

"Virtual" Co-operation: The Jurist's Role

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1. Introduction

This paper debates on the future of co-operative law and practice. For the last thirty five years, Professor Munkner has been the dominant figure in that sphere not only in Germany but throughout Europe and the rest of the world. His remarkable linguistic skills and great learning in comparative law are well known around the world. His work through his own Centre in Marburg, the Plunkett Foundation in the UK and with The International Labour Organisation, the United Nations and other international bodies has established laws in many jurisdictions which meet the needs of the co-operatives they serve and underpin the independence and strength of the co-operative business form and economic technique (Munkner (1974)).

Professor Munkner's commitment to liberal democracy and his vision of co-operatives as economic actors within a market economy has often been controversial (Munkner (1994)). However, his position against the subordination of co-operatives by government has been fully vindicated. Perhaps belatedly, the International Co-operative Alliance in its Manchester revision of the Co-operative Principles in 1995 added a new fourth principle of "Autonomy and Independence" ¹, acknowledging the importance of freedom from government control . The element of this principle pointing to the importance of retaining independence when capital is raised from external sources is, however, equally a "Munkner" principle. He has never been comfortable with the ideology of the "social economy" with its concept of a third sector for co-operatives and mutuals distinct from public and private sectors or with the acceptance of non-user investor members found in the co-operative law of some European jurisdictions.

However, the apparent triumph in the 1990's of both liberal democracy and global free markets, has ushered in an era of ever faster change. It seems fitting on this occasion to follow Professor Munkner's example (Munkner (1995)) and to look ahead to the adaptations which will be needed in the laws, practices, and principles of co-operatives if organisations giving priority to people over capital are to survive and develop in the "post-modern" business world of the twenty-first century.

¹"Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organisations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organisations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative independence." International Co-operative Alliance (1995)

In this short paper I examine some of the challenges and opportunities facing co-operatives, and their organisational and legal structures in the age of global markets and the information technology revolution. Only tentative conclusions can be drawn at this stage but it is important to begin a debate on the implications of these developments for the legal regulation of co-operatives. In discussing these issues, I consider the rapidly changing business environment developing in the US, Europe and other post-industrial societies; some of the major organisational theories developed in the UK and USA and their implications for the legislative framework, legal structure and defining principles of co-operatives.

2. New Organisations in a New Era of Business

"We are shifting from a world dominated by bureaucratic-mechanistic principles into an electronic universe where new organisational logics are required.[I]ntense theoretical and practical innovation is part of the transition and, given the fluid, self-organizing nature of a world dominated by electronic media, is likely to remain so." (G. Morgan (1997) pp 375-376).

The world of business and organisations faces revolutionary change. A synthesis of the major developments responsible for this can be found in the work of Geu (Geu (1998) at pages 935 to 983). Politically, the global uncertainty created by the "virtual" end of Communism and the development of a "multipolar" international political world in place of the bipolar Cold War division between the Socialist bloc and the West has hastened the development of regional alliances of nation-states such as the EU and NAFTA. These geopolitical developments undermine the nation state's position as the main unit of political decision making and legal jurisdiction. They have coincided with the emergence of electronically linked "tribes of common interest" formed by individuals and groups using email or the internet across national boundaries. Meanwhile, the shift to a global knowledge based economy has changed the skills needed in the workforce in developed countries and demands investment in life long education. It also connects with the development of a larger and more mobile but ageing population to affect labour costs. In summary, the development of an interdependent, dynamic and innovation-driven global economy with instantaneous electronic communication undermines regulation by national legal or political systems and demands change in existing business organisations. Businesses which fail to adapt to the new economic, political and social environment will suffer the competitive consequences more rapidly than would have been the case in the past.

