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המרכז הבין-לאומי לחקר קהילות כפריות שיתופיות

CIRCOM

CIRCOM, International Research Centre on Rural Cooperative Communities was established in September 1965 in Paris.

The purpose of the Centre is to provide a framework for investigations and research on problems concerning rural cooperative communities and publication of the results, to coordinate the exchange of information on current research projects and published works, and to encourage the organization of symposia on the problems of cooperative rural communities, as well as the exchange of experts between different countries.

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Rhetorical Constructions and Cooperative Conversions: A Comment¹

by

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Abstract

This paper is written from a sociology of science/rhetoric of science perspective. The paper critiques the central rhetorical constructions of neo-classical economic studies as applied to agricultural cooperative conversions. Conversions refer to the internal re-structurings, sell-outs, and hybridizations of cooperative organizational form to investment oriented structures. Neo-classical economics analyses of conversions are based within an "individualist-idealist" metaphor. This metaphor, as articulated in neo-classical economics, does not allow the scientist to see historical and sociological aspects of cooperatives, and broader, more holistic implications of conversions. We argue for broadening the conversation to include social materialist, and social voluntarist metaphors, for more complete expression of the practical implications of the conversion of agricultural cooperatives, and to suggest the importance of self-awareness in doing science.

Rhetoric of science

This paper is written from a sociology of science/rhetoric of science perspective, and is in the spirit of becoming more aware of our everyday doings as "scientists". Rhetoric, as used here, is not understood as "mere" or "empty," but rather as a mechanism of persuasion, or how science is used to persuade (McCloskey, 1985:29). McCloskey (1985, 1990) suggests this persuasion is unacknowledged and tends to be embedded within a culturally modernist, world view, that makes and sees a split reality, a reality divided between fact and value, scientific and humanistic, truth and opinion, objective and subjective, rigorous and intuitive, things and words, cognition and feeling. This world view penetrates and shapes not just science, but our everyday life and can be witnessed to in such statements as "That's just your opinion," "You're not being objective," "That's a very subjective position." Scientists are part of this

1. This article represents the analysis of the authors only, and is not the official view of any associated agency. We wish to extend our thanks to Roger Wissman for his comments and assistance.

socialization, and can not be separated from it. They are shaped by and shape it. Science and scientist are social.

The distinction between objective and subjective is really a distinction between discussable and undiscussable. Says mathematician Armand Borel (1983:13) "...something becomes objective ...as soon as we are convinced that it exists in the minds of others in the same form that it does in ours, and that we can think about it and discuss it together." It becomes objective in a consensually subjective manner.

Kuhn (1962) as presented by Coase (1982:17) and McCloskey (1985) maintained that "The road from scientific law to scientific measurement can rarely be traveled in the reverse direction. The laws come from a tradition of conversation. In physics as in (the various social sciences) "quantitative studies ...are explorations with the aid of a theory ...a search for numbers with which to make specific a theory already believed on other grounds," and those other grounds are invariably based in the use of analogy, appeals to authority, and metaphor, *i.e.* rhetoric. Our paradigms, our systems of concepts, the tools with which we see, are themselves grounded in metaphor, analogy, and authority.

In any writing, be it literature or science, the author creates an implied author and an implied reader. The implied author in literature, says Austin (1975), generally is perfectly witty and perceptive, or if in science, perfectly knowledgeable and skilled. The implied reader is open, perhaps critical, but a cultivated listener, able to understand and appreciate the work. Actual readers of the work can come along for the ride or not. If actual readers assume the implied reader role, they must, to varying degrees, take on "...that set of attitudes and qualities which the language asks the [reader] to assume." A bad read is one in which actual readers have discovered a role they refuse to play, or a mask they will not put on (McCloskey, 1990:38 citing Gibson 1950:4-5).

