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Popular movements and the fragility of the Nordic democracies during the first half of the twentieth century

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Abstract

The Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden are among the few European countries where parliamentary democracy survived the challenges of the interwar period. The apparent resilience of Nordic democracy has sometimes been partly attributed to the strength of the popular movements, the internal democratic structures and culture of these organisations and not least their role in educating their members in democratic practices. Drawing primarily on examples from the co-operative movements in several Nordic countries, the article asks how democracy was understood in co-operative societies and how it functioned in practice. Co-operative societies were committed to the principle of 'one member one vote', but faced constant dilemmas over how to combine the possibility for grassroots influence with the need for central control, especially as the organisations grew in size. In some cases this led to irreconcilable conflicts and splits in central organisations. The article argues that although the co-operatives and other popular movements later came to be seen as crucial elements in the survival of Nordic democracy, their role in this survival should not be taken for granted.

Popular movements and the fragility of the Nordic democracies during the first half of the twentieth century¹

1. Introduction

There is general agreement that the inter-war period (1918-1939) stands out as an important moment of democratic fragility.² Eric Hobsbawm wrote of the shocking collapse of ‘the values and institutions of... liberal civilisation’ during what he called the ‘Age of Catastrophe’ (1914-45), noting that ‘legislative assemblies were dissolved or became ineffective’ in seventeen European states during the inter-war period.³ By 1939 most of the new constitutional democracies established after 1918 had disappeared. These developments, together with the tremendous economic difficulties of the era, mean that the period has often been described as a particularly dark chapter in European history, in contrast to the eras of progress, stability and optimism before 1914 and after 1945.⁴ It is also tempting to point to troubling parallels between the 1930s and the 2010s, when again we see signs of the retreat of liberalism and the rise of populist nationalism.

Seen from the vantage point of hindsight, the Nordic countries seem to differ from this pessimistic narrative. As Mark Mazower commented, by the 1930s, ‘[o]nly on the continent’s northern fringes did effective parliamentary rule survive.’⁵ There was nothing inevitable about this survival, for the relatively young democracies of Norden were no less vulnerable to the challenges of the era than other parts of Europe. Here, as elsewhere, democracy had to be struggled for, even if those struggles were, on the whole, less violent than they were elsewhere.⁶ There were groups and individuals with ambitions to overturn democracy, but there were also signs of democracy’s subjective fragility, in the nervousness of elites about what ‘the people’ might actually demand and uncertainty about what

¹ I would like to thank Johanna Rainio-Niemi and all participants at meetings held in Oxford, Helsinki and Sandbjerg for comments on earlier drafts. An earlier version of some parts of the text was also presented at the workshop “Offentlighet, rett og demokrati i Norden i det lange 19. århundre (ca. 1800-1920)”, organised by colleagues from the University of Oslo at Schæffergården, February 2017, and I would like to thank all who took part for their comments.

² G. Capoccia, “Militant Democracy: The Institutional Bases of Democratic Self-Preservation”, in: *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 9 (2013), 207-226; G. Capoccia, “Defending Democracy: Reactions to Political Extremism in Inter-War Europe”, in: *European Journal of Political Research* 39 (2001), 431-460; D. Berg-Schlosser / J. Mitchell (eds.), *Authoritarianism and Democracy in Europe, 1919-39: Comparative Analyses*, Basingstoke 2002; M. Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century*, London 1999 (1998), 2-4; J. M. Roberts, *Europe 1880-1945*, Harlow, third edition 2001 (1967), 314-315.

³ E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, London 1994, 109-111.

⁴ For a critical discussion of this point see R. Gerwarth, “Introduction”, in: R. Gerwarth (ed.), *Twisted Paths: Europe 1914-1945*, Oxford 2007, 1-7, 1.

⁵ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 3.

⁶ F. Mikkelsen / S. Nyzell, “A Comparative Perspective on Popular Struggle and Democracy in Scandinavia”, in F. Mikkelsen / K. Kjeldstadli / S. Nyzell (eds.), *Popular Struggle and Democracy in Scandinavia, 1700-Present*, London 2018, 435-457.

forms democracy might take.⁷ But the Nordic parliamentary democracies proved resilient, and this resilience was influential in shaping the international reputation of the region as successful and worthy of attention.⁸ As Peter Stadius has written, the years 1918-1939 saw a transformation in the international image of the Nordic countries, where earlier interest in climate and natural environment was replaced by the idea of the region as ‘a future-oriented and functioning democratic mass society.’⁹

As Kristina Krake has noted, historical research on the survival of the Nordic democracies in the inter-war period has often focused on the absence of political extremism.¹⁰ Historians have acknowledged the existence of anti-democratic movements in the Nordic countries, but suggested that these failed to gain root, partly because such movements were highly fragmented and lacked charismatic leaders of sufficient standing to pull them together. Moreover, fascism itself has been seen largely as an imported phenomenon which was inadequately adapted to the specific circumstances of the region and thus failed to gain broad appeal.¹¹ Other explanations have centred on the responses of the Nordic political systems to extremism.¹² Political scientist Ulf Lindström, in his comparative study of fascism in inter-war Scandinavia, argued that the ‘red-green’ crisis agreements, negotiated between social democratic and farmers’ parties in all five Nordic countries in the years 1933-37, were the terminal blow to the political challenge from right-wing extremism.¹³ He noted the symbolic value of the Danish Kanslergade Agreement in particular, concluded following late-night negotiations just hours before Hitler came to power in January 1933.¹⁴

Lindström explained the flexibility of the Scandinavian political system, and the ability of its leading political parties to make far-reaching compromises across the boundaries of party and class, with reference to the relative mildness of social cleavages in the Scandinavian context and the strength

⁷ See Martin Conway’s introduction to this special issue.

⁸ J. Kurunmäki / J. Strang, “Introduction: ‘Nordic Democracy’ in a World of Tensions”, in: J. Kurunmäki / J. Strang (eds.), *Rhetorics of Nordic Democracy*, Helsinki 2010, 9-36.

⁹ P. Stadius, “Happy Countries: Appraisals of Interwar Nordic Societies”, in: J. Harvard / P. Stadius (eds.), *Communicating the North: Media Structures and Images in the Making of the Nordic Region*, Farnham 2013, 241-262.

¹⁰ K. Krake, “Skandinavien i ekstremernes tidsalder. Systemkritik og demokratiforsvar i mellemkrigstiden 1919-1939”, PhD thesis, Syddansk Universitet, 2016; K. Krake, “Reconsidering the Crisis Agreements of the 1930s: The Defence of Democracy in a Comparative Scandinavian Perspective”, published online in: *Contemporary European History* (2018): <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777318000607>.

¹¹ Krake, “Skandinavien i ekstremernes tidsalder”. On this point see also L. Berggren, “Den svenska mellankrigsfascismen – ett ointressant marginalfenomen eller ett viktigt forskningsobjekt?” in: *Historisk Tidskrift* (Sweden) 122 (2002) 3, 427-444.

¹² For a survey see Krake, “Skandinavien i ekstremernes tidsalder”, 27-35.

¹³ Note that Lindström is concerned with Denmark, Norway and Sweden (as is Krake), but red-green agreements were also negotiated in Iceland in 1934 and Finland in 1937. For the importance of the Scandinavian agreements in Finland, see M. Österberg, “‘Norden’ as a Transnational Space in the 1930s: Negotiated Consensus of ‘Nordicness’ in the Nordic Cooperation Committee of the Labour Movement”, in: M. Hilson / S. Neunsinger / I. Vyff (eds.), *Labour, Unions and Politics under the North Star: The Nordic Countries, 1700-2000*, Oxford 2017, 237-257.

