

Making the Co-operative School a Challenge Alternative: Social Reproduction Theory Revisited

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While co-operative schools are different, there are different kinds of different schools. This essay examines the type of alternative co-operative schools are, using distinctions Philip A. Woods draws from Maori philosophy of education. While some may believe that co-operative schools are a challenge alternative — rather than a choice or assimilation alternative — because they promote co-operative values, I disagree. Given the structural link between schools and economy, the way we should determine whether co-operative schools are a challenge alternative to dominant mainstream schooling is by looking to the size and strength of the co-operative economy. Using the educational genesis of the Mondragon co-operatives as a paradigm case, and social reproduction theory as a lens, it is clear that the purpose of co-operative schools was and is to strengthen the co-operative economy. The co-operative economy right now is drastically smaller and weaker than the capitalist economy in England, and the number of co-operative schools emerging does not mean they are emerging as a challenge alternative to dominant schooling.

Introduction

Co-operative schools are different to other schools, but what kind of different? To answer this question, we can look to Philip A. Woods' essay (2014) *Co-operativism as an alternative: choice, assimilation, and challenge*. Woods draws from Maori thinking about education to distinguish three kinds of curricular alternatives: choice alternative, assimilation alternative, and challenge alternative. Each of these alternatives are a different kind of different education. In each case, an educational alternative relates to a mainstream, or "centred hegemonic education" in a different way. An alternative that relates to the mainstream as a choice alternative, for example, is:

an option on the margins of 'normal' education should the mainstream not appeal. This places the alternative in a lesser position in relation to the dominant, mainstream approach. The alternative as an option appears as abnormal ... as peripheral ... (Woods, 2014, p. 46)

A choice alternative is small, peripheral, and abnormal. It may be a different kind of education, like a quirky or weird style to which some ascribe, but this alternative remains subordinate to the dominant education. The alternative — while a rejection of the mainstream — does not pose a threat to that mainstream. This choice alternative may have counter-hegemonic aspirations, but they remain only aspirations.

While the choice alternative has little to no effect on the hegemonic centre, the assimilation alternative has an effect, but a counterintuitive one: an assimilation alternative feeds into the mainstream, but from a different path.

The alternative in this sense acts in a way that the participants in the alternative are shaped into selves more in line with the dominant, mainstream culture ... the process of being alternative can inadvertently reinscribe the very pathologies of difference that [alternative forms of education] attempt to negate (Waitere and Court quoted by Woods, 2014, pp. 46-47).

Woods gives an example of assimilation alternative from research on Maori education. Waitere and Court found that in some cases "trying to establish an alternative ... involves the alternative in grappling with demands for 'standards and accountability' from the dominant centre" (Woods, 2014, p. 47). Such grappling compels the alternative to comply with mainstream norms and practices, thus becoming an organ of the mainstream. This assimilation-through-alternative can happen when the alternative's funding and resources are tied somehow to the dominant

mainstream, for example. Thus the alternative education assimilates students to the mainstream as its ends, though the means by which it does this are different from the mainstream's means.

In contrast to the choice and assimilation alternatives, a challenge alternative is:

an equal in the mainstream ... it exists in its own right and sustains comfortably and confidently its own integrity. It is not defined by its opposition to any dominant or other approaches in the mainstream of education (Woods, 2014, p. 48).

The aim for this challenge alternative is to be a legitimate challenger to the mainstream by having "its own integrity", rather than standing aloof from hegemony (choice) or stand with it in some different way (assimilation).

Are co-operative schools a choice, assimilation, or challenge alternative to mainstream schools? The consensus — or perhaps the hope — among academics and advocates writing about co-operative schools in England is that these schools are a challenge alternative, for two reasons. The first reason is the sheer number of co-operative schools that have emerged in the last eight years. In 2008 there were three schools that had co-operative status, and recent numbers announced by the Co-operative College report that as of 2017 there were somewhere between 600 and 700. While this is a small percentage of the total number of schools in England, the increase is dramatic. With such a surge in the number of co-operative schools, one could think that they are not merely a choice alternative: rather than an abnormal kind of school aloof from the mainstream, the number of these schools is abnormally increasing.