Conversions, as used in this paper, refers to the transformation, hybridization, and/or cashing-out of agricultural cooperatives via a capital-investment oriented logic (Schrader, 1989; Collins, 1991a, 1991b; Harte, 1995; Ketilson, 1995). Our focus is on the case studies of conversions done by Schrader (1989) and Collins (1991a, 1991b). Both are emblematic of neo-classical economics approaches to the issue. We choose these case studies because of the "bad reads" we have had of these studies. By "bad reads" we are not implying the articles are poorly done, or analytically inferior, but that we as actual readers have difficulty assuming the implied reader role.

Is this all to do about nothing? Perhaps. But scientists practice, and practice their trades in a manner consistent with their orientations – not only studying reality, but creating it. We are reminded of the somewhat dated imagery provided in the telling of a well known, but dated joke on a Soviet May Day parade through Red Square. The usual mass of soldiers, guided missiles, and rocket launchers pass through. At last, [and I have done some editing here] come rank upon rank of people in [not gray

suits, but sports jackets and slacks – if you will]. “Who are they?” asks a bystander. “Those are the *social scientists*” comes the reply, “and you can not even begin to think about what damage they can do!”. “Their conversations do it” (McCloskey, 1983:xviii).

Mooney *et al.* (1996) have provided an analysis of conversions with regard to economic analyses and its exclusion of sociology, history, and anthropology. They regard and explain economism as a depoliticization of needs, basing their analysis in Fraser’s (1989) depiction of needs struggle. Our paper moves from conceptions of “science-doing” more generally, under modernity, rather than from intellectual discipline *per se*. We consider the images cast from science, from the subjective agency of the scientist, and specifically when neo-classical economics is practiced as theory and fact, rather than as metaphor and selected fact. We concur with McCloskey (1990:78) that “the scientist. . .is not a passive observer of nature. He chooses his ways of worldmaking.” Taylor (1994) gives focus to rhetoric in “The Rhetorical Construction of Efficiency: Restructuring and Industrial Democracy in Mondragón, Spain,” but as realized in cooperative Mondragón practice, rather than in scientific practice.

Conversions

The word “conversions” refers to internal re-structurings, sell-outs, and hybridizations of cooperative organizational form to investment oriented firm structures (IOFs); Or more specifically to the transformation of agricultural cooperatives from firms that rely upon member investment and cooperative earnings as sources of equity, to firms with publicly held equity.

Regardless of how one views a cooperative, a pool of assets must exist if the cooperative is to survive from one year to the next. While there are several different methods for financing a cooperative, most capital in a cooperative comes from members, and member use. In general, cooperatives do three different things with the earnings they generate from member use: 1) They return earnings to members in cash patronage refunds; 2) They retain earnings, but allocate amounts to members for future returns – termed allocated equity; 3) They retain earnings, but do not allocate them to members – termed un-allocated equity. Equity, both un-allocated and allocated is used to continue the business. This structure is quite distinct from investor-owned firms, where private stockholders own the equity. Their title to the stock, and the amounts owned, have nothing to do with whether the owner uses the firm or not. While capital stock similar to investor-owned firm stock does exist within cooperatives, it is not generally available for purchase by the public. And interest paid on it is severely limited. This limit is deliberately intentioned to preserve the member-owner-user aspects of a cooperative.

Schrader (1989) and Collins (1991a, 1991b) have done case studies of these phenomena, among them analyses of: American Rice Cooperative, an internal

restructuring to an IOF; Rockingham Poultry Marketing Cooperative, Capitol Milk Producers Cooperative, and American Cotton Growers, sell-outs to IOFs (though ACG cashed-out, selling its textile mill operation to another cooperative); and Gold Kist/Golden Poultry and Land O'Lakes/Country Lake Foods, hybridizations involving the introduction of minority public ownership.

Collins (1991a) summarizes four reasons why a cooperative might consider a conversion. These reasons are termed the: 1) corporate acquisition thesis; 2) the equity liquidation thesis; 3) the equity access thesis; and 4) the cost of equity thesis.