¹⁴ U. Lindström, *Fascism in Scandinavia 1920-1940*, Stockholm 1985, 2, 170.

of economic interest organisations able and willing to negotiate.¹⁵ Other explanations have focused on the ideological flexibility of the social democratic parties under the leadership of politicians such as Thorvald Stauning, Per Albin Hansson and Johan Nygaardsvold, and their willingness to form cross-class alliances.¹⁶ The actions of the agrarian parties and their leaders such as Per Axelsson i Bramtorp have also been cited, as has the commitment of the conservatives to democracy.¹⁷ According to Giovanni Capoccia, Finland may be considered an example of ‘militant democracy’, where governing elites were prepared to take exceptional anti-democratic measures – namely, banning the extremist Lapua movement – in order to defend democracy.¹⁸ Recent research by Mirja Österberg also highlights the importance of inter-Nordic co-operation, especially the Nordic labour movement’s co-operation committee SAMAK, which met regularly from 1932.¹⁹

Underpinning all these explanations are assumptions about the exceptional vitality of democratic political culture in the Nordic countries, and the strength and importance of the democratic popular movements in supporting this.²⁰ This suggests that the roots of democratic resilience in the Nordic countries are to be found not only in the immediate circumstances of the 1920s and 1930s, but in political traditions that pre-dated the introduction of parliamentary democracy and universal suffrage. David Kirby has written that,

democracy was rather more than the prescriptions of a written constitution; it was to be found in workers’ clubs, temperance halls, free church assemblies, local council chambers, and in the everyday attitudes and presumptions of the people.

These experiences were also present on the southern shores of the Baltic Sea, ‘but here, they lacked the solid foundation of consensual national tradition and sociopolitical continuity.’²¹ For Kirby, this helped to explain why democracy survived in Norden and not in the Baltic states during the inter-war period. And the role of the popular movements as central to the understanding of the Nordic democracies continues to be celebrated in contemporary self-perceptions of the Nordic democracies, with associational life

¹⁵ Lindström, *Fascism in Scandinavia*; see also G. Esping-Andersen, *Politics Against Markets: The Social Democratic Road to Power*, Princeton 1985; G. Luebbert, *Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy: Social Classes and the Political Origins of Regimes in Interwar Europe*, New York 1991.

¹⁶ See for example S. Berman, *The Social Democratic Moment: Ideas and Politics in the Making of Interwar Europe* Cambridge, MA 1998.

¹⁷ F. Sejersted, *The Age of Social Democracy: Norway and Sweden in the Twentieth Century*, trans. R. Daly, ed. M. B. Adams, Princeton, Oxford 2011. M. R. Nissen, “Det nationale kompromis – Kanslergadenforliget i 1933”, in: *Landbohistorisk Tidsskrift*, 7 (2010) 1, 50-77; which also mentions role of the Venstre in particular and the importance of personal contacts between the politicians involved. Giovanni Capoccia attributes much of the successful defence of Finnish democracy in response to the Lapua threat to the Agrarian Party, though also to the actions of the conservative Svinhufvud. See Capoccia, “Defending Democracy”.

¹⁸ Capoccia, “Defending Democracy”. The term ‘militant democracy’ was also used by one of Childs’ reviewers: R. B. Bryce, in: *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 3 (1937) 1, 142-143.

¹⁹ Österberg, “‘Norden’ as a Transnational Space”.

²⁰ R. Alapuro / H. Stenius (eds.), *Nordic Associations in a European Perspective*, Baden-Baden 2010; N. Götz / H. Haggrén / M. Hilson, “Nordic Cooperation in the Voluntary Sector”, in: J. Strang (ed.), *Nordic Cooperation: A European Region in Transition*, London 2016.

²¹ D. Kirby, *The Baltic World 1772-1993: Europe’s Northern Periphery in an Age of Change*, London 1995, 333.

(*foreningsliv*) identified as one of ten national values in an official Danish cultural canon launched in December 2016.²²

Any discussion of the fragility or robustness of the Nordic democracies thus demands that some attention be paid to the role of the popular movements, not least the extent to which they were perceived as ‘schools for democracy’, by contemporary commentators as well as scholars of Nordic democracy. The extent to which they fulfilled this role, or even the status of the popular movements as democratic organisations in themselves should not be taken for granted, however. Rather, they were forced to confront some important challenges as they sought to put their democratic ideals into practice: how to reconcile grassroots demands for local or regional autonomy with the need for central authority, for example; how to overcome divisions of class, gender and generation; how to accommodate the demands of minorities; how to balance the influence of popular culture with that of expert advice. Such dilemmas are all crucial to the successful or otherwise functioning of democracy, and remain so even today.

This article explores the traditions of democracy that the Nordic popular movements were assumed to represent and asks what this actually meant in practice. The examples are drawn from the co-operative movements mostly in Denmark and Sweden, also in Finland and to a lesser extent Norway, though other organisations will be considered where appropriate. It has not been possible to include Iceland. I examine how democracy was understood in co-operative societies, and how they attempted to overcome some of the perceived challenges to its practice. The article also considers how leaders and activists within the co-operative movement conceived the role of the organisations they led in the defence of democratic systems, especially following the crisis of democracy in the 1930s. Frequently cited, for example, was the role of the popular movements as ‘schools for democracy’, inoculating citizens against authoritarianism. I argue, however, that such perceptions of the popular movements as a key factor in the successful Nordic democracies were generally external, rather than internal. The article is based mostly on an analysis of debates on these points in co-operative journals, supplemented by the published writings of leading co-operative figures and also some examples of commentaries on the Nordic democracies by foreigners. The perspective is thus a top-down one, which leaves open the question of how individual members conceived of their co-operative societies as democratic organisations.

²² Danmarkskanon on ‘foreningsliv og frivillighed’: <https://www.danmarkskanon.dk/vaerdi/foreningsliv-og-frivillighed/>; accessed 12 January 2018. Indeed, so important is this that in Denmark the government has made ‘active citizenship’, demonstrated through at least one year’s participation in an organization such as “a parents’ committee, a school board, a board of a non-profit housing organization, an integration council or a senior council”, one of its supplementary requirements for award of a permanent residence permit. Website New to Denmark, ‘You want to apply for a permanent residence permit’; <https://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-GB/You-want-to-apply/Permanent-residence-permit>; accessed 12 January 2018.

2. The Nordic popular movements

The term 'popular movements' (*folkrörelser; folkebevægelser; kansanliikkeet*) refers to a wide variety of voluntary associations that emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century.²³ In Swedish historiography the most important examples are considered to be the free churches, the temperance movement and the labour movement.²⁴ To this may be added farmers' associations, including the folk high schools and the agricultural co-operatives (especially in Denmark), various youth organisations, missionary groups (especially in Norway), sports associations, and voluntary fire brigades (Finland).²⁵ What all of them had in common was their status as voluntary associations of individuals, in contrast to earlier corporatist societies such as guilds. Many of them were not political per se, but they are generally regarded as expressing popular mobilizations from below, which were prepared to challenge established social and political hierarchies.²⁶

Such voluntary associations were of course not unique to the Nordic countries, but emerged as part of a broader trend in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. According to Henrik Stenius, what was distinctive about the Nordic popular movements is that they were not purely oppositional or rebellious, but were instead nurtured in a symbiotic relationship with the state authorities.²⁷ This meant that conflicts driven by opposition or challenge from below could mostly be effectively contained, notably in the early twentieth century with the example of socialist labour movement. Similar themes were taken up by Niels Kayser Nielsen, in his 2009 study of the long lines of development of Nordic nationalism, democracy and civil society over two centuries.²⁸ Kayser Nielsen makes a conceptual distinction between what he calls nationalism *an sich* and nationalism *für sich*. In other words, the grounds for strong national cohesion (nationalism *an sich*) in the Nordic countries were laid by the absolutist centralized state and its creation of national infrastructures, which also implied early intervention in the lives of its citizens through their religious and practical education. But from the mid-nineteenth century this was also shaped by popular mobilization (nationalism *für sich*), where the voluntary associations of the peasant farmers played an essential role.