However, the increase of co-operative schools itself is not sufficient for concluding that the schools do not assimilate students into a dominant educational mainstream. The second premise in the argument that co-operative schools are a challenge alternative is that such schools promote co-operative values. Call this the values thesis. Tom Woodin (2014b) writes that co-operative schools promise "a new vision of education based upon the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity" (Woodin, 2014b, p. 113). These values are a benefit to schools, Woodin argues, because they represent a set of clear guidelines for curriculum and mission, create a sense of belonging, widening the avenues of accountability to pupils and communities. The values are a benefit to society at large, others argue, because they are a starting point for democratic renewal amidst strong privatising forces in the public sphere.

Values are the flagship concept in discourse about what makes co-operative schools different kinds of schools. A 2012 promotional video about co-operative schools concludes with the idea that in a co-operative school "co-operative values and principles are at the heart of everything we do here, and these values make ours a different sort of school" (Co-operative College, & Co-operative Group 2012). There are variations on the values thesis that draw from theories of democracy, as well as critiques of neoliberalism. Michael Fielding's (2014) fascinating argument against competition and emulation, citing Alex Bloom's school St. George-in-the-East, focuses on co-operation as an attribute of "democratic fellowship", arguing that schools should cultivate such fellowship among students as an end in itself. Davidge, Facer, and Schostak (2014) argue that democracy is in decline due to the market-centred economic system known as neoliberalism. Their conclusion is that:

Neoliberalism has failed to deliver democracy, social justice, and freedom for all. Co-operative forms of organisation in schools by including freely and equally all voices ... may develop approaches, mechanisms, and procedures that provide a check on elite power and thus enable the spread of democratic accountability (Davidge et al., 2014, p. 70).

The authors focus their critique on "the development of democracy", showing the gaps left by policies which privatise public goods, shift decision-making power to the wealthiest, and make workers' lives more precarious. They claim that:

co-operative schools in the UK along with other co-operatives operating across the economic sectors and communities of society, could create the conditions in communities for the broader hopes of an inclusive society founded upon co-operative principles ... (Davidge et al., 2014, p. 70).

What makes co-operative schools different, for them, is that they “create conditions for the broader hopes of an inclusive society founded upon co-operative principles”. Again, here is a variation on the values thesis: schools that educate for and with co-operative principles will imbue society with a set of values that make it more inclusive, setting it apart from mainstream exclusions.

Co-operative schools, these authors might say, are challenge alternatives because they teach co-operative values, which challenge dominant mainstream values like competitiveness, individuality, un-democratic forms of governance, exclusion, and neoliberalism. Insofar as schools promote co-operative values they will not be an assimilating educational alternative because these values are incompatible with dominant values. Combined with the premise that co-operative schools are not a choice alternative because of their increasing numbers, one must conclude that co-operative schools are a challenge alternative.

There is a missing link in this argument, however, specifically in the values thesis. I will call the missing link a structural link, or economic link.

The Structural Link

Indeed, co-operative values are different to dominant mainstream values. But what makes them different is that they derive from a different kind of political economy — one at odds with the dominant mainstream political economy, capitalism. Co-operativism has always been an alternative to capitalism, not just in terms of values, but in terms of production, ownership, and the distribution of wealth. Co-operativism is an arrangement where workers, consumers, and producers own firms, rather than CEOs and shareholders. One must have entirely different values to promote a co-operative economic system over a capitalist one, and these co-operative values emerge from co-operative economy. The purpose of teaching co-operative values, therefore, is not to promote co-operative values for their own sake, but rather to promote co-operative production and strengthen the co-operative economy. Co-operative schools played a crucial part in strengthening the co-operative economy, which Woodin (2014b) notes:

As democratically constituted bodies co-operatives could only advance as far and as fast as their members would allow them and this depended upon education. Indeed, the rapid expansion of co-operatives in the 19th century took place on the back of the loyalty, support, and commitment that was shown by members in supporting their societies as they moved into production, banking, insurance, agriculture and other industries. Their very existence depended upon a learnt associational identity as well as advanced technical and managerial training to fuel the growing demands of an expanding business (Woodin, 2014b, p. 7),