The corporate acquisition thesis refers to the possibility that conversion incentives come from outside the cooperative. A private firm may wish to take over a cooperative as a supply source or for its processing capacities, and/or to expand scale and spread costs. The equity liquidation thesis suggests members may have value locked up in the equity of the firm, such that it can only be realized with the sale of the cooperative. The equity access thesis suggests that in order to grow, some cooperatives may determine they need to go outside the cooperative for capital, given limits to capital availability from current members and earnings. The cost of equity thesis suggests that when assets of a cooperative have high market value, and the organization presents a low risk picture, outside investors might be interested in purchasing stock. Cooperatives may choose to issue stock to the public, not because they can not generate it from within (the equity access thesis), but because outside investors may pay well for the issues, representing low cost capital for the cooperative.

Collins found fairly consistent support for the low cost of equity thesis in his case studies, and somewhat more limited support for the corporate acquisition, and the equity liquidation thesis. Schrader's (1989) results are similar, though focused on economic growth and to the difficulties in generating capital internally. He maintains, this led cooperatives to look outside of the organization for sources of capital. This was met at times with outside firms looking in. Once presented with an option to liquidate, members voted for its realization.

Schrader (1989:51) predicted: "There is little question that other cooperatives will be faced with decisions to sell all or part or to restructure their enterprises" in the future. He was right. From 1992 through 1996, 76 U.S. agricultural cooperatives have merged, been acquired by, or consolidated with an investor-owned firm. These restructuring have included Mississippi Chemical Cooperative, Lindsay Olive Growers, and Guild Wineries of California, Silver Springs Citrus Cooperative of Florida, West Central Turkeys of Minnesota, as well as a public stock offering by The Saskatchewan Wheat Pool in Canada. He cautioned that useful information should be readily available to members and their cooperatives when alternatives are presented.

But what kind of information?

Both the Schrader and the Collins (1991a) studies come from within a neo-

classical economics approach to reality. In some ways, possible information and alternative answers have already been determined. Conceptual options become delimited, in part, with the grounding of the view in methodological individualism, and in the use of the “rational individual” as metaphor, for analytic analogies. This founding metaphor, usually a man, is forever guided by reason, and acts in his self-interest to maximize or optimize his satisfaction or utility. Such macro phenomena as total output and the general price level, are understood as aggregations of micro decisions, or as aggregations of constitutive causes (Klamer, 1987). Analysis of individual rationality, “allows neo-classical economists to focus on economic exchange as the (most) relevant (and in some ways the only) relationship between individuals.” The inter-related concepts of rational choice become the spectacles for seeing. Generally opaque are such considerations as the influences of tradition, power, emotion, and cultural perceptions – or if visible, they are only dimly so (Klamer, 1987:177; also see Mooney *et al.* 1996:561).

The Schrader (1989) article is fairly explicit in its assumptions, and Collins’s (1991a), though more implicit, are congruent with them. The cooperative member is understood as economically rational, motivated primarily by economics. “It is presumed that cooperative member-patrons participate in a cooperative business primarily to increase the level of their incomes” (Schrader, 1989:41). Member-patrons are understood as participating and investing in cooperatives as long as the financial benefits received are equal or exceed “the value of benefits foregone” from their investment. Members are recognized as having the option “to vote to employ their capital elsewhere through liquidation or sale of the business,” and will likely do so for financial reasons if benefits are found better.

To some extent, we easily assume the role of the implied reader. These are surely important financial analyses. However our difficulty is finding the farmer in these works. The word “farmer” rarely appears in the articles. He or she has been redefined from view, as an investor. As an investor, an investment oriented structure logically fills out the metaphoric investor’s – and if we shift dimensionally to the concretely real – the scientist/writer’s view.

While the articles do not recommend conversions overtly, they tend to self-generate suggestions that are reactive, following their own “rational man” investment logic. And if a cooperative converts, it tends not to be understood beyond this logic. Missing are individuals as “farmers, men or women, parents or children, or siblings (or even individuals) . . . as community members with extra-individual concerns” (Mooney, *et al.* 1996:561).