The impact of these global developments on individual businesses has been summarised by Toffler as "a new system of wealth creation" (Toffler (1990) at 234 quoted by Geu (1998) at page 962). It operates at great velocity and so increases the monetary value of each unit of time. Adaptation to this reality

involves the development of the "virtual organisation" to respond to the demand of customers for a "virtual product" which will adapt in real time to the customer's changing needs (Geu (1998) pp 963-977). Thus, the organisation "is a network not an office" (Handy (1996) at 212 quoted in Geu (1998) at 964) and as Geu summarises Davidow and Malone (1992) on the virtual organisation (Geu (1998) p964 fn 185):

"To the outside observer it will appear almost edgeless, with permeable and continuously changing interfaces between company, supplier and customers. From inside the firm the view will be no less amorphous, with traditional offices, departments and operating divisions constantly reforming according to need. Job responsibilities will regularly shift, as will lines of authority - even the very definition of employee will change as some customers and suppliers begin to spend more time in the company than will some of the firm's own workers."

While this organisational structure is still most commonly found in consultancies and other project orientated firms in high tech or fast moving industries (Morgan (1997) p52), this limitation is unlikely to last as competitive pressures and the remorseless speed of technological innovation transform the whole range of economic activities. Morgan ((1997) at pages 81-82) furnishes the hypothetical example of a manufacturing organisation based in New York City which co-ordinates the assembly in Taiwan of parts made throughout Asia delivered to customers throughout North America and Europe by independent distributors, with a customer help line served by representatives employed in Ireland and accounting support from the Far East. Only research and development, marketing, and co-ordination are carried out by the small staff in New York. Recent exponential growth in access to the internet, and its acceleration by developments in mobile telephone and broadcasting technology, will make such arrangements commonplace.

Geu ((1998) at pages 964 to 966) points to the importance of trust in such organisations where so much is done in distant places and also to the tendency to "outsource" not only raw materials, distribution functions and sales but also the workforce, employed on a "just in time" basis to minimise costs and maximise flexibility. This explains the growth of part time and casual employment and the development of employment agencies providing employees on that basis in the US and UK. However, while this may weaken the position of some of the people involved in the enterprise, for those operating as "knowledge workers" it involves increased market power.

The development of electronic technology provides an opportunity for people centred organisations such as co-operatives. If a diverse workforce breeds creativity, (Geu (1998) p981) open membership as a principle of inclusiveness is a virtue. If computerised coaching reduces worker dependence on management

for training, the commitment of co-operatives to education will fortify them as successful competitors in the new economy. However, bureaucratic-mechanistic management systems which use electronic monitoring on the workforce will discourage independence and so stifle creativity. This will prevent the development or recruitment of the "self actualised" people who can manage change, for example, by forming temporary, focused project teams and jumping quickly into new ventures (Geu (1998) pages 925 to 926). Thus the organisational principles which enterprises use take on central significance in the new business context.

Writers on organisational theory have developed a number of metaphors to describe and analyse organisations. In the latter part of the twentieth century, those ideas moved away from the mechanistic, "scientific", ideas of classical management theory towards concepts based on organisms, brains, networks and even chaos or flux. This has led to an emphasis on flexibility and reaction to events in a changing environment rather than a rational and bureaucratic structure with clear lines of command and well defined roles. The "scientific" principles of Taylor who saw management clearly defining functions and roles and employees carrying out defined tasks to implement management policy or decisions has given way to concepts of teams, the devolution of responsibility and the empowerment of employees at all levels (see the works discussed in Morgan (1997) at pages 379 to 426).

The tasks carried out by the organisation will affect the necessary approach and different aspects of the organisation's work may require different organisational styles. Using Morgan's metaphors, the machine, the organism, the brain or electronic network, and issues about organisational culture and the adjustment of competing interests all have to be considered in trying to adapt co-operatives to enable them to thrive in the environment of flux and transformation now common (Morgan (1997) pages 347 to 373). If this can be achieved, co-operatives could have an important role in challenging the problems of domination and exploitation seen by many in the continued growth of multinational corporations and their relations both with the post industrial societies of the North and the developing countries of the South. The last point indicates that it is particularly important for the laws of developing countries to avoid the rigidity and inflexibility which will prevent growth and innovation by co-operatives or other user controlled businesses to challenge established multinationals (Munkner (1979) & (1993)).