Co-operative schools taught a “learnt associational identity” because co-operative businesses needed their workers to work co-operatively. The values co-operative schools taught served the economy co-operators were building. The success of co-operative schools, in other words, was tied to the success of the co-operative economy. What made the co-operative schools different was not the fact that they inculcated co-operative values, but rather the fact that they did this to support a co-operative economy to confront the capitalist economy. I call this connection between co-operative schools and the co-operative economy a structural link because it acknowledges that schools exist within a larger social structure, and schooling serves a purpose within that structure. Co-operators saw a need for co-operative schools because they needed workers who understood how to own factories and firms, rather than be exploited by owners as waged workers. The schools taught the values and skills necessary to support worker-owned firms, and that structural link to the economy is what separated them from other schools.

The formation of the Mondragon co-operatives is a paradigm case of this structural link between schools and economy (Backer 2017). Working in the Basque Country of Spain in the 1940s, Father Don Jose Maria Arizmendiarieta aimed to create more employment opportunities for his parishioners. The primary steel company in the area, Union Cerrajera, was a private firm, unequally distributing wealth in the region and creating tensions between workers and the small

group of wealthy owners. The priest's goal was to mobilise the Basque region's social cohesion and natural resources to make gains for its working classes. To do this, he created a medical clinic, a youth sports league, a public movie theatre, and eventually a school oriented towards working class empowerment. The school was, arguably, the centrepiece of his initial strategy.

The strategy of starting a school to make gains for the working class emerged out of an experience Father Jose Maria had at the beginning of his tenure as a priest in the region. Union Cerrajera operated an apprentice school (Escuela de Apprentices), though it was small and restricted to wealthier families' children, leaving few spots for working class children to learn managerial and engineering skills. Union Cerrajera asked Father Jose Maria to teach at this school. The priest became disenchanted with it, and began organising with union leaders to create a school open to working class children. This "school for the working class" began operations in 1943, enrolling 20 students and employing five professors (Ornelas-Navarro, 1980, p. 119).

While the governing and financing structures of the school were not strictly co-operative, there were elements at its inception which led directly to the formation of the Mondragon co-operative. First, the school's finances were made to be "transparent as glass" from the very beginning (Ornelas-Navarro, 1980, p. 120), published in:

a relatively easy-to-understand statement of accounts ... for general inspection, not only by those directly interested and collaborators, but by anyone who desires to look at them (Ornelas-Navarro, 1980).

Second, the mission, pedagogy, and curriculum of the school included a clearly-articulated set of values deriving from Father Jose Maria's commitments to co-operativism, gains for the working class, and Catholicism. This humanistic vision was always articulated in service of a technical, brass-tacks commitment to employment and improving workers' material conditions of existence through co-operative ownership. Father Jose Maria:

chose to focus on the creation of a technical school rather than standard liberal arts education because these impoverished people ... needed concrete skills and knowledge that could lead to jobs and a better standard of living." (Meek, & Woodworth 1990, p. 511)

In general, Ornelas-Navarro concludes that "[t]he task was to look for the appropriate people and prepare them to undertake co-operative activities". The school was a place of preparation to instil this combination of humanism, religion, and co-operative ownership. Father Jose Maria

believed it was possible to create a social and economic order in which labour was valued as the critical element of the firm and in which the common person could be his or her own master as a co-operative owner and participant in the enterprise ... the school was a place where could be taught and instilled in the potential new leaders of industry (Ornelas-Navarro, 1980).

The first class of graduates finished at the EPP in 1947. Eleven of these high school graduates continued their education with advanced night classes at the EPP. These eleven college graduates, having been educated at the EPP, went on to work in Union Cerrajera for several years. Five of these students maintained friendships with one another and with Father Jose Maria after graduating from the EPP. Disappointed with their experiences on the shop floor of the capitalist Union Cerrajera, the priest guided them in the creation of a "new enterprise" owned by workers (Ornelas-Navarro, 1980, p. 125). In 1956, they started a worker co-operative, ULGOR (formed by the first letters of their own last names). Ulgor would become the first co-operative in the Mondragon system. They wanted to make a firm "which conformed to the ideals and examples previously discussed with Jose Maria" (Meek, & Woodworth, 1990, p. 516). Doing extensive community outreach, they raised an initial investment with the Mondragon community by 1958 and began building the company, factory, and organisational structure (Meek, & Woodworth, 1990). Article I of Ulgor's "Internal Regulations" document stated that "[m]annual labour should enjoy the prerogatives inherent in its dignity in all productive processes" (Meek, & Woodworth, 1990, p. 517). By 1959, four other co-operatives — a consumer co-operative, two producer co-operatives, and a "Working Peoples' Bank" — emerged in

Mondragon, and the EPP was reorganised a second time to become part of this co-operative network.

