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## **Confronting three revolutions: Western European consumer co-operatives and their divergent development, 1950-2008**

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This article analyses the divergent development of Western European consumer co-operatives in the period from 1950 to 2008. It asks how some consumer co-ops throughout the post-war years manage to defend and even strengthen their market share and increase their membership while others saw both market shares and membership decline or evaporate. To analyse this question the paper offers a comparative analysis of three selected consumer co-ops; one case where consumer co-ops developed positively (Norway), one case showing consumer co-operative collapse (Germany) and one case where there has been quite substantial decline but no collapse (United Kingdom). The overall argument propounded is that the success or decline of these co-ops was intimately linked to how they confronted three parallel transformations in the post-war food retail market: the ‘supermarket revolution’, the ‘chain store revolution’ and the ‘consumer revolution’. The divergent ability to confront these challenges was related both to external and internal factors.

**Keywords:** Consumer co-operatives, retail history, self-service, supermarkets, hypermarkets, chain stores, consumer movements, co-operative ideology

### **Introduction**

By the inter-war period consumer co-operative businesses had developed to become one of the major players in the food retail market of most Western European countries,

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controlling a substantial market share and organising a considerable number of members.<sup>1</sup> As a user (consumer) owned and democratically governed business, ‘the co-op’ was firmly established as an important alternative to traditional forms of capitalist commerce. From the 1950s onwards, however, many co-ops started to stagnate and decline. In countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany and Austria, consumer co-operative retail trade disappeared more or less completely. In others, such as the UK, co-operative retail societies had to accept substantial losses of both market share and membership. In yet other countries, however, consumer co-operatives continued to thrive. Within the Nordic region, the co-op remained a dominant force within the food retail market, and co-ops also developed positively in countries such as Italy, Switzerland and Spain.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this paper is to investigate the divergent fortunes of consumer co-operative retail trade in Western Europe during the second half of the twentieth century. How did some consumer co-ops throughout the post-war period manage to defend and even strengthen their market share and increase their membership while others saw both market shares and membership decline or evaporate? To answer this question the paper provides a comparative analysis of the post WW II economic development of three Western European consumer co-ops. It investigates one case where consumer co-ops developed positively (Norway), one case showing consumer co-operative collapse (Germany) and one case where there has been quite substantial decline but no collapse (United Kingdom). With such a limited scope, the essay cannot provide a definite answer to how the divergent development of post-war consumer co-ops should be understood. As a historical comparison the aim is rather to examine the complexities of factors shaping the divergent development of the three organisations in question and on this basis present an overall interpretation of their divergent fortunes. Alongside this

specific analysis the paper develops a general framework for understanding the success or decline of consumer co-operative enterprises during the post WWII years. I argue that this framework may be applicable to the study of other consumer co-ops and clear the ground for more comprehensive comparative work.

### **Consumer co-operatives and the three revolutions of post-war food retailing**

The reasons for the divergent development of consumer co-operatives in Western Europe during the second half of the twentieth century are obviously many and complex. Within existing research most focus has been directed at understanding the decline characterising so many consumer co-ops during the post-war years. A variety of explanations have been offered in this respect.<sup>3</sup> Some have pointed to the organisational deficiencies of the federal co-operative model, and the inability of co-operative enterprises to handle the strengthened competition characterising the post-war retail market.<sup>4</sup> Others have defied such economic explanations, instead pointing to changes in the social and cultural climate in which the co-ops operated. Hence historians Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda argue that the post-war development of co-operative enterprises were not primarily shaped by 'the movement's economic weakness, but by its obligation to confront the consumerist revolution.'<sup>5</sup> Yet other have focused on reduced democratic participation, arguing that 'the decline of consumers' co-operatives in many places is a result of the failure of leaders to stimulate sufficient participation in both the business enterprise and the voluntary association side of the movement.'<sup>6</sup> The role of the political milieu and changes in political regulations has have also been highlighted in a variety of studies.<sup>7</sup>

Although all these perspectives offer valuable insight, since they have primarily been concerned with decline, they largely fail to account for the co-ops that actually have been successful. Moreover, most existing research has tended to evolve in

isolation from more general studies of retail history. As a consequence, the development of the co-op has seldom been systematically linked to more general trends within the competitive environment in which they primarily operated.