Co-operatives were in many respects typical of the nineteenth century popular movements, especially in their combination of practical, economic aims with more political goals. Typically of all the nineteenth-century popular movements, the development of co-operation in the Nordic countries was shaped by the transnational exchange of ideas.²⁹ The roots of co-operation lay partly in the

²³ For a definition, see N. Kayser Nielsen, *Bonde, stat og hjem: Nordisk demokrati og nationalism – fra pietismen til 2. Verdenskrig*, Aarhus 2009, 258. On the 'folk' concept in the Nordic countries, see Jeppe Nevers and Jesper Lundsby Skov's contribution to this special issue.

²⁴ S. Lundkvist, "Popular Movements and Reforms, 1900-1920", in: S. Koblik (ed.), *Sweden's Development from Poverty to Affluence, 1750-1970*, translated J. Johnson, Minneapolis 1975, 180-193.

²⁵ Kayser Nielsen, *Bonde, stat og hjem*, 259ff.

²⁶ See H. Stenius, "Nordic Associational Life in a European and an Inter-Nordic Perspective", in: Alapuro / Stenius (eds.), *Nordic Associations*, 29-86.

²⁷ Stenius, "Nordic Associational Life".

²⁸ Kayser Nielsen, *Bonde, stat og hjem*; see also N. Kayser Nielsen, "Denmark 1740-1940: A Centralized Cultural Community", in: J. P. Árnason / B. Wittrock (eds.), *Nordic Paths to Modernity*, Oxford 2012, 69-88.

²⁹ See M. Hilson, *The International Co-operative Alliance and the Consumer Co-operative Movement in Northern Europe, c. 1860-1939*, Manchester 2018, on which the following draws.

‘associationalism’ of utopian socialists in England and France during the 1830s and 1840s, but from the mid-nineteenth century it was widely discussed by middle-class social reformers as a means to promote self-help and social cohesion among those of limited means, in both rural and urban contexts.³⁰ Co-operatives could take different forms. Farmers’ co-operatives allowed their members to raise capital collectively in order to introduce technological innovations in the production, processing and marketing of agricultural goods, such as the centrifugal milk separator or the mechanized slaughterhouse. Credit co-operatives organized on the German Raiffeisen and Schulze-Delitzsch models offered small farmers a source of cheap loans. Also important were consumer co-operatives, inspired by the famous society established in the northern English town of Rochdale in 1844, which benefited from the liberalization of trade laws in establishing retailing networks for the distribution of essential goods to those of limited means.

The Nordic co-operative movements were extremely diverse, which makes them a good case study for this article. They developed rapidly from the end of the nineteenth century, and by the inter-war period they were found across the entire region. There were clearly major differences between agricultural and consumer forms of co-operation; while even within the consumer co-operative movement, which is the main focus for this article, there were also differences between urban and rural co-operative societies, for example, or even differences of language or political ideology, especially in Finland. But at the same time, there were common factors that mean the co-operative organisations can be considered as belonging to a unified movement. In all four Nordic countries, consumer co-operatives developed central unions and wholesale societies, which acknowledged common guiding principles including that of democratic governance. Especially during the inter-war period, these national organisations also collaborated with each other, especially through their participation in the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA).

3. Co-operatives as democratic organisations: theory and practice

As noted, one of the major sources of inspiration for the nineteenth-century co-operative movement was the consumer co-operative society founded in Rochdale, in 1844. Exactly what Rochdale co-operation meant was often debated, however, at least until the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) established a definitive list of seven principles in 1937.³¹ In his 1858 book on the Rochdale society, *Self-Help by the People*, which was very influential not only in Britain but also in the rest of Europe, George

³⁰ M. Hilson / P. Markkola / A.-C. Östman, “Introduction: Co-operatives and the Social Question”, in: M. Hilson / P. Markkola / A.-C. Östman (eds.), *Co-operatives and the Social Question: The Co-operative Movement in Northern and Eastern Europe (1880-1950)*, Cardiff 2012, 1-24.

³¹ The second of the seven principles of co-operative identity adopted by the ICA in 1995 (based on revisions of earlier statements from 1937 and 1966) concerns “Democratic Member Control” and reads as follows: “Co-operatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and co-operatives at other levels are also organised in a democratic manner.” ICA, “Co-operative Identity, Values and Principles”; available at <https://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles>; accessed 12 January 2018.

Jacob Holyoake referred to fourteen principal features of the Rochdale system of co-operation, including the provision that the society was governed on the basis of 'one member one vote'.³² This was co-operation's main claim to be considered as a democratic institution, and it was found in the many practical introductions to co-operative business that appeared in the Nordic countries (and indeed elsewhere) in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

In Denmark, the Rochdale society was a major source of inspiration for the Thisted Workers' Association (Thisted Kjøbstads Arbejderforening), founded in northern Jutland in 1866 by a local clergyman, H. Chr. Sonne.³³ The short book about the association published by Sonne in 1867 was full of extracts from the English co-operative press. Following Rochdale practice, the Thisted rules placed the management of the association in the hands of a committee elected by a general meeting of all members held monthly. Membership was also to be open to all, though Sonne clearly envisaged that these members would be male heads of households.³⁴ Despite these arrangements for the internal self-governance of the society, Sonne's presentation of the Thisted association made no explicit reference to co-operation as a force for democracy. Rather, he described the aims of consumer co-operation in purely economic terms, and by extension as a means for workers of limited means to avoid indebtedness and drunkenness. Co-operation would thus contribute to raising the morale and self-confidence of the workers, through economic self-help, and this was also to be strengthened by the requirement that the members shared collective liability (*'solidarisk Ansvar'*) for the association's loan capital. Sonne's pamphlet was aimed in part at well-meaning members of the middle class like himself, who saw in co-operation the means to achieve social reform.³⁵

The rules of the Thisted association were to form the basis for other consumer co-operative societies in Denmark, for example that founded in Aarhus in 1884.³⁶ Some members of the Danish co-operative movement later insisted that the Rochdale story had little relevance for Denmark, arguing that co-operation – or more properly *andelsbevægelsen* – especially in the countryside, was rooted in specifically Danish traditions of agricultural self-help and education associated with the Grundtvigian

³² G. J. Holyoake, *Self-Help by the People: The History of the Rochdale Pioneers*, London, tenth revised edition 1893, reprinted 1922, first published 1858, 156-157; see: M. Hilson, "Rochdale and Beyond: Consumer Co-operation in Britain before 1945", in: M. Hilson / S. Neunsinger / G. Patmore (eds.), *A Global History of Consumer Co-operation since 1850: Movements and Businesses*, Leiden 2017, 59-77.

³³ P. Thestrup, *Nærbutik og næringslovs-omgøelse. En undersøgelse af brugsforeningerne og deres placering i innovationsprocessen i Danmark mellem 1850 og 1919*, Odense 1986; N. F. Christiansen, "Denmark's Road to Modernity and Welfare: The Co-operative Way", in: Hilson, Markkola and Östman (eds.), *Co-operatives and the Social Question*, 25-40; K. Jensen (ed.), *Brugsen – en anderledes forretning? 1866-2016: Dansk brugsbevægelse fra pastor Sonne til det moderne Coop*, Albertslund 2016.