Meek and Woodworth (1990) claim that the Mondragon co-operative experience, one of the most successful industrial co-operatives in the world, had an “educational genesis”.

Indeed, without the educational programmes and systems ... and the continued elaboration and development of new educational mechanisms and institutions, the co-operative enterprise might never have started ... the EPP and Alecoop created the necessary engineering and managerial talent to sustain the system and propel its expansion (Meek, & Woodworth, 1990, p. 506).

The EPP “created the necessary engineering and managerial talent to sustain” and propel the co-operative. In Ornelas-Navarro’s landmark research on schooling and producer co-operatives, he claims that schools can have a reproductive role in anti-capitalist social formations by training workers to live and work with co-operative relations of production. Using Bowles and Gintis’s (2011) notion of “correspondence”, Ornelas-Navarro builds on the assumption that curriculum, pedagogy, and school activities correspond to economic behaviours outside of the school.

For Ornelas-Navarro, this correspondence does not entail a “mechanical correspondence” between MCE and EPP, however:

Since the EPP is different in structure from standard capitalist schools, the outcomes produced by such a school also tend to be different. These differences in outcome are due (a) to a more democratic and egalitarian organisation and governance, and (b) the combination of formal education with paid productive co-operative labour ... The linkages between the EPP and the MCE are exemplified in the types of values and attitudes the EPP reproduces in its contribution to the reproduction of labour power (Ornelas-Navarro, 1980, p. 19).

Schools train students to be workers, and their behaviours in school correspond to work behaviours. Rather than capitalist correspondence, however, the students’ activities in the EPP corresponded to co-operative relations of production. In other words, there was a correspondence between their school behaviours and work behaviours, but this correspondence guided the students to a non-exploitative economic life rather than an exploitative one. The EPP reproduced co-operative know-how and ideology. The structural link between co-operative schools and the co-operative economy is therefore a reproductive one. In what follows, I unpack the structural link further by revisiting the basic tenets of the social reproduction theory of schooling. Through the lens of social reproduction theory, co-operative schools can be assimilation alternatives — even if they promote co-operative values — because they reproduce the capitalist economy. But they can also be challenge alternatives, insofar as they reproduce relations of production that challenge the capitalist economy.

Social Reproduction Theory¹

Social reproduction theory of schooling has its roots in Marxist philosophy. In *Reading Capital*, one of the most important recent interpretations of Karl Marx’s ideas about society and economy, Etienne Balibar (2016) carefully interpreted the idea of social reproduction. On Balibar’s reading, reproduction is a process of continuity: how society continues to be thus-and-so; the formation and dissolution of society’s parts; or the succession of these parts (Balibar, 2016, p. 424). The word reproduction tends to have a biological meaning: the ways individual members of species give birth to new members of the species, and thereby continue that species. The biological term retains this significance in the social-theoretical context, but in a new way: Balibar claims that reproduction is the “pregnancy of the structure” (Balibar, 2016). While a human individual’s pregnancy births new individuals and thereby continues the species, giving that species permanence since it ensures they do not go extinct, so too is the social structure’s pregnancy “the general form of permanence of the general conditions of production” (Balibar, 2016, p. 426). Notice here that Balibar is focused on production, or economic activity. Like Marx, Balibar wants to know how a mode of production like capitalism continues over time.