The present article seeks to respond to these shortcomings by offering a comparative analysis focusing on cases showing divergent development paths.<sup>8</sup> In addition, it directly relates the development of the consumer co-ops to ongoing transformations in their societal and competitive environment. The basic argument propounded is that the success or decline of Western European consumer co-ops during the second half of the twentieth century was intrinsically linked to how they approached three major transformations, or revolutions, in the food retail market.

The first of these transformations was the gradual replacement of the small, numerous counter serviced stores that still dominated the food retail industry in 1950, with large self-serviced supermarkets and hypermarkets; the so called 'supermarket revolution'. In 1946 practically all food stores in Western Europe were based on counter service. Most of these stores were highly specialised, selling meat, fish, fruit, bread, milk or groceries. The stores were small, numerous and located close to the consumer. By the end of the century this situation had been drastically altered. Most food was now sold on a self-service basis in stores stocking all daily household requirements. The average size of the stores had risen tremendously, while the number of shops had been drastically reduced. In addition to scale, from the 1980s and 1990s onwards major retailers increasingly sought to exploit the advantage of operating a diversified structure of stores, including small, local convenience stores and kiosks, as well as medium sized supermarkets and large, out of town and edge of town hypermarkets and superstores. The ability to confront these dramatic transformations in the operational principles of the major food retailers was fundamental in shaping the market survival of post-war

retailers. To survive in the market place, it was simply necessary to develop a structure of stores capable of exploiting the full economic potential of the self-service system. To remain among the market leaders, it was also often necessary to develop a multi-format approach and compete aggressively in many different market segments. The economic development of the co-operative movement throughout the post-war period was intrinsically linked to how these challenges were dealt with.

The second challenge consumer co-ops had to deal with was related to the growth of the large standardised, integrated and centralised retail chains; the so-called 'chain store revolution'. In 1950 independent, small-scale retailers controlled the vast majority of Western European food retail trade. These retailers would typically operate one or a few shops. They received their supplies from a complex set of middlemen and operated their stores on an autonomous, non-standardised basis. By the turn of the millennium this organisational structure had been fundamentally transformed. Large standardised, integrated and centralised firms had mostly replaced the independent retailers. The retail chains held several hundred branches under centralised control and operated them on a standardised basis. Stores operated by a chain would be marketed under the same brand, hold a similar assortment, and operate according to standardised procedures. The enterprises comprised both retail and wholesale functions and supplies were obtained through an integrated system of distribution. Buying was made the responsibility of the chain headquarters, negotiating on behalf of all the stores operated by the chain. The flow of goods was increasingly controlled through the development of retailer owned warehouses, regional distribution centres and technologically advanced logistics systems.<sup>9</sup>

The basic organisational principles of the chain store – centralisation of control, standardisation of operational procedures and integration of the distribution function –

lay the foundation for huge cost savings with subsequent possibilities for reduced prices. The chains managed to handle huge volumes of trade at reduced costs, making way for dramatically increased efficiency and productivity of operations. In effect, the rise of this alternative, large scale form of retail organisation posed serious threats to the consumer co-operative way of doing business.

The third and final challenge facing the consumer co-ops was related to the rise of the affluent, individualised consumer; the so-called 'consumer revolution'. In their initial form the co-ops had sought to offer their members three parallel advantages: the political advantage of being a member of a consumer organisation, the advantage of self-governance and the economic advantage of being eligible for a share of the profits produced in the enterprise. During the post-war period all these initial advantages of consumer co-operation were increasingly scrutinised and questioned. New consumer movements established during the immediate post-war years refused to accept that the co-op could effectively fulfil its role as a true consumer movement. The democratic governance structure of the co-operative enterprise was also gradually losing its legitimacy among the general consumer, as local autonomy and democratic control by lay members gradually had to be replaced by standardisation across society structures, integrated operations and centralised governance. Finally, as dividend levels sank, competition intensified and standards of living rose, it was no longer obvious that the co-op offered economic rewards that could not be equally be offered by other retailers. A fundamental post-war challenge for co-operative enterprises wanting to survive and expand in the second half of the twentieth century became, therefore, to convince existing and possible future members of the continued relevance of the co-operative alternative. The ideological basis on which the movement rested had to be rephrased and adapted to the new competitive and societal environment.

