Cooperation: A Common Principle of Mormonism and Anarchism

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In the late 1800's, the Mormon pioneers, exiled to the Utah territory, implemented one of the largest experiments in cooperative living that the United States has ever known. They wanted to create a society with no rich and no poor. This society would be built, among other things, on the principle of cooperativism. Cooperation is the simple notion that when people work together as opposed to competing with one another, they can achieve economic and political goals without backbreaking work, or the stratification of society that the capitalist system requires.

The value of cooperation can also be found in much of the political theory of anarchism which, as a body of ideas, is probably one of the most misunderstood in mainstream society. The most common misconception is that anarchists advocate chaos, and that an anarchist organization is an oxymoron. Anarchism is also associated with violence, and media portrayals of "anarchists" seem to suggest that we are simply a rag-tag group of black-wearing-stone-throwers who relish the opportunity to vandalize corporate property during anti-globalization rallies. Anarchist ideas have a long and vibrant history in the United States, much of which is non-violent. In anarchist writings there is a stubborn utopianism that continues to push humanity in a direction of greater equality, solidarity, and dignity. Even a cursory glance at anarchist literature and practice reveals an uncompromising commitment to freedom, self-determination, cooperation, and social justice.

Though Mormonism and anarchism are hardly thought of as compatible world views, they both hold a deep commitment to community, solidarity, and cooperativism. Below, I will briefly outline cooperation from the perspective of both Mormon history and anarchist practice.

The Mormon Cooperative Movement of the 1800s

Robert Owen is best known for the popularization of Cooperativism, who formed The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in 1884. This society attempted to alleviate the pressures of the English industrial revolution and promoted the principles of self-reliance, equality, solidarity, and democracy. What is sometimes overlooked, though, is that around this same time, Mormon pioneers were practicing cooperation in the Utah territory with astounding success.

A cooperative can take many forms; member-and worker-owned are the most important for our purposes. Both types of co-ops are owned by the people that benefit from them, worker-owned by the workers, member owned by the members. Member-owned co-ops are typically stores. Member-owners elect a board of directors, and the board usually hires an executive director. Worker-owned co-ops tend to be run by the workers themselves depending on the size.

After intense persecution in Missouri, Mormon pioneers began a mass migration to what is now the state of Utah, which was then part of Mexico. It is interesting to note, that these Mormon Pioneers left the United States, or as they saw it, fleeing from Babylon, an ironic fact considering contemporary Mormonism's zealous patriotism. In the late 1800's, a variety of member-and worker-owned cooperatives were an important tool of the Mormon united order movement for promoting equality and attempting to put the brakes on expanding American capitalism in the Utah territory. It is estimated that between the years of 1868 and 1884 over 200 cooperative enterprises were formed under the direction of Brigham Young. At this time there was a growing fear of outsiders and the proliferation of trading companies, about which Brigham Young states "there is a class of men who are here to pick the pockets of the latter-day saints and then use the means they get from us to bring about our destruction" (Arrington, 294). Church leaders feared that the growing "gentile" merchant trader class was charging too much money for their goods,

and threatening the self-reliance of its membership. Church policy was aimed to ensure that no one person was making "exorbitant profits," which created an early stigma attached to anyone dubbed a "profiteering saint."

These enterprises were, from the beginning, formed to protect and promote equality, community self-reliance, and community unity; to encourage maximum production through home industry as opposed to consumption and trading. Cooperatives were created to ensure that the wealth that was generated from trade was equally distributed among the people and was used for the "building up of the kingdom of god." As Brigham Young states, the purpose of cooperation was "to bring goods here and sell them as low as they can possibly be sold and let the profits be divided with the people at large" (Arrington, 298) and to "guard against the development of a moneyed class among the latter-day saints themselves which would rend the social fabric and destroy cohesion and unity" (Arrington, 295).

In 1869, The Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution (ZCMI) was established as a joint stock company in Salt Lake City or a member-owned cooperative. By church mandate, ZCMI then became the central distributor of all goods imported into the territory, with each settlement charged to establish similar cooperatives at the local level. Members were admonished to only do business with the ward and community cooperative stores. Brigham Young believed that ZCMI's monopoly on regional trade was justified due to its public ownership, low prices, and the importance given to production over distribution. In other words, it was a measure to keep what was perceived as Babylon from enslaving the saints. Despite the centralized control of ZCMI, at the local level provisions were made so that anyone could own stock, and some co-ops even limited the amount of stock that could be owned by any one individual, some even maintaining the classic one-member-one-vote system for electing its board of directors (Arrington, 304). After ZCMI was established, cooperative industry was encouraged in practically every aspect of economic life. Enterprises such as iron-working, farming, butcher shops, molasses mills, shoe manufacture, wool manufacture, furniture makers, textiles, cotton, and tanneries all formed under cooperative principles and structures. These industries formed a network of economic solidarity and mutual support that rivaled that of any other territory or region on the continent.