What exactly does the structure give birth to when it reproduces? Balibar lists three things. First, the structure gives birth to “economic subjects” through the “interlacing and intertwining” of individual people with individual capitals (Balibar, 2016); the way persons like you or me find, seek out, or become associated with wages, rents, or commodities, for example. Second, the structure gives birth to different levels of society which aim to “sanctify the existing situation as law”. These levels are not production-related, but keep the mode of production in place: the structure reproduces legal and governmental processes that maintain the ruling class’s power, which is different than reproducing the ways individuals intertwine with particular capitals. Finally, the structure reproduces the economic status of objects themselves: in a capitalist economy the material of production has to be material of capitalist production, from natural resource to consumer good. Reproduction, for Balibar, renews “social relations”: relations between people, relations between objects, and relations between people and objects.

Louis Althusser, Balibar’s teacher and co-author, argues the same point about the renewal, continuity, and making-permanent of social relations in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, but specifies that — at least in the recent period of economic activity where the capitalist mode of production is predominant — the social structure maintains its social relations through schooling. Schools reproduce “‘competencies’, that is, qualifications or the lack of them” (Althusser, 2014, p. 38). A competent person, for Althusser, “can be put to work in the complex process of production, in specific posts” (Althusser, 2014). Competence means being skilled “in the existing socio-technical division of labour” (Althusser, 2014). Competency therefore requires “know-how”, consisting in knowing the “rules of good behaviour” appropriate for the post that a student is “destined” to hold. Althusser uses scare quotes for the word “destined” because part of what happens in school — in a capitalist mode of production — is that we learn that we must get a job, that working for money is our destiny. But this lesson has two sub-lessons. First, the ability to talk and be ordered around properly, as well as maintaining a respect for the division of labour as such. Althusser phrases it this way: school teaches:

submission to the dominant ideology and, for the agents of exploitation and repression, reproduction of its *capacity to handle the dominant ideology* properly, so as to ensure the domination of the dominant class ‘verbally’ (Althusser, 2014, p. 51).

For Althusser, School qualifies students for a position in the economy but it also legitimises the economy itself as something to be qualified for. There is a submission to the ideology (legitimation) and the ability to handle that ideology (qualified to get a job and keep it) — that is to live, act, and behave well within the economy. School therefore teaches us how to carry on our tasks within the mode of production. In the mode of production, school teaches various tasks depending on a students’ positionality. Schools can teach “the task of the exploited (the proletarians), the exploiters (the capitalists), the auxiliaries of exploitation (supervisory personnel)” (Althusser, 2014, p. 53). School is therefore:

a system *external* to the [economic] enterprise ... that ‘educates’, more or less, different individuals ... in ways that vary with the milieu from which they come. [School reinforces] the practical, economic, and ideological prohibitions ... which distribute *in advance*, on a class basis, the individuals recruited by the enterprise ...

School is therefore “a dispositive ‘distributing-penning-in’ ... for the purpose, precisely, of exploiting workers” (Althusser, 2014, p. 24).

Althusser’s is a Marxist philosophy of education: it claims that schools reproduce social structure. To continue with the biological metaphor of pregnancy, schools are part of the structure’s reproductive organs. Two other students of Althusser’s, Roger Establet and Christian Baudelot, would further articulate this reproductive theory and apply it to the French schooling system at that time. Their book, *L’école capitaliste en France*, shows the correspondences between French schools and the division of labour in France in the mid-20th century. Three years after *L’école*’s publication, two American scholars would publish its equivalent in English about the United States school system. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (2011) wrote *Capitalist Schooling in America* and proved Althusser’s theory with empirical evidence and

advanced statistical methods, conclusions which they reaffirmed using more advanced methods in 2002.

Bowles and Gintis debunked the compensatory view of schooling, which claims that schools compensate for social and economic inequality. They showed the opposite: that schooling activities and behaviours correspond to existing inequalities rather than equalising them.

Specifically, the relationships of authority and control between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, students and students, and students and their work replicate the hierarchical division of labour which dominates the workplace (Bowles & Gintis, 2011, p. 12).

Following Balibar and Althusser, Bowles and Gintis show that schools 'replicate', renew, and continue existing social relations in the economy. They called their theory the correspondence theory, a "correspondence between school structure and job structure" (Bowles & Gintis, 2011, p. 13).