³⁴ Sonne wrote about how the association's trading surplus could be used to establish a meeting room where members – 'and from time to time their Wives' – could meet to read, hear lectures and discuss: H. Chr. Sonne, *Om Arbejderforeninger. Til Oplysning og Veiledning*, Kjøbenhavn 1867, 10. This mirrored practices in English consumer co-operative societies, even though the Rochdale rules formally made no distinction between male and female members. See B. J. Blaszk, "The Gendered Geography of the English Co-operative Movement at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century" in: *Women's History Review*, 9 (2000), 559-583.

³⁵ Sonne, *Om Arbejderforeninger*.

³⁶ H. Grelle, *Det kooperative alternativ. Arbejderkooperationen i Danmark 1852-2012*, København 2012, 46.

folk high schools.³⁷ Nonetheless, here too, the principle of ‘one member one vote’ was widely practised, alongside the principle of members’ collective liability. Inspiration for this was reported as coming from the rural Schulze-Delitzsch and Raiffeisen credit societies in Germany, as well as from the mostly urban English consumer co-operative societies.³⁸

The main wave of co-operative organization came slightly later in Sweden than in Denmark, but here too Rochdale consumer co-operation was an important source of inspiration. The principle of ‘one member one vote’ meant that co-operatives were fundamentally different from other types of business where votes were distributed in proportion to share ownership, as was explained in a pamphlet on the English co-operatives which appeared in Swedish translation in 1894:

Every member has *one* vote, regardless of whether the number of shares he owns is large or small. In this way, a member who has only an insignificant amount of capital has the same power as the richest of them all. This is an essential and extremely important principle, and in this way the co-operative societies are far more democratic than many other associations... In general, women have the same rights to vote and to buy shares as the men.³⁹

The same point was made by one of the founders of the Swedish co-operative union KF (Kooperativa Förbundet), G H von Koch, who had studied consumer co-operatives during his travels in England:

The societies are governed by universal suffrage, with no consideration to the amount of capital members have at their disposal; it is the person, not the property, who votes. The same equality prevails with regard to the election of officials... The reasons for this pronounced democratic character may be found in the fact that the gains from the business are distributed according to purchases.⁴⁰

Co-operative societies practised the principle of open membership, but it should be noted that they usually also had a requirement for a minimum share ownership. Although many also made arrangements for these to be purchased in instalments, it seems likely that such thresholds inevitably acted as a barrier to membership for those of more limited economic means. Further research is needed

³⁷ The matter was debated in the pages of *Andelsbladet* in 1926: K. Thøgersen, “Hvad er den historiske Sandhed?”, in: *Andelsbladet* 48 (26 November 1926), 1382-1384; “En gl. Andelsmand”, “Danske Bønder og Rochdale-Væverne”, in: *Andelsbladet* 49 (3 December 1926), 1422-1423.

³⁸ J Th Arnfred, “Dansk Andelsbevægelse”, in: A. Axelsen Drejer, *Den danske Andelsbevægelse*, København 1943, 25-28.

³⁹ “Hvarje medlem har *en* röst, huru stort eller litet antal aktier han än må äga. Sålunda har en medlem som blott innehar ett obetydligt kapital samma makt som den rikaste af dem alla. Detta är en väsentlig och ytterst viktig princip, och i detta afseende äro de kooperativa föreningarna långt mera demokratiska än många andra föreningar... Kvinnorna hafva i allmänhet samma rösträtt och samma köprätt till aktier som männen.” A. H. Dyke Acland and B. Jones, *Arbetarnes Cooperations-Föreningar i Storbritannien*, trans. P.D., Stockholm 1894, 43. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

⁴⁰ “Såsom förut nämts, råder inom föreningarna allmän rösträtt, ingen hänsyn tages till det större eller mindre kapital, medlemmarna förfoga öfver; det är personen, ej egendomen som röstar. Samma jämlikhet råder vid valet till ämbetssysslorna... Grunden till denna utpräglade demokratiska karaktär torde kunna sökas i den omständigheten, att vinsten på affärsrörelsen fördelas på uppköpen.” See G. H. von Koch, *Om arbetarnas konsumtionsföreningar i England*, Stockholm 1899, 17.

on the membership of local co-operative societies to establish how the principle of open membership and member control actually operated in practice.⁴¹

In Finland, rules for the governance of co-operative societies were established in a law on co-operatives (*Lagen om andelsvärksamhet; Osuustoimintalaki*) adopted in 1901.⁴² According to this legislation, the main aim of co-operatives was to further the economic welfare of their members, especially those of limited means.⁴³ The most important provision of the new law, as it was presented in the *Pellervo* journal, was the principle of members' mutual liability (*ömsesidiga ansvarighet/yhteinen vastuunalaisuus*), which formed the basis on which co-operatives could secure credit and raise capital to begin their operations. As in Denmark, this provision was not derived from Rochdale, but reflected the practice adopted by the German Raiffeisen and Schulze-Delitzsch credit co-operatives. The law was not prescriptive on how the surplus should be divided among members, but it did stipulate the requirement for democratic control (*den folkeliga bestämelse*) through the principle of 'one member one vote' at co-operative meetings. The 1901 law has been acknowledged as highly significant in the development of the Finnish co-operative movement, triggering a rapid expansion in the number of new co-operative societies founded.⁴⁴ Knowledge of the law and its provisions was spread by the Pellervo Society, which was founded in 1899 by a group of well-to-do individuals interested in social reform, and led by the Helsinki University agronomist Hannes Gebhard who had also contributed to drafting the legislation. Pellervo was not itself a co-operative society, but was an educational organisation intended to foster the development of co-operation through various means, including the provision of model rules and of instructors and auditors to assist local societies.⁴⁵

In a comparative essay on the Nordic popular movements Henrik Stenius writes that, 'the preparedness to accept standardized statutory norms seems to be greater in East Norden than in West Norden, and looking at Finland and Sweden, statutory, national norms seem more common in Finland than in Sweden.'⁴⁶ The co-operative movement – as Stenius himself acknowledges – is a good example of this point. It proved more difficult to form central institutions in Denmark and Norway than it did in Finland and Sweden.⁴⁷ Whereas in Denmark, the governance and organization of co-operative societies

⁴¹ See K. Friberg, *The Workings of Co-operation: A Comparative Study of Consumer Co-operative Organisation in Britain and Sweden 1860 to 1970*, Växjö 2005, 253ff, for a discussion of co-operative rules and practices in one local society, Solidar, in Malmö.

⁴² There was no legislation on specifically co-operative businesses in Denmark or Sweden. For a discussion of the legal status of co-operatives in Sweden, see Friberg, *The Workings of Co-operation*, 77-84; in Denmark: Axelsen Drejer, *Det danske Andelsbevægelse*, 18; also V. Kruse, "Andelsforeningernes retslige Stilling", *Nationaløkonomisk Tidsskrift*, 1 January 1918, 1-29.

⁴³ Aim: "att genom sammanslutning underlätta utöfvandet af de till andelslaget personernas näring eller eljes villkoren för deras utkomst." Law on co-operatives [Osuustoimintalaki/Lagen om andelsvärksamhet], 1901, reprinted in *Pellervo* July 1901, 193-197. *Pellervo* was published monthly in both a Finnish and Swedish edition; here the Swedish text was a direct translation of that which appeared in the Finnish edition.