In 1882, John Taylor stopped official church sponsorship of the cooperative movement, but voiced his emphatic support of the principles of cooperation. Eventually local business men began to gain control of the co-ops and the stock fell into fewer and fewer hands. In addition, the ridicule and pressure from the US laizze-fair system became too much for cooperativism and they have practically vanished without a trace in the formal economic sector, though LDS communities practice a vibrant tradition of mutual aid and cooperation.

One interesting parallel of the church trading system that succeeded united order movement was its resemblance to the recent emergence of fair trade, a system of third party certification that provides producers of such commodities as coffee, tea, and bananas, with the assurance of a decent wage and fair labor conditions. The Zion Central Board of trade was formed in 1878 by Brigham Young's successor, John Taylor. This program was designed to adapt to the rapidly changing national economy and growth that had contributed to the failure of the United Order movement. Its stated principles were formed to avoid "hurtful competition," "peddlers and middle men" and to "support home industry," and a system of "living prices for the fruits of a man's toil," and finally to "foster capital and protect labor" (Arrington 343). These principles, though not entirely cooperative, were adapted to what was seen as an unstoppable US economy, and were designed to adapt cooperation to the US system of capitalist trade.

Anarchism and Cooperation

Though the cooperatives of the Mormon United Order were not models of anarchist organization, they demonstrated the deep commitment of a Christian community to cooperation and to creating a society ruled only by love. Worker-owned cooperatives have been looked to by many anarchists as viable institutional alternatives to capitalist and communist tyranny because they place the means of production, decision making power, and profit in the hands of the workers. The Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin, along with many other anarchist writers and agitators, has looked to the cooperative as a minimum requirement for economic democracy. Almost every anarchist experiment in the 20th century has used some sort of cooperative model for running economic enterprise, from the Paris Commune, to the Spanish anarchists of civil war era Spain. Peter Kropotkin's 1902 Mutual Aid affirms that, despite Darwinian notions of survival of the fittest competition, most communities of species are webs of symbiotic relationships. Mutual Aid is an attempt to debunk the then-pervasive notion that competition and individualism are human "laws of nature." Kropotkin states, that "it is not love to my neighbor—whom I often do not know at all—which induces me to seize a pail of water and to rush towards his house when I see it on fire; it is a far wider, even though more vague feeling of instinct of human solidarity and sociability which moves me (Kropotkin, xiii). Kropotkin points to the cooperative nature of indigenous peoples and even medieval European villages before their absorption by nationalist state structures as viable examples of human communities with cooperative economies. During the enclosure movements of the 16th century, European villages struggled against state encroachment just as Mormon Pioneers did in the Utah territory. These communities though diverse, used the power of community to meet the needs of everyone, with little emphasis on individual gain.

The economics of anarchism, though varied between the different anarchist schools, emphasize mutual aid and cooperation as a common principle. Human economic relations should be undergirded by meaningful relationships and respect. Communities should not seek to compete with one another, but to distribute the earth's abundance equitably according to need not one's ability to pay. Although there are not wide scale examples of an anarchist economy, anarchists and other socially progressive groups around the world are creating alternatives to capitalist exploitation and market dominance by starting community currency, experimenting with gift and barter exchange, and starting food not bombs locals. Organic and diversified permaculture farms are also a part of the movement to localize economic relationships and support small, ecological farm operations that resemble pioneer-era and indigenous farming practices. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) creates a cooperative relationship between farmers and the community by eliminating the middle person, and even offering participants a work-trade option on the farm in exchange for food. Affinity groups, collectives, and worker-owned cooperatives all work under the premise of distributing wealth among workers, reducing coercion and hierarchy, and promoting the value of cooperativism. One interesting example of cooperative principles being used to create alternative spaces to capitalism is the Argentinean factory take-over movement that has occurred since 2001. During the presidency of Carlos Menem, deregulation led to an economic crash, which prompted many business and factory owners to abandon their factories, leaving literally thousands without jobs. Many workers, disgusted at the practices of their employers began to occupy and start the factories up again creating cooperative structures without the bosses. To date, there have been over 200 take-overs in Argentina. These take-overs have

been hailed as a great success in workplace democracy, and are just one example of cooperative principles being employed by contemporary social justice movements.

Conclusions

At the turn of the century, Mormonism called an uneasy truce with Babylon. One reason was simple: survival. From that point on, Mormonism has furiously striven for acceptance by the world so that the world in turn might accept its sacred message of salvation. While I am not calling for a conflation of anarchist and Mormon ideologies, I do think that meaningful discussion could be produced around the common goal of a world without inequality and poverty. Although Mormons may not have "all things in common" with the revolutionary anarchist vanguard, we can draw on our theological instincts and heritage in cooperation to help build a more equitable world. While the ideal society will come for anarchism through revolution, and in Mormonism it may take God's intervention; we both seek to establish meaningful alternatives to the world's economy though solidarity, unity and cooperation. In working toward justice and an ideal society, Mormonism could do well with a little healthy dissent, and anarchism with a little more faith.

References

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