

Association of Cooperative Educators Conference

Winnipeg, Canada, July 26-29, 2011

This trip was organized around two events: a keynote address at the Association of Cooperative Educators annual conference, and a talk at the Mondragon Bookstore Cooperative.

Getting to Winnipeg

My trip began with some High Drama. I was leaving from Burlington, Vermont, where I had been visiting the parents of my soon-to-be son-in-law. I arrived at the Burlington Airport, tried to check in, and discovered to my horror that I had forgotten my passport and couldn't get a boarding pass. I called United. The only solution seemed to change my connection in Chicago to a late flight to Winnipeg and then add a round trip flight Chicago-Madison-Chicago so I could get my passport. That cost \$1200, but what could I do. So I made the change. I then called Sam to ask him to get the passport and then meet me at the Madison airport. After I hung up I had another idea: maybe I could get someone to take the Van Galder bus to O'Hare with the passport. After all, for \$400 that would be a good deal -- \$50/hour -- but it would save me \$800. So I called Toni in the Sociology Office and asked her to see if she could recruit someone. She recruited John Maynard, the undergraduate program secretary. Sam got him the passport and I coordinated with John about meeting him at 4pm in front of the United Terminal in Chicago. I then called United back and cancelled the round trip to Madison, which I could do without penalty because it was a full fare refundable ticket. The last glitch -- or maybe pseudo-glitch -- occurred when I gave my Chicago boarding pass to the ticket taker at the gate in Burlington. The boarding pass signaled: "Not checked in". It seems that in order to get the boarding pass to Chicago they had to disentangle it from the connecting flight to Winnipeg (since I didn't have my passport), and in doing so it became associated in the reservation record with the new flight -- now cancelled -- to Madison. SO, when I cancelled the Chicago-Madison-Chicago flight, this cancelled the boarding pass to Chicago as well. The gate agent was also the person I had dealt with when the drama began, she looked at me, looked at the red flashing light, and waived me on.....

Winnipeg

The last time I was in Winnipeg was in January, 1979, when I gave a talk in the Sociology Department at the University of Winnipeg on "What is "Middle" about the Middle Class," one of the standard off-the-shelf talks early in my career when I worked mainly on the problem of class. I remember it as bitterly cold, -20° F or so. This time it was sunny and mild every day. The city is not especially attractive physically -- 850,000 people in a low-density endless sprawl of strip malls stretching into the Prairie and a fairly nondescript city center with only a few blocks of older, appealing buildings. Still, there are some things of note:

- Some old residential streets with fantastic tall elms on both sides creating a joined canopy, like Lawrence when I was a kid.

- Two winding rivers that join in the middle of the city, making it quite confusing to figure out where you are on a bike if you thought you could use the water as a way of orienting yourself. I spent several enjoyable hours today on a bike meandering around the city and got quite turned around because of the twists and turns of the two rivers.
- A very large population of Canadian Indians, who are now referred to as aboriginals, many living in considerable poverty. (It seems awkward to use this term, since I so strongly associate it with Australia, but this is the term that everyone used in Canada when talking about indigenous people, so I will use it here). The conditions in which they live involve intense ghettoization and marginalization is very much like inner city African-Americans. Winnipeg has the largest urban aboriginal population and, it seems, relatively erratic public policies to deal with the situation.
- A very lively and interesting left activist community, both in the university and in the city with a long tradition. This made my talk at the bookstore especially interesting.
- Many innovative and thoughtful real utopia initiatives revolving around cooperatives. Because the ACE conference organized a “mobile learning sessions” – basically tours of cooperatives – I got to visit six of these while I was in the city.

The Mondragon talk. I was invited by Eton Harris to give an evening talk about *Envisioning Real Utopias* at the Mondragon bookstore cooperative. The cooperative is actually more than just a bookstore – it also includes a vegan restaurant and an organic grocery – and is in a building which it shares with a couple of other cooperatives, including one that builds and repairs bikes (that’s where I got the bike I used on my bikeabout). The cooperative was founded fifteen years ago and now has about ten worker-owners. They are animated by a kind of anarchist vision of anti-hierarchical participatory democracy and strong consensus formation. They have created a very appealing, ramshackle place and are clearly a center of progressive activity.