Alternative rhetoric

An alternative rhetoric to the left of the neo-classical economics position (though the categorical rhetoric of how far to the left or left of exactly what is never quite clear) places class relations, power and organization as central to a conceptual

system. While the neo-classical economics approach, fundamentally is a social idealist view of reality, understanding ideas/values/preferences, as the primal causal force of societal and market formation, social materialism places class relations to material production as the primal causal force (Mooney, 1988, 1990, 1995; Bonanno, 1987; Archer, 1978:81). Rather than individuals, class is what is important, class understood as a relationship, and not as a category.

Most agricultural cooperatives, though not all, have historical roots in the class practices of farmers, and generally the smaller family based units. They were organized and designed by farmers to provide a service where one did not exist before, and/or to serve as an instrument of power against exploitive proprietary firms – all of which occurred within the larger surplus production contradictions of U.S. agriculture. When conversions occur, farmers lose an instrument of their class practice.

While Flora and Flora (1994) found very little difference in the action of agricultural cooperatives from investor oriented firms, and certainly not behavior indicative of class action, conversions remove any artifacts, such as a governance structures that remain from earlier historic periods. These are permanent losses of class instruments, removing them from possible availability during periods of mobilization. While mobilization of farmers may seem unlikely at this historic conjuncture, it is not uncharacteristic of social movements to ebb and flow in episodic fashion, activating latent mobilization structures that had previously been in “abeyance” during less receptive political periods (Taylor, 1989; Mooney, 1990).

The neo-classical economics approach is basically removed from this discussion. Given its initiating focus from the individual/preference/values position it tends not to be able to see conversions as a loss in class practice. Rather theories and analyses range along a continuum, from understanding cooperatives as an aggregation of individuals – as individuals – à la Phillips (1953, 1994) – to understandings of the cooperative as a business, much like any other business, à la Helmberger and Hoos (1962, 1995). Emphasis is given to making farmers more efficient as individuals, or the cooperative more efficient as a business, but not to the cooperative as an instrument to act in the interest of the collective class interest of family farmers for example.

From a class practice analysis, information provided members considering conversions would be quite different from that provided from the neo-classical perspective. Conversions would not be an option. They could be seen from this view, but would likely be understood as additional societal forces contributing to the disempowerment and loss of family farming as a collective class.

A second alternative rhetoric might be termed cultural populism/voluntarism (Hinkle, 1994, 1975; Hinkle and Hinkle, 1954) and is perhaps best represented in earlier work by Craig (1980); Lasley (1981); Knoke (1981); and more recently by Garkovich *et al.* (1987) Goreham (1997); Nadeau and Thompson (1996); Al-Sakran

(1992); Craig (1993); Masuku (1997) and Hakelius (1996). In the U.S. this work extends out of the behavioral/social psychological metaphors established by Rogers (1971); Warner and Heffernan (1967); Warner (1964); Warner and Rogers (1971); Copp (1964) and others, as applied to agricultural cooperatives. The individual again plays a central role in this story, though it is a political individual, as a voluntary member of an organization. The organization itself is understood as subordinated to the collective needs of the voluntary joiners, and not as a verification – as with the neo-classical constructions – frequently super-ordinate, not only to individuals, but to the group as a collective. The populist/voluntarist metaphor is constructed with the following distinctions, and contra-distinctions as central.

Cooperatives are organized to meet the needs of the member-users of the organization. The users are the owners, and the user-owners gain benefits from the organization according to their use (Dunn, 1988). Organizational direction is done democratically, typically by a one-member, one-vote principle.

These understandings are held in contradistinction to investor oriented firms (IOFs) as being organized differently and having different purposes. IOFs are organized to make a profit for the owners, *i.e.* the stockholders. The stockholders may never use the products or services of the firm. Stockholders supposedly control the firm by electing a board of directors that directs the manager. Stockholders hold voting power according to how much of the company – how many shares – they own. One stock holder may hold a sufficiently large enough proportion of votes to control the firm, and shape it to his or her particular interests. The “populist/voluntarist” view may point to the fact that “hired” managers frequently will be major owners of the firm as well, creating conflict of interests issues between managers and owners.

