

Book Review

Saviour Rizzo

Baldacchino Godfrey (1990) *Worker Cooperatives with Particular Reference to Malta: An Educationist's Theory and Practice*, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, pp.168 + appendices.

Although cooperatives may not be playing a major role in the world economy, for very often they are confined to its marginal sector, the cooperative movement has nevertheless established itself in many developed and developing countries and is trying to branch out into different sectors of the economy. Malta does not seem to be in line with this trend. Indeed the few cooperatives that exist can hardly claim to have emanated from the high ideological principles that inspired the birth and growth of these work organizations and we can hardly boast of any long strides towards this ideal.

Failures And Successes

Baldacchino's book is an attempt to analyze the issues which surround and affect worker cooperatives so as to evaluate the spirit of cooperativism prevailing in Malta.

He does this by first delving deeply into the theoretical background of worker cooperatives at the macro level and then, after analyzing the local socio-political scenario, with its subsequent cultural legacy, presents the Maltese case to see how and why it fits or fails to fit into this macro setting.

The author does not try to hide the fact that there have been numerous cases of worker cooperatives that have failed to thrive or of those that have not managed to live up to their guiding principles. But this is not taken to mean that a defeatist attitude should be adopted for "there are a few beacons of success" which warrant "a fair dose of optimism in the feasibility of workers' cooperatives".

But success to a cooperative must be measured on a twofold dimension: "success is understood in terms of both economic viability and democratic participation in decision making". This quantitative, and qualitative success cannot however be achieved through a "hit and miss" approach. A strategy is needed for these

cooperatives to become a beacon of light for others to follow suit.

Dominant Culture

It is here, in spelling out this strategy, that Baldacchino seems to be at his strongest point of argument. He does of course refer to the intrinsic values inherent in work in cooperatives: such as having the potential of offering the least alienated form of work by merging capital with labour, giving power to the workers and making work more meaningful.

However the author does not fall into the pitfalls of romanticising cooperatives by depicting them as the epitome of a completely harmonious group of workers cooperating in a conflict free environment. This may be a "utopian dream" - a phrase used by the detractors of cooperatives to define the impracticability of these work organizations.

And yet, though shorn of this illusion, he sees that many features of this dream can become a part of reality. This dream has not become a reality not because of the impracticability of its workings but more due to the fact that a market oriented society tends to reward competition and risk taking rather than solidarity and cooperation. Such a dominant culture naturally casts doubts on the legitimacy of cooperatives. In his typology of failure, Baldacchino asserts that the causes are located in "the degenerative pressures" that emerge from a dominant ideology which fosters values alien to worker cooperation.

So he maintains that the focus should be on "an environment that spawns and breeds" the principles of cooperativism. To create such an environment is no easy task for unfortunately the banking orientation towards the school, where the grassroots values of society are nurtured and developed, is helping to produce "the values and behaviour patterns which legitimise the undemocratic structure of economic life" rather than the spirit of cooperativism.

This hegemonic culture can only be combatted by fostering a counter ideology that can act as a catalyst for the creation of a different kind of culture by disseminating the principles of cooperativism. Baldacchino, having had

experience in the field of workers' and adult education, is here treading on ground with which he has grown familiar out of practice and some of the approaches which he prescribes to solve this dialectic between the hegemonic and counter ideology spring out of this practical experience. This is the ideal behind the workers cooperatives which is by and large given in the first part of the book dealing with theory building.

Idealism

In the second part of the book, Baldacchino attempts to relate this theory to the Maltese experience. His tenet is that the Maltese scenario has been characterised by two diametrically opposed forces. For the Maltese case is characterised by the emergence of social movements with their potential to mobilise people amid a culture where people have been conditioned to comply to paternalism and resort to clientelism and patronage. Opportunities have been lost which many not recur. The Roman Catholic faith which as a force has been "a moulder and reproducer of specific values which affect one's attitude and perception of reality could have given a greater and far more valid contribution in inculcating the principles of cooperativism". It is true that the Social Action Movement (SAM) - a body which has close affinities with the Church and which was pioneered by a Catholic diocesan priest drawing inspiration from the principles of Catholic social doctrine - has made its presence felt by constituting itself as a supporting agency initiating some successful ventures in this field. However I tend to agree with the author's assertion that "the Church authorities in Malta have failed so far to take advantage of their powerful cultural position and community and educative spheres by coming out with a clear policy in favour of Maltese workplace democratization". Neither have the other social movements (trade unions, political parties) shown any grassroots initiatives towards this high ideal even though there have been initiatives worth recalling. The author does not fail to mention these ventures for he is not hesitant to give credit where it is due. Nevertheless that idealism which moves people to action has been sadly lacking. An evaluation of the Italian cooperative movement makes clear the vital role that idealism can play in the setting up of a strong cooperative movement.

Indeed Baldacchino believes that the Italian building cooperatives together with the Cyprus

cooperative societies and those of Mondragon in Spain should be our models. There is no detailed account of these cooperative movements: the author seems to presume knowledge on the part of the reader. I consider this omission to be a shortcoming for once the author presents them as being our source of inspiration he should not have been content with a passing reference but should have gone to some length to acquaint the reader with the basic features of these cooperatives. The contrast between the Maltese social movements and their counterparts on the continent would have thus been made starker. The author contends that the Maltese social movements devolved "into a dependence on external initiative and charismatic leadership" making them "vulnerable to political indoctrination". In other words they succumbed to the constraints and imperatives inherent in the culture which we inherited from the past colonial days.

This dialectic between the two forces (cultural inheritance and social movements) throbbing in the bosom of our nation naturally gives rise to highly contentious issues which may trigger controversies. Critics who may be inclined to be sceptical about the validity of this dialectical concept may find a lot of ground with which they will differ. But if they start looking for flaws in the book they are not bound to find many. It is well referenced and annotated and it seems to me to be authoritatively researched. It is about the ideal behind Workers' cooperatives but to give us that ideal the author looms over wide horizons. And, what's more, he looks forward. The analysis used can serve as a springboard for future policy for the advantage of hindsight makes us wiser in long term planning. What we need is the imagination to foresee the problems and the resolution to face them in order to combat the often repeated criticism levelled at these unconventional views about the place of work as being unrealistic and naive.

The cooperative movement in Malta has lagged behind to such an extent that, to most Maltese, a cooperative is synonymous with a sort of agricultural association. Why is there such a low level of consciousness about cooperatives among the Maltese public or rather what have been the cultural, economic and political factors that made the principles of cooperativism so difficult to be implanted?

These are questions to which this book tries to give an answer.