Eton has been a worker-member of the cooperative for thirteen years and is an extremely warm and engaging person. He picked me up at the airport when I arrived Winnipeg and took me to a Chinese vegetarian restaurant for dinner with his wife, Ming, a professional dancer (who had just gotten a grant from the Canadian council for the arts to spend a few weeks in Vienna and Berlin for some dance events). Today, driving back to the airport we had a very interesting conversation about the cooperative and the problem of making a life in that setting. I said that in the bookstore’s namesake, Mondragon in the Basque Country, most of the worker-owners saw becoming a member as the beginning of a real career, not just an episode. Eton said that three of the owners of the bookstore had been there ten years or more and another two for five years, but the rest had been members for less than a year. He said that they tried to provide benefits and pension funds and the like so that people could really make a long term commitment, but it was very hard to generate enough revenue to sustain that. The duality of the membership – a few long time members and a bunch of younger, less experienced members, posed challenges, he said, for the democratic process. He saw the problem being that the more experienced people had been through various junctures and decisions and just knew more about what worked and what didn’t, but that it took a lot of time

to explain all this to the less experienced members. I suggested that there might be another issue in play: the character of the time horizons of the senior members compared to the younger members. It really makes a difference how strong are the stakes that a person has in a decision, particularly in the consequences of making the wrong decision and having to figure out how to correct the mistakes. Differences in time horizons can pose deeper challenges to consensus than differences in experience, since the latter can be dealt with through deliberation and some good faith deference by the newcomers to the veterans, but the time horizon issue potentially constitutes real conflicts of interest. Eton thought these observations were extremely helpful and thought it would have been great if I had been able to attend a general meeting of the cooperative to talk about this. I suppose this is the sort of thing that “cooperative educators” do. Maybe if I pursue the real utopias project on cooperatives and worked through more themes of this sort I could occasionally do workshops on these kinds of issues.

The talk was scheduled to go from 7:30-9:00, but the audience was engaged in such intense discussion that we ended up continuing until well after 10:00. I would have gone on even longer, but my keynote at the ACE conference was scheduled for 8 a.m. the following morning.

I decided, based on the experience earlier in the summer in Berlin, to combine the talk about the Wisconsin Protests with my standard exposition of real utopias in & beyond capitalism theme. It is a good combination for an activist audience, at least when there is time for a relatively lengthy exposition. As in Berlin, the audience was very appreciative and seemed to really like the juxtaposition of something so concrete and current with the more abstract and schematic theoretical exposition.

This discussion got quite animated at times. I suppose the most noteworthy exchanges involved a quite articulate, somewhat aggressive, radical anarchist in the audience who raised quite strong objections to some of what I presented. He objected to my argument that the stripping of some of the union rights, especially eliminating the dues check off provisions of labor law, was a bad thing. Dues check-offs, he argued, meant that labor leaders didn't have to worry about funds and didn't have to mobilize members. They became well paid union bosses because of the guarantee of steady flow of funds. The Wisconsin legislature did a service to the labor movement by getting rid of dues check-offs since now union leaders would be forced to be more militant. In terms of my arguments about configurations of social empowerment, he rejected the idea that “symbiotic strategies” were useful, arguing basically that cooperating with the state or working through the state was always a trap. The key to going beyond capitalism was ruptural transformation. Everything else was a dead end. And ruptural strategies ultimately required insurrectionary violence. The people need to be armed; the state's monopoly of violence has to be challenged. I strongly challenged him, saying something like this: “The problem with insurrectionary violence, at least in complex societies like the one in which we live, is that it never actually advances human emancipation. There are no instances of violent ruptures being followed by the construction of a democratic egalitarian society. This isn't a philosophical point about the inherent undesirability of violence; it is a pragmatic claim about the ramifications of violence and the uncontrollable chains of effects it unleashes. This doesn't mean that a progressive political force engaged in transformation should not defend

itself when attacked, or that a democratic socially-empowered state should not use force to oppose attacks, but it does mean that violence should never be the core of a strategy and never be a pre-emptive means of seizing power.”

He argued back that capitalism could never be dislodged without insurrection. I again affirmed the point that it was a fantasy that this would produce significant advances in democratic egalitarian social relations. There are no examples. What about the American Revolution, he responded? Now, that was a first: a leftwing anarcho-socialist invoking the American Revolution as an instance where significant advances in democracy and equality were accomplished through violence. I replied by saying that the American Revolution was an anti-tax revolt that helped solidify slavery in the United States, and while it symbolically affirmed egalitarian and democratic values, it certainly obstructed their implementation. Furthermore, Canada never had a violent revolution against Britain and has made more progress on these values than the US. I also commented on the character of our respective modes of arguing: “You are a lot more certain about the absolute correctness of your views than I am of mine. I think it is extremely difficult to predict where possibilities and limits of possibilities lie in the future; you seem quite certain that you’ve worked this all out. “ Later Eton said that he really liked the way I dealt with these issues.