The success or decline of consumer co-operative enterprises during the post-WWII years rested on their ability to confront the operational, organisational and ideological challenges facing them. They had to develop their store formats to deal with the growth of supermarket and hypermarket retailing. They had to develop their system of distribution in order to secure the level of efficiency obtained by the multiple retailers. Finally, they had to successfully re-evaluate and re-state their ideological profile in order to remain an attractive provider of retail services among increasingly affluent post-war consumers. Co-ops that managed to make all these three changes were generally more successful.<sup>10</sup>

The subsequent section expands on this argument by providing a brief analysis of the experiences of three western European consumer co-operatives during the post WW II years, focusing on how they handled the three revolutionary changes in the post-war food retailing market. It shows how the transformations were handled unequally by the different national consumer co-ops, and discusses possible reasons for the divergent approaches and how this may have affected their survival.

### **The divergent development of Western European consumer co-operatives**

The divergent development of post-war consumer co-operatives is well illustrated by the examples of Germany, the United Kingdom and Norway. Figure 1 shows the development of the shares held by the consumer co-op in these countries' food retail market in the period from 1950 to 2008, while figure 2 shows the development in membership figures during the same period.

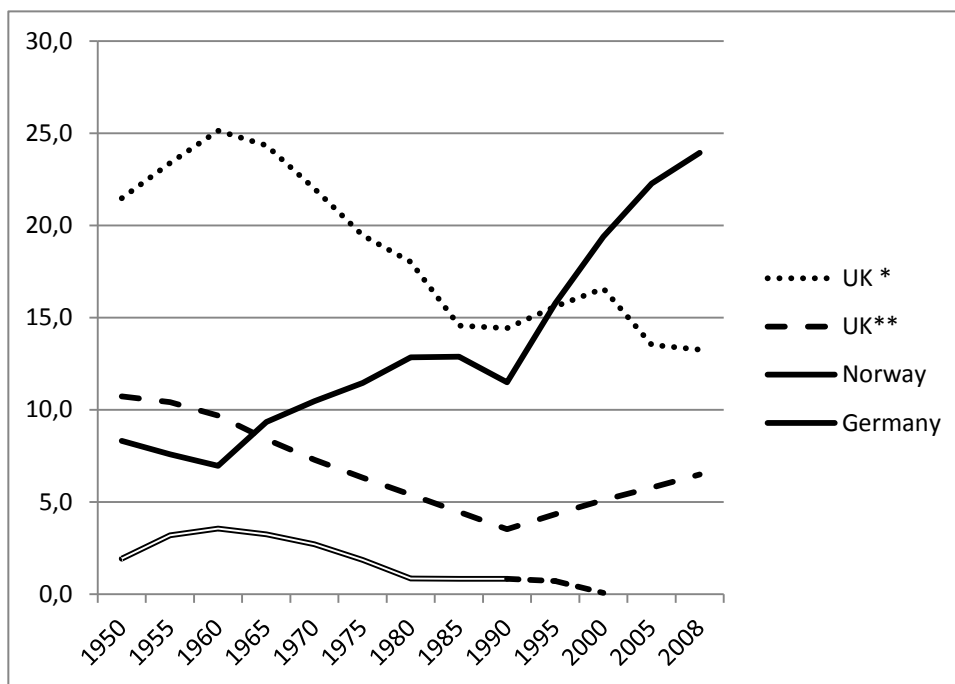
Figure 1: Consumer co-operative market shares (food retailing), 1950-2008.<sup>11</sup>





Notes: Figures have been compiled from a variety of sources and should be interpreted with care: Brazda, 'The Consumer Co-operatives in Germany'; EuroCoop, Consumer Co-operatives – Statistical Review 31.12.1988; Ekberg, 'Consumer Co-operatives'; Coop NKL, Annual Report, various years; Sparks, 'Consumer Co-operation in the United Kingdom'; Co-operatives UK, Performance and Statistical Review. Where a solid line becomes dashed it indicates that the figures are based on estimates.

Figure 2: Consumer co-operative membership as share of population, 1950-2008<sup>12</sup>



Notes: Figures have been compiled from a variety of sources and should be interpreted with care: Brazda, 'The Consumer Co-operatives in Germany'; NKL, Våre Tall 1907–2005; Coop NKL, Annual Report 2008; the Co-operative Union, Co-operative Statistics, various years; Co-operatives Europe, European Co-operatives 2009. The population data are taken from Heston et al., 'Penn World Table Version 7.0'. \*Official figures/\*\*Estimated figures.