Balibar and Althusser, and Bowles and Gintis articulated this reproduction thesis almost exclusively in an economic context. For them, the relations that schools reproduce are economic relations: capitalist exploitation. In reaction to this exclusive focus on economics, other scholars made important contributions and clarifications. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Passeron's (1990) work was the first major corrective to the exclusively economic version of the reproduction thesis. Bourdieu and Passeron continued the idea that schools make social relations permanent over time, but pointed out that economic relations are not the only social relations. There are cultural relations as well, markers of value that do not exclusively connect to economic production but also symbolic production. Focusing on how schools contains complex:

social mediations and processes which tend, behind the backs of the agents engaged in the school system — teachers, students, and their parents — and often against their will, to ensure the transmission of cultural capital across generations (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990, p. ix).

For Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), schools ensure transmission by the "perpetuation and legitimation of social hierarchies" (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990, p. xi) through the "symbolic potency of the title (credential)" which serves "a social function quite analogous to that which befell nobility titles in feudal society".

While Bowles and Gintis had a correspondence theory, Bourdieu argued for a "principle of intelligibility", which was similar, though it introduced important notions of culture and field to the debate, positing a "system of relations between the educational system and the structure of relations between the classes" (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1990, p. xix). Bourdieu and Passeron claimed that schools reproduced cultural capital, a "representation of legitimacy" or "legitimate symbolic violence," clarifying what goes into Balibar's first kind of reproduction: the intertwining of persons with capitals.

A related tradition of thinking emerged in the 20th century looking at how students complicate schools' attempts at reproducing social relations, or counter-intuitively help reproduction succeed by misbehaving or resisting particular attempts at reproduction (Cohen, 1955; Hargreaves, 2006; Lacey, 1966; Merton, 1938; Waller, 1932; Willis, 1977). Not only do school structures correspond to job structures, not only do they transmit cultural capital through symbolic violence, but students have unique cultures of their own that confirm, complicate and contradict this structural perpetuation in idiosyncratic ways. Student subcultures and delinquency, for example, meet the reproductive force of schooling in ways that reveal a complex rather than simple process of social-structural maintenance. What became known as critical pedagogy and resistance theory starts from this premise, though the history of these ideas and their configuration is far from settled (McGrew, 2011).

Social reproduction theory claims that schools renew, maintain, and perpetuate in continuity the social relations that define the social structure within which they exist. They are social structure's reproductive organs, birthing new instances of social structure as time passes: interlacings of individuals to economic entities, juridical procedures which hold the economic

system in place, and processes that keep objects themselves in the predominant economy. Schools also transmit cultural capital through certification, not only ensuring a certain economy but also symbolic communication and status. Finally, from progress in the field of reproduction theory, we know that reproduction does not always succeed. In fact, schools can block and contradict dominant ideologies. As Althusser would put it, they are relatively autonomous from the modes of production and the repressive state apparatus attempting to hold that mode of production in place. The story of Mondragon's education's genesis shows us an example of how social reproduction does not always mean social reproduction of the dominant social relations in a social structure. Schools can reproduce alternative social relations. Another response to the initial question is now possible using these insights from social reproduction theory: are co-operative schools in England a challenge alternative or an assimilation alternative?

Co-operative Schools as Assimilation Alternative

If the role schools play in a society is to reproduce social relations, then the way to judge whether a school is a choice, challenge, or assimilating alternative is to look at the success of the social relations the school aims to reproduce. If an alternative school seeks to reproduce alternative social relations, but the social structure around the school is dominated by hegemonic and mainstream social relations, then the alternative school is an assimilation alternative and not a challenge alternative — even if the school promotes alternative values. Back of the envelope calculations of the size and strength of the co-operative economy in England confirm this hypothesis for English co-operative schools. Figure 1 below depicts the relative size of the co-operative economy based on 2016 numbers reported by Co-operatives UK (Co-operative Economy, 2017). The United Kingdom's gross domestic product in 2016 was 1.2 trillion pounds. Since this economy is a predominantly capitalist economy, I will use this number as a measure of the size and strength of the capitalist economy. The co-operative economy exists as an alternative economy within the capitalist economy. As we know, the co-operative firms' values and ownership structures are different to that of capitalist firms. According to Co-operatives UK, this alternative economy was valued at 34.1 billion pounds in 2016. For every £1 associated with co-operative production in the United Kingdom, there are £10,000 associated with capitalist production. In other words, the co-operative economy is 0.012% of the capitalist economy, which is very small.