A few other themes in the discussion:

- I was asked what I thought about “false consciousness.” This doesn’t come up all that often in my visiting talks, but it is certainly the case that my arguments affirm the value of “scientific” knowledge and implies that people can have incorrect views. This is a touchy issue in some quarters where “po-mo” influences treat science as just one among many perspectives. What is especially contentious are claims about “interests”. I took the bull by the horns and straightforwardly affirmed the idea that people can hold false beliefs, and if they base their understanding of the interests on those false beliefs, then they can be said to have false consciousness. I emphasized that this does not at all imply certainty about the truth or falsity of beliefs. Science isn’t about certainty, but about methods that are capable of adjudicating between rival claims about the world.
- At one point, after one of the exchanges I had with the insurrectionary anarchist guy, a very earnest young woman, in her early 20s I think, turned to the anarchist and said: “I think both of you are really brilliant and saying important things, but we should be trying to find common ground not attack each other this way. Isn’t that what we need?” I was touched by how her plea was so enthusiastically heartfelt and sincere.
- One woman asked, in a fairly assertive way: “Why is any of this relevant to me as an activist? How do your schemas help me know what to do?” I explained that my approach was designed to clarify two menus for progressive politics and activism: a menu of destinations – my configurations of social empowerment – and a menu of strategic logics. These two menus correspond roughly to the different broad traditions of anti-capitalist activism -- socialist, anarchist, and social democratic. She didn’t seem convinced that this was of any practical value. Well, I said, maybe it isn’t for you. Different ideas and relevant to different people depending upon what bugs them, where they feel confused, what they need. The next day over dinner with some of the

academics who had been at the talk I was told that this person raises the same problem with every speaker who comes to Mondragon.

- Toward the end of the evening a striking aboriginal man, tall, lean, missing some front teeth, maybe in his 40s (although he might have looked older than he was) stood up while I was answering a question, interrupted me and said “This is all irrelevant. None of this is ever going to happen. None of this has anything to do with me.” He was clearly drunk. I tried to respond respectfully. And the earnest young woman also said something about how these ideas might matter. But he just turned his back on everyone and walked out. Eton told me the next evening that this guy hangs around Mondragon quite a bit and that the day after the talk he had talked to him about the incident. The man said he barely remembered any of what happened. Eton said that the guy is actually quite thoughtful and, when sober, has interesting things to say, but that he is basically living a life of despair, without hope.

ACE conference

I don't think I have ever been to a conference like this before. There were only a few academics attending. Most of the participants were people who worked for associations of cooperatives or organizations that advised cooperatives in various ways. Some worked in the training departments of large cooperatives, like the huge Quebec credit union *des Jardines*. While in principle ACE is concerned with all kinds of cooperatives, most of the people there were professionally engaged with consumer coops, credit unions, producer cooperatives rather than worker cooperatives. I was impressed with how deeply committed everyone seemed to cooperative principles (often called the Rochdale principles), and how broadly the participants recognized that these principles were in tension with the dominant economic institutions. Even if relatively few had a comprehensive view critical of capitalism, they definitely had critical sensibilities and were extremely receptive to what I had to say.

Most of the sessions consisted of reports about specific cooperative experiences and initiatives, usually laid out in a pretty descriptive manner without much theoretical framing. For example, one of the sessions consisted of a presentation by Christopher Kopka, who works with a Lutheran nonprofit mutual insurance company, Thrivent Lutheran Insurance. 100 years ago Insurance was mostly organized as fraternal, mutuals rather than as private firms. Now less than 2% are organized this way. Thrivent is one of the last. It is a Fortune 500 firm that is nonprofit and member governed. Most such mutual insurance firms demutualized in the 1990s. Such fraternal mutual are not technically cooperatives, but they are very close kissing cousins because they are a member-based firm rather than a private firm. In the talk the speaker asked: “Are cooperatives a movement or a business model. I say: who cares?” Basically what he was saying is that the story of cooperatives and mutual need to be told and especially young people need to learn about these so that they will become involved. “Young people today are eager to build alternatives, and they see nonprofits as the basis for this. They do not know about cooperatives as a model for how to try to change the world.