3. Lessons for Co-operative Structures

Ironically, many co-operatives have used the most traditional "Taylorist" or mechanistic and bureaucratic management structures. While the co-operative principles of democratic control, the central role of people rather than capital and

openness to new members may have applied to the legal structure of the business, its internal organisation has often been firmly hierarchical and inflexible. The major exception to this tendency was the wave of worker co-operatives established from the 1960's and 1970's onwards in which experiments in the rotation of tasks and decision making by consensus or on a collective basis were developed.

To compete successfully in the new world of globalisation and electronic communication flexible, loosely structured, creative teams are needed and trust has to be developed between the organisation and those with whom it deals. The application within the organisation's culture and management structure and in its dealings with all its stakeholders of co-operative values of "self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity" as well as "the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others" (ICA (1995)) becomes a necessary condition for commercial success and survival rather than an idealistic aspiration. It is in this way that those working in or with the organisation can be adaptable and flexible while engendering the trust necessary for effective participation in the global economy. Co-operatives will thrive by applying these values and not by seeing co-operative ideals as a luxury paid for by the surplus generated from non-co-operative business practices. How does the urgency of adaptability relate to the defining principles of co-operatives and the law which provides their structure and framework?

4 Lessons for and from Co-operative Principles and Law

The International Co-operative Alliance Principles refined in 1995 at Manchester provide the most commonly accepted definition and description of co-operatives for legal and other purposes (ICA (1995)). It is now time to analyse the implications of the new business context for those principles and for the legal framework within which they apply.

Open and Voluntary Membership

"Open" membership takes on a new significance in the electronic age. Why should members be drawn from a limited geographical area within one country or one part of the shrinking globe? In consumer, financial or marketing co-operatives contractual relationships need not be so confined and, with fluidity in the nature of work and the structure of the labour market, the same question applies to workers' co-operatives. Can such organisations not have a virtual membership spread around the world? Is face to face contact necessary for co-operation? The desirability of diversity as a means of encouraging adaptability and flexibility in organisations provides a justification for being open to the widest possible range of members in co-operatives of all kinds on a basis of non-discrimination on racial, religious, gender, political or other arbitrary grounds. The close link of this principle with those involving democratic control and

economic participation may make membership is attractive by promising all members participation in decision making and in any economic surplus generated by the organisation.

In defining a "co-operative", the law must take account of these possibilities. The rigidity implicit in having different legislation applicable to different types of co-operative could stifle innovation. If legislation applies only to workers' co-operatives or applies to them in a particular way how is a "worker" to be defined? Will the structure be available if the members are self employed suppliers of services? If it is not, is a suitable alternative co-operative structure available for those who wish to operate in that way or need to do so to survive economically? Can the members of a society registered as a consumer or marketing co-operative include those who buy or sell only through ecommerce? Can the members be domiciled in or nationals of another jurisdiction? Co-operative Law must tackle these issues flexibly while still maintaining a workable definition of a co-operative.

Democratic Control by Co-operative Members

The possibility of devolved decisions quickly taken by small groups must be reconciled with the principle of democratic control by the members. The role of those members might be facilitated by allowing electronic voting and discussion rather than insisting on face to face meetings. Innovative and flexible rules on these issues would fit the needs of the potential global membership base and the availability of fast electronic communication.

A legal system with rigid and closely defined legislation governing voting methods, the nature and calling of meetings, and definitions of the majorities required for particular decisions, may prevent the use of established legal structures in the new environment. This will hold back the exciting possibilities now available for co-operative development and may lead co-operators to use their own bespoke contractual arrangements, non-co-operative business structures or jurisdictions with more flexible legal rules. Legislation has to balance the importance of flexibility and choice against the policy of ensuring that those organisations recognised legally as co-operatives do practice democratic control by the members.