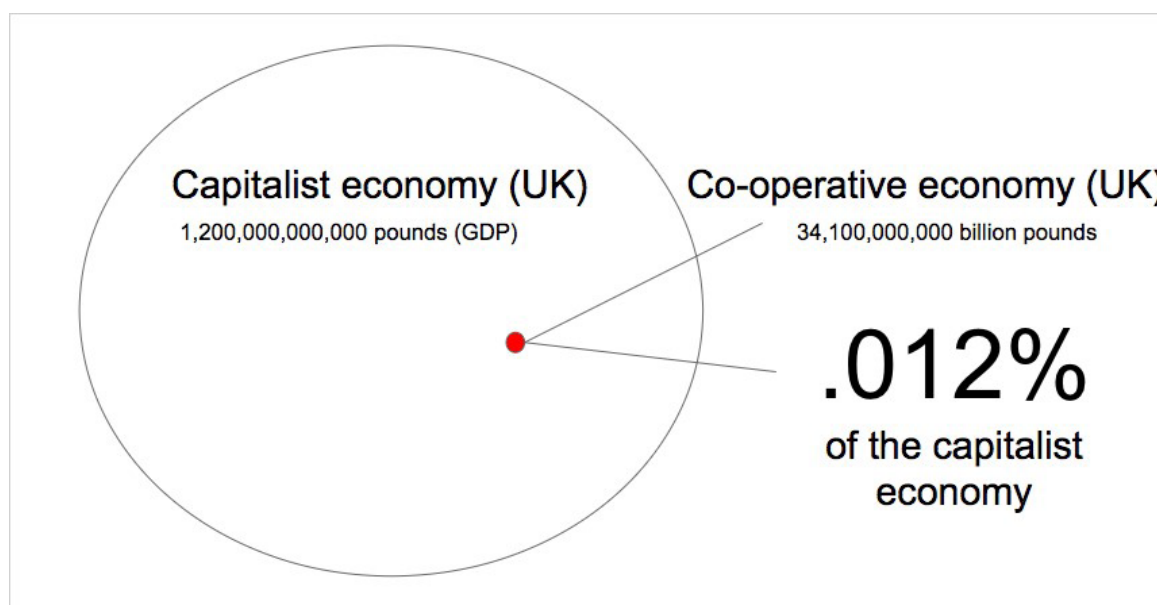


Figure 1. Size and strength of co-operative economy relative to capitalist economy

Using the Maori distinctions between different kinds of alternatives, but now for economies and not schools, the co-operative economy in the United Kingdom is a choice alternative to the capitalist economy. It is abnormal, peripheral, and in a lesser position to the dominant

mainstream economy. The percentage above measures the extent to which the co-operative economy is in a lesser position. But if the co-operative economy is only a choice alternative, then it is likely that co-operative schools are an assimilation alternative, since students graduating from these schools are more likely than not participating in the capitalist economy. They may have been taught co-operative values at school, but their chances of being active members in the co-operative economy — all other things being equal — is about 1 in 10,000.

What would make co-operative schools a challenge alternative, therefore, is not whether the schools promote co-operative values, but whether the schools maintain and renew co-operative social relations in the economy. If the increase in co-operative schools comes along with an increase in the size of the co-operative economy relative to the capitalist economy, then we can say these schools are on their way towards becoming a challenge alternative.