⁴⁴ V. Rasila, "Kauppa ja rahaliike", in: J. Ahvenainen / E. Pihkala / V. Rasila (eds.), *Suomen taloushistoria*, 2: *Teollistuva Suomi*, Helsinki 1982, 94; H. Stenius, *Frivilligt, jämlikt, samfällt: Föreningsväsendets utveckling i Finland fram till 1900-talets början*, Helsingfors 1987, 323-324.

⁴⁵ Hilson, *The International Co-operative Alliance*.

⁴⁶ Stenius, "Nordic Associational Life", 29-86, 55.

⁴⁷ Hilson, *The International Co-operative Alliance*.

was established through local practice, in Sweden it was shaped and controlled by the dissemination of KF's model rules, and in Finland by national legislation.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, despite the different forms co-operative societies took across the region there are clearly some important similarities in how they operated, especially in the adoption of the principle of one member one vote in their rules.

The example of KF's central control also raised some important questions and dilemmas, however. One potentially problematic aspect of co-operative democracy concerned the organization of the internal structure of the movement beyond its local origins. As co-operative societies grew, the notion of members having direct control over day-to-day governance had to be abandoned and replaced by some form of representative democracy within national federations. In Sweden, Finland and Norway national organisations were founded in the early twentieth century that combined the functions of central representative union with those of wholesale supplier to local co-operative societies.⁴⁹ In Denmark, the national wholesale organization Fællesforeningen for Danmarks Brugsforeningerne FDB was established in 1896, while a central co-operative committee (Andelsudvalget) founded in 1899 served the functions of co-ordination, not just for the consumer movement but also for the agricultural co-operative societies.

The assumption was that the principle of one member one vote should also operate with regard to the representation of local societies in the national federations, but this proved much more difficult to realise in practice. In Finland the consumers' co-operative movement was split over the question of how local societies should be represented at the national congress. The larger urban societies with their mostly working-class membership sought a structure where delegates were allocated in proportion to membership, while the smaller rural societies insisted on the one member one vote principle where each society had an equal weight, regardless of the size of its membership. The differences proved irreconcilable and in 1916 the so-called 'progressive' co-operatives left to form their own federation and wholesale (KK/OTK).⁵⁰ During the 1920s both Finnish co-operative federations continued to insist on their independence from political parties and their adherence to the principle of internal democracy. But the conflict that arose over this issue illustrates a broader dilemma faced by all popular movements, over the balance between local autonomy and centralization and how was this to be negotiated.⁵¹ It was not always clear how the demands for direct, participatory democracy – in the members' meeting – could be reconciled with those of large and complex organisations at the national level.

It is common to refer to the unusual levels of homogeneity in the Nordic countries and the lack of significant ethnic or religious cleavages, at least before the late twentieth century. The example of the co-operative movement indicates, however, that such divisions were never entirely absent and could

⁴⁸ On KF's model rules: Friberg, *The Workings of Co-operation*; see also O. Ruin, *Kooperativa Förbundet 1899-1929: En organisationsstudie*, Lund 1960, 36ff.

⁴⁹ In Sweden Kooperativa Förbundet KF (1899); in Finland Suomen Osuuskappojen Keskuskunta SOK (1904); in Norway Norges Kooperative Landsforening NKL (1906).

⁵⁰ E. Aaltonen, *Finlands konsumenter i samarbete*, translated S. Malmström, Helsingfors 1954.

⁵¹ Jenny Jansson describes a very similar struggle over the one-member-one-vote principle in the worker education organization ABF, where after 1918 there were moves to establish a system of internal representation in proportion to membership in order to prevent smaller left-wing organisations from gaining control of the ABF: J. Jansson, "Maktkamp i ABF", *Arbetarhistoria*, 153-154 (2015) 1-2, 23-29.

sometimes be significant in shaping the internal democracy of the popular movements. In Norway, for example, the split between core and periphery has long dominated Norwegian history-writing and is also interpreted as shaping the popular movements, notably the Labour Party's decision to join Comintern in 1919.⁵² In Denmark, the co-operative movement appears to span the major cultural division in Danish society, between the countryside and the towns, the workers and farmers.⁵³ But here too there was also a formal split, when representatives of the larger consumer co-operative societies serving the urban working classes formed their own central federation, Det kooperative Fællesforbund, in 1922. In his history of workers' co-operation in Denmark, historian Henning Grelle noted that, like in Finland, one of the main points of contention in relations between the urban co-operatives and their rural counterparts was the perception that small rural societies were over-represented in FDB.⁵⁴ In Finland, national co-operative organisations also had to contend with heightened tensions over the language question, especially during the 1920s. Within the consumer co-operative organizations a formal division was avoided through the establishment of separate meetings for representatives of the Swedish-speaking societies at SOK congresses, while SOK and KK produced member newspapers in both Finnish and Swedish throughout the inter-war period. The agricultural co-operatives could not avoid a split, however, and a separate central organization was established in 1919.⁵⁵

Even for local societies, we should ask how democracy was practised and what the theoretical commitment to 'one member one vote' actually meant in practice. A partial answer to this question can be found in Katarina Friberg's study of the internal organization of the Solidar consumer co-operative in Malmö, founded in 1895, which she compares with another large consumer co-operative society in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in northeast England. Both societies implemented the principle of one member one vote and in both cases this implied that the board of directors was elected by a poll among all members and that their actions were also subject to scrutiny and held to account by members. The main forum for this was the regular members' meeting, held quarterly in Newcastle and less regularly in Malmö. But here Friberg notes a very interesting difference between the two cases. She finds that member meetings in Newcastle could be very lively affairs, where members cheered, heckled or even booed the directors and entered into direct debate with them over decisions concerning the running of the society, for example the allocation of the surplus for different purposes and the proportion returned to members as quarterly dividend. In Malmö, by contrast, these mechanisms were fixed by the KF model rules and decisions about the society's commercial activities were left in the hands of its board of

⁵² For a discussion, see E. A. Terjesen, "Radicalism or Integration: Socialist and Liberal Parties in Norway, 1890-1914", in: Hilson / Neunsinger / Vyff (eds.), *Labour, Unions and Politics under the North Star*, 218-236. On the Norwegian co-operative movement, see E. Lange (ed.), *Organisert kjøpekraft. Forbrukersamvirkets historie i Norge*, Oslo 2006.

⁵³ Jensen, (ed.), *Brugsen – en anderledes forretning?*, 18-19.

⁵⁴ Grelle, *Det kooperative alternativ*, 148-149. See also the leader in *Kooperationen* 11 (November 1928), 136-137: "Princippet een Forening – een Stemme er misforstaaet Demokrati og virker som en skarp Kontrast til det gode kooperative Princip: een Mand – een Stemme."