Member Economic Participation

Issues of economic participation are particularly problematic once national boundaries are crossed. A nightmare of complexity or a buccaneering opportunity to develop a new frontier (depending on one's perspective) arises from the interplay of national tax laws and national laws on business finance by way of loan and share capital on a transnational workers', marketing, consumer, or financial co-operative. The new global electronic world allows for the easy

payment of dividend (or patronage refund) to members or the receipt of capital contributions from them across national boundaries. The legal consequences are harder to fathom. However, legislators must tackle such questions if co-operatives are not to be left behind. Varied national accounting rules create problems of transparency and communication between members in different countries. Different rules on the creation and maintenance of reserves, the definition of the surplus available for distribution, the circumstances in which members may be entitled to a patronage refund, and the nature of the share and loan capital of the society will all frustrate co-operative development and the seizure of global opportunities.

Autonomy and Independence

The principle of autonomy and independence is particularly apt in the post-modern business world. To be an arm of the state may well be the kiss of death to a co-operative which needs to operate in the electronic global market place. Such a status is likely to impose bureaucratic and mechanistic structures which fatally inhibit imagination and delay decision making. However, control by investors who are not users may undermine the fundamental feature of the co-operative as a user controlled organisation.

This principle underlines the significance of the concept of legal personality and raises the question of where that personality has its domicile. Is it in the jurisdiction of registration or the jurisdiction where the organisation has its "central management"? Is the concept of "central management" itself obsolete? The global electronic economy makes it easy to be registered wherever one chooses and trade elsewhere. Legislators and the negotiators of International Conventions have much catching up to do. This problem has proved impossible for the European Union to resolve for companies or co-operatives despite its high level of economic integration and sophisticated legal system (Drury (1999)). However, if regulation of business organisations by national or European Union law is not to become wholly irrelevant it is an issue which must be tackled.

Education and Training

The principle of training, education and information has never had greater relevance. If there is one feature of the fluid and flexible, perhaps chaotic, global electronic market which is particularly clear, it is the vital importance of information and learning. This is the key resource of businesses, individuals and whole societies. It skews the playing field in favour of those with information and skills. However, capital can always buy access to information and employ people with skills. Co-operatives must both promote the co-operative business system, and ensure that their members, managers, employees and directors are well equipped to adapt and develop continually to meet the demands and constant flux of the market. Being a people centred organisation may provide a competitive

advantage in this context:

"Knowledge does not reside in a book, a databank, a software program; they contain only information. Knowledge is always embodied in a person; carried by a person; created, augmented, or improved by a person; applied by a person; taught and passed on by a person; used or misused by a person. The shift to the knowledge society therefore puts the person in the center." (Drucker (1993) at page 210 quoted in Geu (1998) at page 980).

If co-operatives are to take full advantage of the commercial opportunities offered to people centred organisations by the new importance of knowledge and information, they must be "learning organisations" with a built in process for adapting by the use of feedback about their current situation (Pedler and Aspinwall (1996)). If they are to remain co-operatives and extend the application of co-operative principles to new fields they must also promote education in the special and distinctive values which they represent. The legal regime which governs them and the rules of each society must permit and encourage expenditure on education for members, employees and other important stakeholders.

Not only is the role of education emphasised in the new business environment, autonomy and self-help in its provision and development are also essential. People cannot rely for education and training on managers and employers when there are no more jobs for life. The state is constrained by the perceived need to limit tax rates to avoid competitive disadvantage. It cannot be relied upon to provide universally all necessary facilities. Co-operatives could take the opportunity to provide education and training to those excluded from the new knowledge based economy and make a major contribution to social cohesion by the use of mutual self help.