The following are recommendations to those who have an interest in making co-operative schools a challenge alternative:

- 1) **Think of co-operative schools not only in terms of promoting alternative values, but also promoting alternative production.** There is a structural link between society and school, and the extent to which a school is a challenge alternative is connected to whether its social relations are a challenge alternative in society.
- 2) **The bottom line for co-operative schools' success should be tied to the success of the co-operative economy.** Thus success can be measured by number of direct partnerships with existing co-operative firms, creation of co-operative apprenticeships and internships, and the success of the co-operative economy as a whole.
- 3) **Take the structural link seriously.** Programmes like the Young Co-operatives are a good start, on a small scale, to prioritising the structural link between co-operative schools and the co-operative economy. However, a large-scale vision would aim to network co-operative schools directly to co-operative firms for internship, apprenticeship, and placement. Co-operative firms must play a role here as well. One recommendation is to require that any candidate for top leadership position in a co-operative firm must have attended a co-operative school.
- 4) **Academics and advocates must fill out the missing structural link in discourse about co-operative schools.** Accounts of co-operative schools furnish ways of thinking and speaking about them, and current accounts focus almost exclusively on values rather than production. As mentioned earlier, in the 2012 promotional video, *Co-operative Schools — Where Values Make a Difference*, two young people make the case for the co-operative schools. They first define co-operative schools as owned and “democratically controlled by its members, stakeholders that have an interest in the school such as a parents, teachers, staff, and members of the local community, and kids too”. Next, the narrators’ describe co-operative schools as part of the fast-growing co-operative sector of United Kingdom’s economy, noting that “one in five of the UK’s population now belongs to a co-operative. From housing to banks to food to schools, there’s a co-op for everyone”. After citing this statistic, the video’s narrators move to an in-depth description of the values integral to co-operative schools: civil collaboration between students (rather than individualised competitive learning), participation in decision-making (rather than top-down hierarchical governance), and fair disciplinary measures. The video finishes with the idea that having a co-operative school “means that there will always be a great school for the young people in our community. Co-operative values and principles are at the heart of everything we do here, and these values make ours a different sort of school”. The quick transition from the co-operative economy to co-operative values suggests that co-operative schools are valuable because the co-operative economy is a fast growing sector. Yet the idea that co-operative schools are good for the co-operative economy, or connected to the co-operative economy for a specific reason, is not made explicit in the video. The connection between co-operative schools and the co-operative economy is left unarticulated, and the fact that there is a connection

is left as a suggestion only. I call this the missing economic link in discourse advocating co-operative schools: the implication, left largely unsaid, is that co-operative schools can prepare students to participate in alternative economies as adults.

Conclusion

While co-operative schools are different, there are different kinds of different schools. This essay examines the type of alternative co-operative schools are, using distinctions Philip A. Woods draws from Maori philosophy of education. While some may believe that co-operative schools are a challenge alternative — rather than a choice or assimilation alternative — because they promote co-operative values, I disagree. Given the structural link between schools and economy, the way we should determine whether co-operative schools are a challenge alternative to dominant mainstream schooling is by looking to the size and strength of the co-operative economy. Using the educational genesis of the Mondragon co-operatives as a paradigm case, and social reproduction theory as a lens, it is clear that the purpose of co-operative schools was and is to strengthen the co-operative economy. The co-operative economy right now is drastically smaller and weaker than the capitalist economy in England, and the number of co-operative schools emerging does not mean they are emerging as a challenge alternative to dominant schooling.

Consider a hypothetical: if all the schools in England were co-operative schools promoting co-operative values, but England's economy was capitalist, would the schools be alternative schools? At best they would be an assimilation alternative, shaping selves to participate in an economy that is antithetical to the values promoted in the schools. There would be a capitalist economy with people trained in co-operative values. Considering the history of co-operative schooling in England and Spain, such a situation would defeat the purpose of co-operative schools altogether. From a social reproduction perspective, such schools would not be co-operative schools. Rather, they would be schools that walk a capitalist walk and talk a co-operative talk. To prevent this unfortunate situation which betrays the heritage of co-operativism, I recommend that co-operative school advocates think of co-operative schools not only in terms of values, but also production; use the success of the co-operative economy as a bottom-line for thinking about the success of co-operative schools; and fill the missing structural link between co-operative economy and schools in discourse about co-operative schools.

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Note

- 1 Social reproduction theory of schooling is a wide-ranging tradition of thinking about institutional education from a political-economic perspective. In the following account I try to articulate basic premises of social reproduction theory for the purposes of my argument about co-operative schools as a challenge alternative. This account is by no means exhaustive. I only try to articulate some thoughts that are necessary for social reproduction theory, though they are not sufficient. For some reflection on this issue, see McGrew, 2011.