⁵⁵ B. Wallén, *Enighet ger styrka: Finlands Svenska Andelsförbund 80 år*, Helsingfors 1999. Focusing on co-operative dairies in Ostrobothnia in western Finland, Ann-Catrin Östman has argued that the language issue only really became salient after independence; earlier tensions between local societies and the centre arose over differences about trading relations. See A.-C. Östman, "Valio och Enighetens tidiga historia – om smör, språk och kooperativ handel", in: *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*, 98 (2013) 1, 1-32.

management. The member meeting was viewed as a forum for communication between management and members, rather than an arena for debate.⁵⁶

This contrast was also demonstrated to the six members of President Roosevelt's Inquiry on Co-operative Enterprise in Europe, which visited co-operative organisations in Europe during the summer of 1936. In Scotland, a Glasgow co-operative society arranged for the American visitors to attend its monthly members' meeting. In their memorandum of the meeting, the Americans regretted that they were formally introduced to the meeting, fearing that this might inhibit open discussion, but they soon realized that there was no reason for such fears. The meeting engaged in a lively discussion of the Board's recent actions in hiring a general manager, with reservations expressed about the political affiliations of the successful candidate. The guests concluded that:

The democracy exhibited in the absolute freedom of expression by the membership in this meeting was striking... This demonstration of active participation of the members in determining a vital issue in this one of the thousands of local cooperative societies in Scotland served to give on an insight into the real nature of the cooperative movement in that country and to create a vision of its significance as a great and living force for democracy and for the kind of education known as 'learning to do by doing'.⁵⁷

In Sweden, by contrast, the impression created by the Inquiry documents is of a careful effort to ensure that the visitors would be impressed not so much by the vibrancy of co-operation's internal democracy but the efficiency and modernity of its business activities.⁵⁸ It is also striking the extent to which by 1936 Kooperativa Förbundet (KF) had become identified with one man, its energetic director Albin Johansson, who in a speech to the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) in 1927, argued against the dangers of too much member democracy: the management of co-operatives, he thought, was best left to experts.⁵⁹

We still need more detailed academic studies of co-operation at the local level in the Nordic countries to help us understand how co-operative societies dealt with these dilemmas in their everyday practice. How could the goal of business efficiency be reconciled with the principle of democratic control

⁵⁶ Friberg, *The Workings of Co-operation*, 471-482. Friberg also shows how the balance between members and management was not static, but changed over time.

⁵⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park (NY): President's Committee on an Inquiry on Cooperative Enterprise in Europe, Records, 1936-1937: Box 5, report on committee's visit to monthly meeting of St George Co-operative Society in Glasgow, 25 August 1936.

⁵⁸ See also M. Hilson, "Consumer Co-operation and Economic Crisis: The 1936 Roosevelt Inquiry on Co-operative Enterprise and the Emergence of the Nordic 'Middle Way'", in: *Contemporary European History*, 22 (2013) 2, 181-198.

⁵⁹ A. Johansson, *Aktuella kooperativa problem*, lecture presented to ICA congress 1927, Stockholm 1927. In their comparative history of European co-operatives, Johann Brazda and Robert Schediwy described Johansson as the "epitome of the highly motivated, idealistic, innovative co-operative *autocrat* [emphasis added]," who rose to prominence in European consumer co-operative organisations after the First World War with an emphasis on business rationalization rather than internal democracy: J. Brazda / R. Schediwy, "Consumer Co-operatives on the Defensive: A Short Overview", in: J. Brazda / R. Schediwy (eds.), *A Time of Crises: Consumer Co-operatives and Their Problems around 1990*, Vienna 2011, 13-42, 18. Available at:

https://genos.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/genossenschaftswesen/Genos/consum.pdf; accessed 15 January 2018.

on the basis of one member one vote? Was it possible – or even desirable – for member meetings to question the appointment of managers, as they did in Glasgow in the example cited above?

4. Co-operatives as schools for democracy

Despite the challenges of democratic self-governance, the popular movements have often been regarded as fostering a democratic spirit among their members. Writing of Norway after the Second World War, Sverre Steen suggested that ‘intense organizational activity [in the popular movements] has contributed directly to the growth of the democratic spirit, by providing training in self-government, loyalty, objectivity and co-operation’.⁶⁰ Such perceptions continue to sit deeply today.⁶¹ Popular movements functioned as ‘schools for democracy’, informally through their stimulation of active participation in democratic practices, and more formally through their provision of educational opportunities for their members. At the same time, the popular movements themselves were also perceived to be the beneficiaries of a well-developed education system. Pondering why the ‘intensely individualistic’ Norwegian people had embraced ‘the spirit of cooperation’ so successfully, the American O B Grimley, writing in 1937, concluded that the answer was, ‘education, education and again education’. Education implied more than schools, however; it included adult education, folk high schools and study circles: ‘[i]n other words education, which develops the power to think and to decide freely and independently for himself and herself – the corner stone of democracy everywhere.’⁶²

Studying the educational provisions of the labour movement in Sweden and elsewhere, Jenny Jansson made a distinction between two concepts of education. Popular movements offered their members practical education or training for the development of specific skills (*utbildning*), but they were particularly concerned with the broader, more idealistic concept of enlightenment (*upplysning*).⁶³ The latter could be associated with identity formation – for example class formation or nation building – but in this sense education was also perceived to have a direct role in preparing citizens for their democratic responsibilities, especially in an era of expanding suffrage.⁶⁴ According to Jansson this idea was central to the vision of the founder of the Swedish Workers’ Education Union ABF, Oscar Olsson, who insisted

⁶⁰ S. Steen, “The Democratic Spirit in Norway”, in: J. A. Lauwerys (ed.), *Scandinavian Democracy: Development of Democratic Thought and Institutions in Denmark, Norway and Sweden*, Copenhagen 1958, 139-149, 144.

⁶¹ For example: T. Hussein, “Foreningsdanmark er meget bedre til integration end alverdens integrationsprojekter”, *Politiken*, 3 September 2015.

⁶² O. B. Grimley, *The New Norway: A People with the Spirit of Co-operation*, Oslo 1939, 156. See also N. Kayser Nielsen / J. Bale, “Associations and Democracy: Sport and Popular Mobilization in Nordic Societies c. 1850-1900”, in: *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 37 (2012) 1, 69-86, 76; R. Ambjörnsson, “The Conscientious Worker: Ideas and Ideals in a Swedish Working-Class Culture”, in: *History of European Ideas*, 10 (1989), 59-67, 64.

⁶³ J. Jansson, “Från individ till människa – bildning och arbetarrörelsen”, in: *Arbetshistoria* 153-4 (2015) 1-2, 6-13. See also J. Jansson, “Class Formation in Sweden and Britain: Educating Workers”, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 90 (2016), 52-69, 54; Stenius, “Nordic Associational Life”, 45-46.

⁶⁴ On the importance of study circles, libraries and active reading in the development of the thinking, autonomous individual citizen, see R. Ambjörnsson, *Den skötsamme arbetaren. Idéer och ideal i ett norrländskt sågverkssamhälle 1880-1930*, Stockholm 1998; first published 1988; on the connection between these activities and national identity in Sweden, see S. Edquist, *Nyktra svenskar. Godtemplarrörelsen och den nationella identiteten 1879-1918*, Uppsala 2001.

that the workers' study circles should be voluntary, free of state control, democratic and non-hierarchical.⁶⁵ These ideals have in turn been attributed to the influence of pietism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with its emphasis on the individual's own responsibility for salvation through reading and reflection that was carried over into secular popular movements.⁶⁶

Jansson's distinction between *utbildning* and *upplysning* may also be useful in understanding the educational aspirations of the co-operative movement. Recognition of the importance of education was central to the movement's self-understanding, epitomized in the Rochdale rule stipulating the allocation of two and a half percent of the trading surplus to educational activities.⁶⁷ As they expanded their business activities, co-operative societies also began to provide educational services for their members, often in connection with other efforts to develop working-class education.⁶⁸ Co-operative education was a broad field however, and encompassed at least three types of activities.⁶⁹ Firstly, as co-operative business grew it became increasingly necessary to allocate resources for the specialist and technical training of co-operative managers and officials. Secondly, for many of its members co-operative societies offered a means to overcome the deficiencies of the state education system and to seek self-improvement through formal education in a range of practical and academic subjects. Thirdly, co-operative education was to serve the more idealistic aim of creating co-operators and was thus concerned with more general *upplysning* or 'enlightenment', to use Jansson's term.

