

Cooperatives as Schools of Self-Government

Kevin Carson

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At Chlorophyll, Esteban has some interesting comments on co-ops as an educational tool for developing an empowered society. He notes the radical disconnect between the kind of “democracy” we learn about in the publik skools’ civics classes, and our experience in the economic world:

Our mental model is that there are those “above” us, who hand down dictates that may or may not make sense, and the most we can hope for is to stay on their good side. If we live this medieval model all day every day, is it any surprise that a lot of folks aren’t inspired to break with it to vote? They don’t think they could — or maybe even should — have an influence over the wider world.

History shows that all the propoganda in the world can’t overcome people’s experience. Get-out-the-vote efforts might cause a measurable rise, even enough to tip the balance one way or the other, but can’t convince the other 50% of the population to vote. Only daily practice in democracy — not just voting, but engaging each other and deliberating — can create a context to do that.

Jeffersonian democracy was ideally suited to a society of self-employed tradesmen and farmers. And, despite the obvious self-serving aspect of limiting the franchise to the 40s freeholder, there was some logic to the connection between economic independence and political power. The habits of dependency and subservience that come from employment at another’s pleasure can translate into some extremely pathological behavior in the political realm. Especially, in the past thirty years or so, the steep decline in union manufacturing jobs (often associated with a willingness to tell bosses to go to hell), and the rise of a work force divided between instantly disposable minimum wage service workers and careerist white collar apparatchiks in corporate bureaucracy, have undermined most of the socio-economic basis of democracy. People who spend twelve years in the publik skools learning that the path to success lies in finding out what it takes to please authority figures and jumping through hoops, and then find those lessons reinforced in the Darren Stevens world of the corporation, are a pretty dangerous bunch to count on when it comes to vigilance against the government.

But it works the other way. The more parts of our daily lives we’re in the habit of managing for ourselves, the harder it is to preserve unquestioning deference to authority in the other spheres:

But there's more to this. The more people participate in their workplaces and communities, the healthier and more productive they will be. That is to say, there will be less need for the federal government to take care of us, because we'll be taking care of ourselves. Over time, that will apply to state government, and eventually even the municipal level. But this can only happen to the extent that we empower ourselves. No one will do this for us — no one wants us empowered. We must take responsibility for our own liberation. And the best way to do that is in the workplace, through worker ownership and management.

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