Co-operation Among Co-operatives

This principle may enjoy a renaissance if co-operatives take full advantage of the instant global communications now available. While a consumer co-operative may have difficulty finding a worker, financial or marketing co-operative offering the right product or service at the right price within a limited geographical area, the possibility of dealing with other businesses around the world opens up more opportunities subject only to the limits imposed by transport or the need for face to face communication. Those factors may limit the possibilities for buying goods or some services but would not be important where the service or resource could itself be delivered electronically.

The secondary and tertiary organisations built by co-operatives need to adapt to the new technology. The use of electronic communication and the adaptation of

existing rules to allow for this offer possibilities for economy - why tolerate the expense of sending delegates to exotic locations when virtual meetings are possible? Why have large head offices when a few people well equipped electronically could co-ordinate outsourced services? Is there a need to have any single geographical centre for an organisation? How far does co-operation among co-operatives need to take organisational form at all? Could it develop through more fluid contractual arrangements between co-operatives?

In addition new legal and organisational forms may evolve from groups which talk to each other on the internet and through email via subscriber lists. Do they need a constitution? If primary co-operatives can have members voting, nominating, meeting and deciding issues electronically so can secondary or tertiary co-operatives and national and international co-operative organisations. Indeed, the "electronic tribes" developing through internet or email links for whom interest in a subject is more important than nationality, class, economic role or other traditional classifications may develop their own structures in a fluid and ever changing form. Temporary alliances and shifting constellations may come and go as needed to serve the interests of the member co-operatives just as primary societies may operate in this way for their own members.

Co-operatives established by co-operative or other businesses for economic purposes such as purchasing, marketing or particular joint ventures may develop electronic systems for meeting and decision making more quickly than those based on a large individual membership. The benefits of reduced costs may well be more obvious to business members with better access to the technology than to individuals.

Concern for Community

This principle which was first made explicit in 1995 clarifies the wider vision and responsibilities of co-operatives. Its reference to working for "the sustainable development of.....communities" may have a wider and more varied application as the new world of electronic communication allows people to define a co-operative's "community" by criteria of common interest without geographical limitation. The principle may be applied by developing groups or servicing causes across a wide geographical area without direct face to face contact. The objective of sustainability highlights the environmental concerns which co-operatives will wish to acknowledge in their policies and actions both locally and globally.

It is perhaps in pursuit of this principle that co-operatives will best be able to develop a role in providing a sense of belonging and face to face links. Those people who find the uncertainty, flux and breadth of the impersonal global electronic village threatening may need more intimate local geographically based communities to counterbalance globalisation. Those communities could well take a co-operative form in neighbourhoods and promote inclusion, non-

discrimination, democracy and solidarity against more dangerous xenophobic, excluding, closed or defensive "tribal" instincts. Similarly, the expression of environmental and ecological concerns at every level presents a challenge for co-operatives and for the laws governing them in terms of business operation and wider objectives. The potential tension between serving members and serving a wider community is resolved in the ICA principle by a reference to community service policies approved by co-operative members. Legal regulation and business structures must allow space for the development and application of such policies.

5. Wider Implications for Co-operative Law

The demands of the new world in which co-operatives have to operate have implications for Co-operative Law broader than those referred to in the last section.

The need for flexibility in structure and approach suggests a "contractarian" approach so that those establishing a co-operative have freedom to design their society's constitutional structure. The form and powers of the internal organs such as the unitary board of directors or supervisory and executive boards (perhaps the choice between those systems); the members' meeting; audit committees or other specialist bodies and the function of senior employees and managers should ideally be laid down by the parties forming the co-operative and be capable of change by them to meet new circumstances as the demands of the market develop and change with ever greater speed. The power to make contracts must give similar fluidity in the range of relationships and transactions which can be entered into with employees (or self employed contractors providing services), suppliers of goods, services and finance, customers, creditors, managers or executives as well as local, national or transnational governmental bodies and other co-operatives.

