

Co-operation and Anarchism

Alexander Atabekian

1919

Co-operation is the scientific practice of mutual aid.

Élisée Reclus

Forms of co-operation, like everything in society, in organic life, in the nature of the universe, are subject to change and *evolution*. The modern notion of co-operation corresponds to the latest form of a whole series of phenomena, the origin and development of which can be traced throughout the history of human and even animal societies.

The theorists of co-operation who attribute its origin to one or another historical figure, who say, like Tugan-Baranovsky, that co-operation was “invented” and had its spiritual fathers, remind us of the naive biblical account of the creation of the world: in the beginning there was chaos and darkness, until God thought to engage in creation. This does not, of course, diminish the historical role of prominent co-operators as pioneers of co-operative progress.

If we take a closer look at those organisations that are commonly called co-operative – consumer (trade), productive (artels), credit (mutual aid through trust), insurance, the co-operative organisation of public services that has begun to emerge (such as co-operative educational institutions – art schools of teachers, or the co-operative organisation of public safety that exists in some cities of the United States of North America, along with the state one) – we will see that they all pursue practical goals. By combining their personal strengths, they all endeavour to meet the *immediate needs* of all their members.

In this sense, the word co-operation, as introduced by Robert Owen, justifies its literal meaning – *co-operation* or *assistance*.

Different forms of personal co-operation existed at all stages of social development. In patriarchal life, under slavery, during serfdom, under capitalist orders, people are also united for economic and other purposes aimed at satisfying the needs of the participants of the associations, but nevertheless not all forms of co-operation can be called *co-operation*, because many of them lack the main feature of co-operation – the *free choice* to participate or not to participate in this or that joint organisation.

Capitalist forms of production and commodity exchange fulfil this requirement of free choice to a certain extent: a *given* worker and manager, a given trader and buyer are not bound together. The worker can leave his master, just as the manager can dismiss the worker; the buyer takes goods today from one shop, tomorrow he can buy from a competitor offering cheaper or better

goods; — nevertheless, there is nothing co-operative in these phenomena, since there is no *equality* of parties in the distribution of benefits and losses arising from the combination of mutual economic needs and activities.

Free choice and equality in the enjoyment of benefits and in the incurring of duties and losses in associations of individuals are the essential features of co-operation.

In the broad and direct sense of the word, co-operation or *collaboration* should be called a long series of associations observed in animal and human societies, pursuing by common endeavour the equal satisfaction of the material and spiritual needs of their members. Kropotkin studied these phenomena under the name of “Mutual Aid” and he gives them the significance of an important factor in progressive evolution.

With good reason, Kropotkin classifies, with some critical reservations, all modern legally formalised co-operation as phenomena of mutual aid, and he dwells especially on “the informal co-operation” of the Russian folk *artel*. (see pp. 195–196 of *Mutual Aid*, Moscow edition, 1918).

Élisée Reclus, while also critical of the negative aspects of modern co-operation, in turn looks at it as “the practice of mutual aid”.

“Nevertheless,” he says, “serious and sincere anarchists can learn a great deal from such co-operative unions, which are springing up in great numbers everywhere, and which are joining one with the other to form an ever-growing organism, embracing the most diverse fields: industry, transport, agriculture, science, arts, entertainment; they even endeavour to form an organism embracing production, consumption, and the course of development of aesthetic life. The scientific practice of mutual aid is spreading and being facilitated, it remains only to give it its true meaning and moral significance by simplifying all exchange of services, keeping only the simple statistics of production and consumption...” (*Evolution, Revolution and the Ideal of Anarchism*, Moscow. ed. 1917, p. 110).

Mutual aid is characterised, apart from the satisfaction of immediate material and spiritual needs, by the moral principle of *justice* — the equal distribution of the fruits of united efforts among all participants.

Is not this ethical task the stumbling block for modern co-operation in its search for more perfect forms, free from the distorting influence of capitalist principles?

On the other hand, co-operative thought has had its influence on the forms of development of capitalism. Joint-stock companies, with their small contributions, equal distribution of benefits (dividends) and equality of rights of the participants, have great similarities with co-operation. The main difference is to be found in the fact that joint-stock companies use exclusively *wage labour*, and the resulting economic exploitation of some people by others violates the equality of all actual participants in the enterprise.