As the figures show, during the period covered the German movement was almost totally eradicated. After a brief surge in market shares during the 1950s, further expansion halted. In the mid 1980s more or less the entire national movement, which by that point had merged to form one integrated, national enterprise, collapsed in a scandalous bankruptcy, and only a few remaining large regional societies, as well as some minor retail co-ops which had stayed out of the merger, continued to operate throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In the UK, the overall pattern is also one of decline, but here recent years have seen a revival of consumer co-operative trade, and the membership figures also seem to be on an upward trend. As regards membership, two different figures are reported, since the official figures are most certainly overestimates.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the Norwegian experience provides a definitive contrast to both the declining German and the declining, but later reviving, British movement. The

Norwegians experienced stable and in some periods expanding market share, and a strong increase in membership, especially from the 1990s onwards. The question remains, then, how this divergent development pattern can be explained? The following three sub-sections provide further detail.

### ***Failed adaptation: the German case***

Despite being dissolved by the Nazi government during the war, consumer co-operative trade in Germany quickly regained the market position it had held before the war.

Between 1948 and 1954 the movement tripled its membership while its share of the retail market doubled. From then on, however, gradual decline became the overall trend.

While multiple stores and co-ops held approximately the same share of the grocery retail market in 1950, fifteen years later the share held by the multiples was more than twice as large as that of the co-ops. By this point, the economic problems of the German co-operative movement were legion. The majority of retail co-ops, as well as the federal wholesaler GEG, were increasingly running huge losses. In addition, they had amassed huge amounts of debt.<sup>14</sup> From the 1970s onwards, therefore, a major merger process came under way whereby all willing retail societies and their national federals merged into one national, fully integrated enterprise. The company, eventually named Co-op AG, was organised as a limited liability company, which basically implied that the large majority of German consumer co-operative trade was demutualised. The company continued to trade under the Co-op name, however, and for a short period, the merger seemed to have been a success, with market shares increasing again throughout the early eighties. But the growth, it turned out, was based on fraudulent behaviour and in 1989 the entire structure collapsed in a scandalous bankruptcy, leaving the large majority of German consumer co-operative trade in ruins.

The immediate causes of the collapse of the German movement were in large part related to managerial failures. As co-operative historian Johann Brazda concluded, the movement was in the end 'ruined by managers who cared much less about the well being of their company and its employees than about their own fortunes.'<sup>15</sup> The very establishment of the Co-op AG in the first place had, however, been preceded by a continued weakening in market shares, profitability and membership. This weakening in turn, was caused by a series of strategic failures in meeting with the supermarket revolution, the chain store revolution and the consumer revolution.

As in most Western European countries, German co-operators were quick to launch self- service stores. In 1949 the co-operative society *Produktion* opened Germany's first self-service store. A year later half of the country's thirty-nine self-service stores were operated by co-ops. But soon, however, the co-operators fell behind. In 1960, more than twenty-two thousand self service stores were in operation, but only 9 per cent were operated by co-ops.<sup>16</sup> Along similar lines, the co-ops fell behind in transferring trade to larger supermarkets and hypermarkets. Between 1960 and 1974 co-operative sale space increased by 350 per cent while it increased by more than 800 per cent in retailing as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

Partly, this development seems to have resulted from a deliberate strategy within the co-op movement not to embrace the self-service concept but to develop an alternative system of 'rapid service'. As historian Michael Prinz has shown, German co-operators were initially reluctant to accept the ongoing transfer to self-service, arguing that 'co-operative ideals [...] could not be realized in the context of anonymous structures where only the goods speak to the customer.' In effect, a necessary modernisation of the structure of stores was hindered by the perceived 'ethical foundation of consumer co-ops'.<sup>18</sup> But capital shortages also played their part.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s paid up share capital dwindled alongside the decline in membership. By 1969 the share of total capital accounted for by member's paid up shares was half the level it had been nine years earlier. Increasingly, investments had to be financed by borrowed capital, in turn increasing the total debt burden of the movement.<sup>19</sup>