The most unusual presentation – or the oddest perhaps – was from a bushy haired young man who, as an undergraduate at Berkeley, had successfully opposed the take over of the Free Speech Café by a fast food chain, and organized a student-run food cooperative as an alternative. After graduate he has become a kind of social entrepreneur running cooperative “boot camps” for college kids interested in forming food service cooperatives which might gain a foothold on their campuses. He was a kind of hyper-active salesman who wanted us collectively to do some “leadership building exercises” of the sort that get done in corporate executive leadership training retreats. So, he ran his session like a kind of sensitivity training revival meeting. “Ok, everyone come to the front and form two lines facing each other.....Now, I want you to look into the eyes of the person across from you. Hold their gaze for two minutes...now take a half step closer and look into their eyes. Think about something you really like about the person.....” After the two minutes he randomly asked people to report what they liked. Pretty weird, and not very helpful, especially in a context where not everyone knew the person they were staring at. Still, there was something somewhat endearing about his overflowing energy and cheerfulness, and it seems that he has been a pretty effective leader in fomenting campus cooperatives of the sort he started in California.

The most interesting thing about the conference was the visits to cooperatives. Some of the highlights:

- The Neechi grocery cooperative. This is a worker-owned coop, not a consumer cooperative, founded 30 years ago in the most devastated part of the aboriginal ghetto in Winnipeg. Nearly all of the members are aboriginals. They are the only grocery store in the area – all of the commercial stores left. They have a mission to provide healthy affordable food, and they have been pretty successful. More recently they have gotten some large grants from the Federal Government and the Manitoba Government to build a new store, ten times larger, which will also have a restaurant and meeting rooms. The laws about cooperatives have changed in Manitoba so they will become a Multi-stakeholder cooperative (MSC) which will allow consumers to also become members on some kind of basis. I really liked the people there.
- Norwest Health Cooperative. This was another quite interesting coop. It was essentially a member-run health center. You did not have to be a member to be a patient (those are the rules of the Canadian health system), but the board of directors consisted entirely of members of the coop. Doctors and other employees could be members, but could not be elected to the board of directors. A lifetime membership cost \$1, so basically it was completely open. Such a thing is viable in Canada because of the single payer system, which means that this center, like all health care providers, gets directly paid by the government for the services it provides. This cooperative has also recently gotten some large government grants for new facilities and expansion, but will be retaining the same governance structure. As a result of its membership base, the center engages in a number of activities that other health centers do not – like a strong multidisciplinary domestic violence intervention project that is part of the health center rather than connected to social work agencies or the police.

- Arctic Services Limited. This coop deals with the extraordinarily difficult problem of providing provisions for tiny communities in the far north – mostly fly-in villages with no road access at all. The stores in those communities – old fashioned general stores in some sense – are all cooperatives since a regular commercial store would not be viable. And these coops have created a second tier cooperative to fly in products. They also connect with Inuit artist cooperatives to market soap stone carving and other crafts. The cooperative is huge, hundreds of millions of dollars.
- We also visited a housing cooperative, Assiniboine (a huge credit union), and Mondragon.

Dinner Thursday

On Thursday, after the mobile learning tours, I met with Eton at Mondragon and a few the academics from the University of Manitoba who had been at the talk – Radhika Desai, a woman Marxist political scientist; her partner, Adam, who is an architect; and Bob (I didn't get the last name), a Marxist economist with whom I had a published debate in the early 1980s on the question "Who Pays for the Welfare State?" (meaning: is it capitalists, because some Marxists argue that all taxes come out of surplus value which is appropriated by capitalists; or is it workers, because the taxes have the result of actually reducing wages, since the level of surplus extracted from workers is not independent of the tax rate). It was a lovely, pleasant evening in the 70s with a wonderfully long Northern twilight. We ate at a spectacularly good but not too expensive restaurant at a table on the sidewalk, and talked late into the evening about theoretical and political matters of all sorts. At one point we had a pretty heated discussion about the problem of measuring inflation and productivity. One of the issues was the question of whether or not the rate of inflation should take into account the improvements in the qualities of products. It is one thing to say that the price of an orange has increased if at time 1 it costs 25 cents and a time 2, 50 cents. It is another to say that the price of "a computer" as gone up if it cost \$1000 in 1990 and \$1500 in 2010, when the latter computer is fantastically more powerful and flexible than the earlier one. I argued that it is virtually impossible to really solve this issue and that it is hard to know if prices have gone up or down, or by how much, if the consumption basket of people radically changes. Radhika argued that only in the US does the government attempt to correct for qualitative changes – what she called hedonic adjustments. Every other country used a fixed basket without adjustment. I found this implausible, but who knows.