In his book about the Thisted consumers' co-operative society, Pastor Sonne wrote that the immediate business of purchasing and distributing goods was not an end in itself, but a means to raising the condition of the lower classes morally, intellectually and socially and giving them a sense of their self-worth.⁷⁰ According to the Thisted rules a proportion of the surplus – 2½ percent, in line with the Rochdale rules – was to be saved each month for 'spiritual purposes' (*aandelige Øiemed*). As soon as funds allowed a space should be established where members could hold meetings and attend lectures, and there was also an aspiration to establish a reading room and library. The founder of FDB Severin Jørgensen argued for the educational value of co-operation in a 1912 lecture, reported in the International Co-operative Alliance's journal *International Co-operative Bulletin*. '[Co-operation] shows the people how to govern themselves and how to help themselves...' he told his audience. 'Co-operation is therefore a preparatory school for developing active interest in the affairs of the whole country, of the

⁶⁵ Jansson, "Från individ till människa", 6.

⁶⁶ Ambjörnsson, *Den skötsamme arbetaren*; Kayser Nielsen, *Bonde, stat og hjem*; on pietism see 57-8.

⁶⁷ N. Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914-1960: Minding Their Own Business*, Farnham 2010, 101ff.

⁶⁸ T. Woodin, "Co-operative Education in Britain during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: Context, Identity and Learning", in: A. Webster et al. (eds.), *The Hidden Alternative: Co-operative Values, Past, Present and Future*, Manchester 2011, 78-95; A. J. H. Jackson, "The Co-operative Movement and the Education of Working Men and Women: Provision by a Local Society in Lincoln, England, 1861-1914", in: *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 90 (2016), 28-51; Hilson, *The International Co-operative Alliance*, 41-42.

⁶⁹ Woodin, "Co-operative Education"; Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement*, ch. 5.

⁷⁰ "den i borgerlig Henseende lavere stilled, afhængige og trykkede Deel af Befolkningen til et høiere sædeligt, intellektuelt og socialt Trin og derved til en hæderligere Plads i Samfundet." Sonne, *Om Arbejderforeninger*, 6.

community and of the State.⁷¹ Moreover, co-operation would also help to bring people together and to break down the divisions of class and nationality.

Jørgensen's portrayal of co-operation as a 'school for democracy' was echoed in US author Frederic C Howe's account of the Danish co-operative movement, first published in 1921. Howe wrote that:

Denmark seems to me to be quite the most valuable political exhibit in the modern world... Through the thousands of co-operative societies the economic life of the people moves, just as their political life moves through the political state. And the men who have been trained in the co-operative movement are the men who have risen to political power. This co-operative movement of the farmers has ended the duality that prevails in other countries. It has put an end to the artificiality of a political state governed by lawyers, landowners or a privileged class, and an economic state separate and detached from the political state. In Denmark men work and govern as a single undertaking. The economic and political state are merged.⁷²

Such views were not held universally. The impression of a Danish participant in the ICA's international co-operative summer school, held in Manchester in 1926, was that Danish co-operators had much to learn from their English counterparts in the provision of co-operative education activities.⁷³ The authors of a textbook on Danish co-operation first published by Andelsudvalget in 1929 played down the movement's commitment to educational activities, arguing instead that this was provided by the folk high schools.⁷⁴ Writing specifically about the consumer co-operatives, L. A. Godsk suggested that educational provisions were confined mostly to technical training, rather than the broader ideals of Sonne's original vision.⁷⁵ The co-operative editor and author A. Axelsen Drejer, writing in *Review of International Co-operation*, portrayed Danish co-operation as strongly practical and less concerned with idealistic aims than some of its foreign counterparts. It owed its success, he argued, partly to the democratic, independent attitudes of the Danish farmers who formed the main body of membership. In other words, co-operation was a beneficiary of a culture forged through the folk high school movement and the general education system, rather than its creator.⁷⁶ This interpretation was supported in an account of Danish co-operation by the Swedish co-operative author Anders Hedberg, who wrote that the folk high schools 'have imparted to the Danish peasant a self-confidence and general culture which is perhaps not equalled in any corresponding class of the community in any other country.'⁷⁷ Several of

⁷¹ S. Jørgensen, "The Importance of Co-operation in the Interests of National Welfare and National Education", *International Co-operative Bulletin* July 1912, 185-189.

⁷² F. C. Howe, *Denmark: A Co-operative Commonwealth*, New York 1921, iii, vii.

⁷³ M. Jensen, "Den internationale co-operative Sommerskole i Manchester 1926", in: *Andelsbladet* 35 (27 August 1926), 971-973.

⁷⁴ Arnfred, "Dansk Andelsbevægelse", 23-24. A. Axelsen Drejer, "The Danish Co-operative Movement Today", in: *Review of International Co-operation* August 1937, 311-314, noted the increasing interest in educational activities such as publications, the co-operative school, and study circles.

⁷⁵ L. A. Godsk, "Brugsforeningerne", in: Axelsen Drejer, *Den danske Andelsbevægelse*, 88.

⁷⁶ A. Axelsen Drejer, "The Co-operative Movement in Denmark: Its Position, Importance and Spirit", in: *Review of International Co-operation* March 1935, 81-85.

⁷⁷ A. Hedberg, "Farmers' Co-operation in Denmark", in: *Review of International Co-operation* February 1930, 53-56.

these authors noted however that the co-operative interest in education was growing during the 1920s and especially the 1930s, demonstrated for example at the national co-operative rallies (Andelsstævne) held from 1926 and by the decision to establish an education committee within FDB.⁷⁸

In Sweden, the consumer co-operative federation KF also included a provision to allocate 2½ percent of the trading surplus for educational purposes in its model rules, adopted in 1908.⁷⁹ In his study of KF's educational visions, however, Peder Aléx suggests that significant efforts to develop these activities emerged only after 1918. A leading figure here was the KF editor Axel Gjöres, who took inspiration from a visit to English consumer co-operatives in 1919 to stimulate the development of educational committees, courses and social activities in local co-operative societies.⁸⁰ The co-operative movement's ambitions had to go beyond supplying the material needs of its member-customers, he argued, and should also attempt to create co-operators. This could not be achieved simply through the spread of co-operative literature, but required an investment in educational activities, including discussion groups and social meetings. In an article for the journal *Kooperatören*, Gjöres described in detail the social activities provided by English co-operative societies, including concerts, dances and whist drives, which had contributed to forging a sense of comradeship and 'co-operative spirit'.⁸¹

These ideas seemed to have been prevalent among the KF leadership throughout the inter-war period. In his book on co-operative ideology first published in 1926, Anders Örne was cautious about the Owenite faith in the unlimited human capacity for education and its ability to remould human character, which he regarded as impractically utopian.⁸² Education was important for the success of co-operation, however, not only in the narrow sense of the practical training needed for co-operative society employees and managers, but also in the broader sense of 'enlightenment' and the creation of co-operative citizens. Such ideas were part of the international discourse of co-operation and debated within the International Co-operative Alliance. In Sweden, Peder Aléx has shown that these aspirations came to be concerned above all with efforts to shape 'rational consumers', who would eschew credit and the false temptations of unscrupulous capitalist advertising.⁸³ As such, co-operation had a role to play in raising living standards and shaping an efficient, rational system for the manufacture and distribution of essential goods, notably through its campaigns against monopoly capitalism.⁸⁴

The contribution of co-operation to the defence of democracy was also understood to be part of this, but I would like to suggest that this understanding was mostly implicit, at least until after the crisis of democracy in the first half of the 1930s. Within the ICA co-operators engaged in difficult debates over their relations with the German co-operative movement, following Hitler's rise to power. They were instinctively opposed to Nazism, but in the uncertain situation of 1933-34 many continued to hope that

⁷⁸ Godsk, "Brugsforeningerne", 90.

