub* in Ethiopia, *Stokvel* in South Africa, *Mukando* in Zimbabwe, *Tandas*, and *Cundina* in Mexico, *Chits*, *Kuries* and *Bhishies* in India and *Thong Thing* in Cambodia (Kabuya, 2015; Cao, 2016).

The Artists Guild

Guilds emerged in Western Europe in the eleventh century. To become a master, a guild apprentice needed to complete a 'masterpiece' passed for its quality by the guild. The 'Dutch Masters' — an extraordinary generation of painters in the Netherlands — were indeed masters in their own time. The patron saint for artists was St Luke. But with church patronage in decline in the Low Countries, in Calvinist times, the Guilds of St Luke turned instead to domestic customers, developing an extraordinary market for art. By 1660, the year that Vermeer died and Rembrandt completed his last etching, 45,000 paintings were estimated to hang on the walls of homes in Delft (Farr, 2000).

The Labour Society

The Shore Porters Society, which dates back to 1498, formed by the Scottish porters, or 'pynours', working in the harbour at Aberdeen (Gordon, undated). One of the first members for whom we have a name is that of a woman, Megy Tod, in 1514. In a trade that required strength and skill, women could find a place — at least early on (Gordon, undated).

The roots of the Shore Porters Society may stretch back even further. A copy of a 1707 royal charter of confirmation in the name of Queen Anne refers to the rights and privileges granted to porters by "our most noble and illustrious predecessors William sometime King of Scotland" — a King better known today in Scotland as William the Lion, crowned on Christmas Eve of 1165 and who reigned through to 1214 (Gordon, undated). The 1498 date, in fact, is the first reference to the society in the annals of the city authority. The city probably oversaw its operations at that time (later, for example, directing the porters periodically to clean the 'middings' — refuse — of the city roads). While the connection through to the city authorities was always strong, in line with many medieval guilds, there is evidence of the society coming to act in a self-governing way. In 1531, Will Grant and a number of other members were named as standing as guarantors for the society as a whole. In 1546, we have the first record of Deacons, elected on an annual basis by the members (sometimes described as 'warkmen' and 'warkwomen') with an equal vote, to manage the property of the society and to chair meetings (Gordon, undated).

Around the same era, the porters, 'naties', in Antwerp also organised in a society, followed not long after by the porters, 'vemen', in the Netherlands. The Dutch guilds, on one analysis, apparently had many of the characteristics of modern co-operatives, such as one member, one vote, member subscriptions and the sharing of benefits (van Driel & Devos, 2007).

The Women's Guild

The guilds typically had masters, not mistresses, although there were variations over time and place. These were patriarchal times and the guilds reflected that. Yet there is evidence both of laws against women as members, in the guilds in Germany, and of those laws being flouted, as well as of initiatives to recognise women. The seamstresses in Paris in 1675, for example, set up a guild that entitled them to sew and sell clothes for women and children (Farr, 2000). In other French towns, such as Rouen, Le Havre, Caen and Lyon, there is evidence of active female participation in guilds (Farr, 2000). In 1628, over forty women who were spinners broke into the city hall of Barcelona. They threw insults at the councillors in protest at the action of master drapers, who were sending wool to be spun outside the city (Crowston, 2008).

The Insurance Mutual

Associations such as 'fire guilds' or 'death guilds' emerged to provide mutual assistance against risks as varied as fire damage, death, shipwreck and the death of livestock. The first recorded society I have learned of was founded in Schleswig Holstein in 1537 (Bruggemann & Mehl, 1984). In 1752 Benjamin Franklin founded America's first mutual, the Philadelphia Contributionship of the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire. This was modelled on one he had seen in his time in England, the Amicable Contributorship of London, to insure and protect buildings from the hazard of fire (Curl, 1980).

The Farmer Society

On the mountain slopes of Switzerland and Franche-Comté, cheese-making societies, *Fruitières*, spread from the fourteenth century (Seeberger, 2015). They offered ways for neighbours to pool milk to produce cheese. We can trace the lines of mutuality, from these neighbourhood associations, present in different forms and with different functions across medieval Europe, to latter self-governing quality standards and charters, such as the *Appellations d'Origine Protégée*, and to the co-operatives that are responsible for the production of Comté and Gruyère cheese today (Toulgoua, 1981).

The Prisoner Community

On the accession of Tsar Nicholas I, there was an uprising of arms and guards officers on 14 December 1825 in Senate Square, St Petersburg. The revolt failed and the rebels were sentenced to exile and hard labour in Siberia, with special orders from the Tsar to make life as hard as possible for them (Ollman, 1980; Rubashov, 1975). In Siberia, they were then packed like 'herrings in a barrel' in prison barracks, recalled Mikhail Bestuzhev. Nikolai Basargin, another of those exiled, recounted that:

each man had half a metre on which to sleep on the planks, so that in turning over onto one's side during the night one had necessarily to knock a neighbour — especially as we wore chains that were not taken off at night and which made an extraordinary noise and caused a perceptible pain with every careless movement. But is there anything to which youth cannot grow accustomed? What can it not endure? We all slept as well as in luxurious beds or on feather mattresses (Beer, 2016: 237).

There, driven by hunger and desperation, but with some connivance from the local authorities, they founded the Great Artel, a form of community or co-operative in effect, to get by together. They shared food parcels coming in, fenced off land next to the prison, started to produce clothing, footwear, saved money and offered credit and even did well enough to sell potatoes and beetroot to peasants in the area (Ollman, 1980; Rubashov, 1975). For the prisoner, Dimitri Zavalishin, mutual support represented "a revival of the Christian commune" (Beer, 2016: 266). For Pyotr Svistunov, in a letter dated September 1831, it:

really is our Lilliputian state. Every year, by means of a majority in a secret ballot, we elect a ruler and a chancellor, who will enact the will of the Artel (Beer, 2016: 267).