However, certain policy needs gravitate in the opposite direction. Where there is a special legal regime for co-operatives under which they register or which at least controls the use of the word "co-operative" in business names or advertising, only those meeting certain criteria will be able to use the legislation or description. Legislation may then limit the freedom of founders or members of co-operatives to develop flexible structures agreed among themselves. Similarly, as many writers have pointed out, even where there is no such special requirement, a key function of the law governing business operations is to provide models dealing with well established problems which can be used by businesses "off the shelf" or at least with minimal modification to reduce the transaction costs of negotiation at the stage of formation or major change and by preventing resort to litigation when problems arise, for example, as certain owners wish to leave the business or further capital is to be raised (Geu (1998) (2) pages 233 to 251). Such problems have to be dealt with if people are to be encouraged to use co-operative structures.

The cost of those structures and of any adaptation required to meet the needs of those using them must be no greater than for alternative business structures. The need for flexibility and a system open to adaptation over time by parties themselves cannot be ignored if co-operation as a business method is to survive.

This tension suggests that co-operative laws must avoid imposing unnecessary rigidity while giving some assurance that those organisations describing themselves as co-operatives have a legitimate claim to do so. This may point to a flexible system examining the reality of an organisation's co-operative nature rather than a rigid set of statutory requirements which fix the structure of every co-operative organisation - providing the cost of the "examination" process does not make the structure "uncompetitive" for those choosing between that form of organisation and others offered in the same or other jurisdictions.

There is the additional need for national laws to deal effectively with meetings and elections conducted by telephone, video conference, email, or over the internet and for national conflict of law rules to deal with the location of such meetings and the law applicable to contracts made in this way. If co-operatives are to be used among the fluid "electronic tribes" which straddle national boundaries and form and re-form from time to time, they must be able to make legally valid and enforceable decisions when their organs operate electronically.

Similarly, the need to do business world wide and the ease with which this can be achieved using the World Wide Web and email in conjunction with other electronic devices, suggests an urgent need for international harmonisation of laws governing co-operatives. It is noteworthy that the European Union despite its significant progress on the harmonisation of the company laws of member states has made no progress in this respect so far as co-operatives are concerned.

Perhaps the UK system of Co-operative Law with its purely administrative decision making process about the "co-operative" nature of a registered industrial and provident society, its open textured approach to the content of the rules of societies and its willingness to permit the use of other business structures such as unincorporated partnerships, limited partnerships, and registered companies limited by share or guarantee for co-operatives has some lessons for systems with more prescriptive legislation. It is ironic that this arises because of a failure to reform nineteenth century legislation and the absence of any significant tax advantages or state subsidies for co-operatives. The cost of this has been competitive disadvantages for industrial and provident societies as against companies due to the absence of rescue procedures for insolvent societies, problems about the legal capacity of co-operatives and their agents and uncertainties about the transparency required by applicable accounting rules.

A possible solution, at least in theory, is suggested by the application of concepts from chaos theory and complex adaptive systems theory to allow diversity

through the permitted combination of different factors within a structure offered by legislation (Geu (1998) (2) pages 233 to 251). Whether ideas such as a range or "menu" of fixed structures from which the founders of a business could choose with a further option of devising their own "freehand" arrangements if they were willing to meet the costs of doing so would work for co-operatives is open to debate.

However, in the fluid world of the virtual organisation the trust necessary to do business will thrive in a culture based on the ethical and organisational principles proclaimed by co-operatives. The role of the law is to establish the preconditions necessary for this ethos by the use of flexible but reliable legal structures, within each jurisdiction or transnationally, capable of operating globally using electronic communications. National and international policy makers, legislators, judges and lawyers have far to go to rise to this challenge. It is time that the problem was recognised. Professor Munkner's work provides a solid basis for the development of a response. The promotion of legal changes to assist co-operatives in seizing the opportunities open to them in the twenty-first century is a worthy task for Europe's foremost co-operative jurist and those he has inspired.

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