Modern co-operation is not free from this sin either. It is not without reason that Bakunin is sharply negative towards the “bourgeois co-operative system”. Here is how he refers to consumer co-operation: “The famous association of Rochdale workers in England, which made so much noise and excited so many attempts to imitate it in other countries, ended up by creating a new collective bourgeoisie, quietly exploiting the mass of workers who do not belong to it” (quoted in A. Karelin, *Life and Work of M.A. Bakunin*, p. 31).

This capitalist element, inherent in modern consumer co-operation, exists partly in the productive, *artisanal* co-operation, which also allows, with certain restrictions, wage labour.

This form of co-operation, which allows wage labour, thus violates the *ethical principle* underlying mutual aid — equality — and thus denies the reciprocity of rights and obligations of its participants.

By eliminating wage labour — this is what the further development of modern co-operation is leading to, this is its immediate and most important task — co-operation will finally merge with the phenomena of mutual aid.

In productive, artisanal co-operation, wage labour is usually reduced to the smallest size or is completely absent. Consumer co-operation should also follow in the footsteps of productive co-operation and be based exclusively on the beginning of a free contract between consumer associations and productive arts.

Recently, consumer co-operation, especially in Russia, has been trying to atone for its *capitalist sin* by various charitable, socially useful appropriations out of its profits (just as joint-stock companies and private capitalists do or have done). But this is not the resolution of the question. Co-operation must finally purify itself from wage labour, and only then will it dissociate itself from capitalist forms and acquire its basic ethical character of mutual aid — that mighty engine of social development.

By its ethical character, by its aspiration to free itself from wage labour and the consequent exploitation of man by man, co-operation is *socialist* and cannot be different without changing its nature.

By its other basic property, the free association of individuals, with the right of each of them to withdraw from the association at any time, co-operation excludes coercion. Being free and voluntary in its internal construction, co-operation is hostile to external violence, which is an inevitable property of state power. Politically, co-operation can be neither monarchical, nor republican, nor democratic (as V. Kilchevsky claims), nor Soviet, since coercion is inherent in all power. Even under the most ideal state system, under direct popular legislation of property equal people, the majority subordinates the minority to its will. Co-operation, on the other hand, is a free association of individuals, their federation in the full and pure sense of the word, and both the minority and the individuals have the right to leave the association if it ceases to meet their material and spiritual needs. On this account, co-operation is politically an anarchist federation (this is recognised by Tugan-Baranovsky, Totomianz and other theorists of co-operation).

Co-operation cannot remain politically neutral without risking its development and even its existence.

Under the autocracy in Russia, the government sought to establish the right of its organs to sanction elections made in co-operative organisations. The Soviet power went further; it implemented the participation of *appointed officials* in the boards of co-operative associations. With its monopolies (nationalisations), the Soviet power destroyed the freedom and independence of credit co-operation, narrowed and disfigured consumer co-operation and paralysed the nascent educational co-operation.

To defend its independence, co-operation must always be prepared to defend itself against the encroachments of state power. This is the only guarantee of its prosperity and even existence.

Not only that. In its endeavour to organise public services by voluntary association, *co-operation is directly opposed to state power*. It competes not only with private capital, but also with the state.

This organic opposition of co-operation to state power is not sufficiently realised by the modern co-operative movement. Co-operation has until recently been opposed only to the capitalist

economic system. During the world war, state power extended its interference in the economic life of the people so widely that it turned the fulfilment of material needs into a kind of monopoly public services. The follies of Bolshevism, logically consistent but devoid of practical common sense in its premises, only revealed more clearly the incompatibility of the free existence and development of co-operation, voluntary in its nature, with state power.

The further development of co-operation should lead to an open denial of the exclusive right of the state power to organise public services: the right to compulsory taxation — to levy taxes, to the monopoly of coinage and the issue of credit marks, to the right to sanction (governmental registration) of its contracts-statutes, to state public education, to administrative justice, to care for public security and even external defence of the territories, the population of which will be united, knit into one whole by a dense network of co-operative societies.

In short, co-operation represents the practical form in which the abolition of economic exploitation and the political oppression of man over man is realised. It clears the way for the separation of public services from state power and thus leads to the abolition of the latter.

Co-operation is one of the theoretical foundations and practical paths to free anarchist socialism.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Alexander Atabekian
Co-operation and Anarchism
1919

Original translation of Кооперация и анархизм

theanarchistlibrary.org