Craig, 1980; Lasley *et al.*, 1997; Baarda, 1986 – as written from within a populist/voluntarist metaphor – are highly suggestive of counterfactual losses, given a conversion occurs (Table 1). Management of information in IOFs tends to be limited or closed. Ideally, in cooperatives it is open. Cooperative decision-making processes generally involve as many active members as possible. In the IOF sector, involvement tends to be limited to dominant groups of shareholders. Participation in cooperative planning ideally includes active members, elected representatives from the membership, and managers. In IOF businesses, planning generally involves dominant owners and managers.

Aspirations integrated into the cooperative organization ideally are those of active members and elected member-officers. In IOFs, again it is the aspirations of dominant owners and managers that generally shape the organization. Cooperation with other cooperatives is generally assumed beneficial to members. Relationships among IOFs is competitive and assumed detrimental to stakeholders in the respective organizations – if other than by investment or business contracts (Craig, 1980).

Table 1. Comparison between management practices in various types of business enterprises (adapted from Craig, 1980)

	Individual proprietary business	Investment- Oriented Firm (IOF)	Cooperatives
Aspects of management practice: Rationale for decisionmaking	Profit rationale for owner	Profit rationale for stockholders	Service rationale for members
Management of decisionmaking processes	Search out ideas from advisors	Involve the dominant group of shareholders to provide a framework decisions	Involve as many active members as possible to establish the framework for decisions
Management of information	No disclosure of financial or operational information	Limited disclosure of financial information to investors and potential investors	Open disclosure of operational information to members aggregated data to public
Management of assets	To provide maximum long-term accumulation of wealth	To provide long-term accumulation of wealth	To provide an accumulation of resources to develop efficient services to meet the needs of the members
Relationship toward other organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On a business relationship only • Other relationships assumed detrimental to producers and/or consumers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct investment or business contacts • Other relationships assumed detrimental to producers and/or consumers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected officials and management • It is assumed cooperation between cooperatives will benefit members
Management of aspirations	The aspirations of the owner are central	The aspirations of the dominant owners of capital and of management are central	The aspirations of active members, elected officials are central
Planning and participation	Involves the owner	Involves the dominant owners of capital and management	Involves active members, elected officials, management and employees

Further, the predominant rationale for decision making in IOF businesses is profits. In cooperatives it is service to members. And ideally, cooperative management of assets is ultimately based on developing efficient services for member needs rather than long-term accumulation of wealth (Craig, 1980). Utilization of the metaphor allows the scientist to “see” cooperatives and investor-owned firms as different kinds of organizations by design and purpose, by aspirations sought to be filled, and by relationships within the socio-economy.

From the populist/voluntarist position, information provided members of potential conversions, would tend to focus on loss of power and influence, loss of democracy. It would be predisposed to seeing the centralizations of power within much smaller groups, how ties to locality would likely be weaker, and direction of the organization subject to influence by absentee, non-local interests – and not the interests of member-farmers. Emphasis would be given to building awareness that planning, aspirations, direction of the organization would no longer be based on member-use, but on the turn-over capital, and return on investment, and that the organization would likely become re-focused from meeting broad empowerment needs, to much narrower monetary issues. Conversions transform an instrument designed for a populist and voluntarist empowerment, to a tool of wealth accumulation narrowly defined.

Concluding remark

The comment of this paper is not to suggest we banish the use of metaphors, and analogy in science, but rather to make them more explicit. Social idealism, social materialism, and social populism/voluntarism are all abstract reasoning tools to order perception of reality. McCloskey(1985, 1990) states that when we do not make our metaphors and analogies explicit, we cease to think and the tool thinks for us. Science is a way of conversing. There are several ways of doing it. The call of modernism and its child scientism, is its promise of certainty. But analogy, and metaphor are not certainties. They are tools of persuasion. Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey (1987) suggest it is better we accept openly, the partial assurances of our rhetorical methods, than to hide in false assurances of objectivity. It enriches and pluralizes science. As with the science of agriculture (see Kloppenberg, 1992; and Busch and Lacy, 1983), the science of conversions can be understood from different perspectives. Better we are clear about the subjective nature of our orientations, if for no other reason than to be clear that there are a breadth of choices in practical recommendations.

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