⁷⁹ P. Aléx, *Den rationella konsumenten. KF som folkuppfostrare 1899-1939*, Stockholm, Stehag 1994, 73; for the operation of this at local level see Friberg, *The Workings of Co-operation*, 357ff.

⁸⁰ Aléx, *Den rationella konsumenten*, 77-82.

⁸¹ A. Gjöres, "Rörelsens andliga styrka", *Kooperatören* 7, 1 (January 1920), 1-4. He reassured readers who might think card games were incompatible with co-operation that no gambling was involved.

⁸² A. Örne, *Co-operative Ideas and Problems*, trans. J. Downie, Manchester 1926, 106-107.

⁸³ Aléx, *Den rationella konsumenten*.

⁸⁴ Hilson, *The International Co-operative Alliance*, ch. 5.

the German co-operative movement could retain its autonomy from the Nazi regime. By the summer of 1933 it was clear to most leading co-operators that this was no longer the case, and reluctantly they had to acknowledge the loss of the German co-operative movement to the ICA.⁸⁵ Writing in *Kooperatören* in 1933, Herman Stolpe noted the disquieting signs of anti-democratic tendencies in Europe, and raised the question of whether these were compatible with the democratic principles of co-operation.⁸⁶ Five years later, however, in a lecture to a Nordic co-operative course in Middelfart, he was much more assertive about the role of co-operatives in defending democracy. Co-operative members should not be passive within their societies; rather co-operation had a responsibility to educate them about their rights.⁸⁷ Stolpe's KF colleague, Albin Johansson, was characteristically forthright about the democratic responsibilities of the co-operative movement in another lecture:

Do you not think that co-operative work also schools people in political democracy, and that during these past years co-operation has helped create the conditions and lay the ground for democratic interaction among the nation's citizens? Is it an accident that co-operation is strongest in the democratic countries? Is it not the case... that through co-operation we learn the things that are required of the democrat? I think that members are schooled through work in the movement.⁸⁸

5. Conclusion

The commitment to democratic principles was deeply embedded in the co-operative movement from the beginning, at least as far as formal arrangements for internal governance were concerned. Such commitments were not an especially Nordic characteristic, but were found in the rules of co-operative societies across Europe, including both the distributive and agricultural producer wings of the movement. The democratic principle was expressed in the commitment to 'one member one vote', which in the Finnish case was even laid down in the national legislation defining co-operative societies passed in 1901.

The operation of this principle in practice was inevitably more complicated than this suggests. Björn Horgby and Christer Ericsson have pointed out that democratic governance could function very differently in different organisations. Drawing on the examples of elite sports clubs and the trade union

⁸⁵ Hilson, "A Consumers' International? The International Cooperative Alliance and Cooperative Internationalism, 1918-1939: A Nordic Perspective", in: *International Review of Social History*, 56 (2011), 203-233.

⁸⁶ H. Stolpe, "Demokratins kris", in: *Kooperatören* (1933), 378-380.

⁸⁷ Työväen arkisto, Helsinki: HNA 16 KK/OTK 1932-1940: Medlemsupplysningen inom kooperationen i Sverige. Föredrag av Herman Stolpe till Det Nordiske Kooperative Kursus i Middelfart, 29/8 – 1/9 1938.

⁸⁸ "Tror Ni inte, att arbetet inom kooperationen skolar människorna också för den politiska demokratin och att det under de år som gått genom kooperationen skapats förutsättningar och att kooperationen hjälpt till att bilda underlaget för ett demokratiskt samarbete mellan medborgarna i nationen? Är det en tillfällighet, att kooperationen är starkast i de demokratiska länderna? Kan det inte förhålla sig så som jag vill göra gällande, att i det kooperativa samarbetet lär man sig en hel del, som är nödvändigt för att vara demokrat? Jag tror, att medborgarna skolas genom arbetet i rörelsen." KF:s arkiv: Albin Johanssons arkiv: Referat av direktör Albin Johanssons föredrag på Auditorium tisdagen den 8 november 1938 i ABF:s och Konsums föreläsningkurs om 'Nordisk samhörighet'.

movement in Sweden during the twentieth century, they suggest that as the movements grew they also experienced a greater distance between members and management. Managers were increasingly likely to be paid functionaries, who used their commitment to democratic practices to legitimize their positions. Decisions were often delegated to such functionaries, leaving the way open for a relatively small group of engaged members to exercise considerable influence at the annual general meeting.⁸⁹ These findings seem to be confirmed by the example of the co-operative movement, driven also by the need for professional management to meet commercial imperatives. Moreover, the example of the co-operative movements in the Nordic countries also illustrate the difficulties of maintaining democratic governance in large national organisations. The 'one member one vote' principle became a source of conflict in Denmark and Finland, leading to splits within these organisations.

Nonetheless, from the late 1930s, and especially after the Second World War, the co-operative movement had become well established as part of the story of the successful Nordic democracies. Co-operatives – like the popular movements more generally – came to be regarded as 'schools for democracy'.⁹⁰ Through participation in democratic associations, members could learn the rules of consensual and democratic decision-making: how to express themselves, how to conduct orderly meetings and take minutes, how to hold those in positions of responsibility accountable for their actions. This perception was undoubtedly greatly influenced by the international interest which the movement attracted. In a book published by the three Scandinavian cultural institutes in 1958, K. B. Andersen wrote that, '[t]he study of basic laws and political history can give but a partial understanding of Danish democracy. Its history is primarily an account of how ordinary people were roused to an awareness of higher human values and how they learned to co-operate with and to respect their fellow men.'⁹¹ The same volume made the point even more clearly with regard to Norway:

It is obvious that the co-operative movement has played an important part in the creation of a democratic social climate in Norway and in the promotion of political and economy democracy. In fact, it may be considered to have been an essential prerequisite for the latter... [T]he democratic feature they [i.e. co-operatives] all have in common is the determination on the part of their members – whether producers or consumers – to manage their own business affairs.⁹²

Further research is needed on the day-to-day practices of local co-operative societies and the social relations between their members to determine how these democratic practices really worked. What can be noted here, however, is that this perception of the Nordic co-operatives as 'schools for democracy' is not least a retrospective interpretation of their role. There are clear parallels here with the ways in which the 1930s crisis agreements were retrospectively framed as symbolic milestones in

⁸⁹ B. Horgby / C. Ericsson, "Demokratin som praktik i fackförenings- och idrottsrörelsen", in: *Arbetshistoria* 1-2 (2017), 28-37.

⁹⁰ This point was also made by Hal Koch: see Johan Strang's contribution to this special issue.

⁹¹ K. B. Andersen, "Political and Cultural Development in Nineteenth-Century Denmark", in: Lauwerys, *Scandinavian Democracy*, 150-159, 159.

⁹² Steen, "The Democratic Spirit in Norway", 147.

the defence of democracy, as Kristina Krake has pointed out in a recent article.⁹³ The crisis of democracy in the 1930s threatened not only constitutions and national legislative assemblies; it also destroyed the democratic infrastructures of the once powerful consumer co-operative movements in countries like Austria and Germany.⁹⁴ Had the same fate befallen the Nordic countries, it is hard to imagine that the Nordic co-operative movements would have fared any better.

⁹³ Krake, "Reconsidering the Crisis Agreements". A similar point is also made by Jussi Kurunmäki in his contribution to this special issue on the retroactive construction of 'old' democracies.

⁹⁴ M. Prinz, "German Co-operatives: Rise and Fall 1850-1970", and J. Brazda et al., "The Rise and Fall of Austria's Consumer Co-operatives", in: Hilson et al. (eds.), *A Global History of Consumer Co-operation*, 243-266, 267-295.