These arrangements allowed different talents to emerge among the prisoners. Nikolai Lorer recorded how "craftsmen of all kinds appeared among us: locksmiths, cabinet-makers, whose work could really rival that of craftsmen in St Petersburg" (Beer, 2016: 271). One of the great talents was Nikolai Bestuzhev, brother of Mikhail, who made clocks, shoes, toys, cradles and coffins, as well as painting a series of impressive portraits of the Decembrists and their wives (whose story alone is also a remarkable chapter of organisation and co-operation).

The venture helped them perhaps to survive and even allowed a few of them to live to taste freedom on the death of Tsar Nicholas in 1856 (Ollman, 1980; Rubashov, 1975). Musing later on the death of his comrade Nikolai Muravyov, Sergey Volkonsky wrote:

it is not sad to die in Siberia, but it is a pity that there is not one single grave for the bones of all of us disgraced individuals ... Separated we are like all people, specks of dust. But clustered together our bones would, with a bit of good fortune ... be a worthy funeral feast for future generations (Beer, 2016).

Co-operation Over Time

These twelve examples are intended to be illustrative rather than representative. They form part, too, of a wider swathe of civil society and association over time. To take one place and one time to illustrate the scale of this, in the eighteenth century, one estimate is that there were a remarkable 25,000 clubs and societies meeting in the English-speaking world (Clark, 2000). These ranged from social clubs and arts societies through to debating clubs, book

societies, alumni, freemasons, horticultural societies, music societies, sports clubs, professional associations, philanthropic and political societies, religious bodies, and scientific and learning societies.

Following the definition offered, the twelve are oriented towards the economic domain. At the same time, one qualification must be that the further one goes back, the less straightforward it tends to become to find an economic dimension that is separable to the wider bedrock of social organisation and belief. In the words of Karl Polanyi, co-operation and mutuality in the economic sphere was 'embedded' in the social and environmental context of the age in which they operated (Polanyi, 1944). Why look at the history of guilds, rather than that of monasteries, for example, when most guilds were organised around religious tenets and most monasteries were active participants in the economic life of their region? The precepts of St Benedict (480-550 AD) on communal life and work were, for example, intended for any Christian community and only taken up later in the form of monastic religious orders. Why look at the history of friendly societies, rather than that of scientific societies, when both were organised on schemes of membership that were probably comparable in terms of their degree of open and internal democracy?

My suggestion is that there can be a line drawn through, as long as drawing that line illuminates more than it obscures. If there was one common thread to that line of self-organisation, it is perhaps a golden thread of 'work'. As Ivan Illich suggests, the multiple expressions of medieval guilds may perhaps all be understood as attempts by specialists to determine how their kind of work shall be done, and by whom (Illich, 1978). A wider interpretation perhaps could be the organising power of shared 'needs', drawing people together to defend their livelihoods or promote their consumption.

Where people come together to do this for their shared economic benefit, it can be transformative for them. But there are also challenges. Challenges can come from those outside with power, wanting to extract value from or exert control through what they do. There can also be challenges from others outside without power — critics, competitors or innovators — who are locked out by the rules that are set up to or serve to exclude them. And then there are the internal challenges of conflict, cohesion and renewal over time. The extent, similarly, to which co-operatives are able to flourish may lie in the degree to which they benefit those on the inside while managing tensions with those on the outside. If so, not just the continuity but also the renewal of co-operatives and mutuals over time and as conditions change, is perhaps down to having the right 'fit' for the environment they inhabit of (internal) cohesion and (external) openness.

The modern *Statement on the Co-operative Identity* of the International Co-operative Alliance can be traced back to the Rochdale Pioneers of the nineteenth century. It would have been convenient if we could have looked to stick to a tighter definition of co-operatives, based on these, and then simply apply these backwards over time. Of course, in practice the evidence simply doesn't exist to do this. Mutual ventures do not leave fossil bones with DNA that can lead us to construct an evolutionary tree or paint a picture of diets and daily life aeons ago. They leave references, rules and, in more modern times, plenty of minute books.

That evidence trail may be stronger, for the last one thousand years, in Europe. But that shouldn't lead us to conclude that the co-operation underlying that was strongest there or strong only there. And what do rules and minute books tells us of the culture of co-operation in practice? Even today, the combined co-operative principles can be argued to represent an ideal more than always the reality across co-operative enterprise.

On that basis, what then do we conclude on the nature of co-operation? Looking back through time, I do not see that examples of co-operation and mutuality have had each and every one of those features (or even, for some, the character of incorporation and formality of rules) but rather the opposite. I conclude that there has been a diversity of co-operative and mutual institutions and practices which have succeeded in their own time, some briefly, some for long periods, with their own mix of characteristics. Co-operation appears adaptable and capable of reinvention to fit new contexts and new needs.

As Raymond Williams argues, the ways that so-called ordinary people have had of getting together in co-operation are cultural achievements, to be taken as seriously as cultural products such as paintings, plays and books (Williams, 1983). A few decades earlier, in the mid twentieth century, writing for the Co-operative Union, G. D. H. Cole wrote that such efforts were timeless - there was no saying when, or by whom, the first attempt at such co-operation was made (Cole, 1944). If so, then today's co-operatives are perhaps expressive of a deeper pattern of mutuality over time that is significant and recurrent in the ways that people choose to organise.

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