Failure to organise the movement efficiently was clearly also a hindrance to growth. As in the UK, the German movement consisted of two overriding, national federal associations; the wholesale society GEG (*Grosseinkaufs -Gesellschaft*) and the political/ideological common association *Zentralverband Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften*. Coordination between these federal organizations remained, however, weak. Rather, as noted by Brazda, by the end of the 1950s the two organizations held 'essentially different views on key business principles, as well as on such important questions as supply facilities for the consumer co-operatives, [...] the logistics of moving goods to the consumer co-operative shops, and the policy of amalgamation'.<sup>20</sup> The relationship between the GEG and the retail societies was also gradually weakened, during a period in which it, if following the recipe of integration and standardization adopted by the chain stores, should have been strengthened. Instead of standardising purchases and integrating the distribution function on a national scale, the increasingly large regional retail societies tended to develop their own warehousing and buying procedures. Between 1955 and 1967, the share of GEG sales going to the retail societies declined by 11 percent.<sup>21</sup>

In terms of dealing with the consumer revolution, the Germans also seem to have had limited success. As figure 2 showed, from the early 1950s a downward trend in membership growth rates was evident, and by 1962 the number of members actually started to decline. A probable reason was the loss of a clear link between class

affiliation and consumer habits.<sup>22</sup> The traditionally strong links between the German labour movement and the co-ops became a drawback rather than an asset for attracting new members. In an attempt to reverse the decline, many societies chose to abandon the traditional dividend and instead offer rebates, in line with the practices of the retail chains. This, however meant abandoning the fundamental co-operative principle of profit sharing. This does not seem to have been a successful strategy. On the one hand it prevented the co-ops from attracting consumers supportive of the quite radical co-operative idea of profit sharing. At the same time, as long as the service and the rebates offered by the co-ops remained inferior to those offered by the retail chains, the strategy was unable to attract consumers with a strictly economic approach to consumption.

Taken together, the decline of the German consumer co-operative movement resulted from a general inability to handle the challenges represented by the supermarket revolution, the chain store revolution and the consumer revolution. For large parts of the second half of the twentieth century the story of the consumer co-operative movement in Great Britain showed much of the same features. The British movement never collapsed, however, and after the turn of the millennium it has in fact expanded. The story of the British movement, therefore, can be analysed as a delayed adaptation to the three revolutions of the post-war food retailing market.

***Delayed adaptation: The British case.***

In the late 1950s, British consumer co-operation was in its heyday.<sup>23</sup> The movement controlled one fifth of the entire British food retail market and held an official membership of thirteen million, representing close to half of all British households.<sup>24</sup> Forty years later the market share had decline to a fourth of its peak level, while the real membership figures probably were down to less than 2 million or approximately 8 per cent of all households.<sup>25</sup>

Interpreting this process of decline it is evident that also the British co-ops found it difficult to adapt efficiently to the major post-war transformations of the retailing market. Similar to the Germans, also the British co-ops had taken the lead in introducing self-service stores, opening the country's first self serviced food retail store at Romford in 1942.<sup>26</sup> But soon, private retailers overtook the co-ops. In 1960, the majority of self-service stores in the UK were no longer run by co-operatives. Even more problematic was the fact that the co-operative's share of the growing supermarket segment was even lower.<sup>27</sup>

This pattern can be related to managerial, ideological and financial factors. British co-operators were keen to establish self-service stores. But unlike their private competitors, they clearly underestimated the needs to refurbish the stores adequately. According to a 1954 analysis in the co-operative journal *Agenda*, the early co-operative store conversions had been 'carried out at the minimum of expense' and 'run with a considerable measure of disregard of generally accepted principles'<sup>28</sup>

As in Germany, a noticeable resentment also seems to have existed among many co-operators towards the actual advantages of the large, self-serviced retail format. Several of the representatives taking to the podium at the 1961 Co-operative Congress in Scarborough, spoke explicitly against a fast transfer to supermarkets, warning about what they saw as an 'epidemic of supermarket hypnosis.'<sup>29</sup> One consequence of such resentments was that, as late as in 1968, less than a quarter of all societies were actually operating supermarkets. And of the stores that were in operation, 'a number [...] [operated] below normal standards of commercial success.'<sup>30</sup>

Financial constraints also played their part. Many small societies struggled to find the necessary capital to finance expansions into supermarket retailing. Continuous erosion of sales and weak profitability severely hampered their financial situation.

Negative publicity and increased competition for savings also caused members to withdraw their deposits. Hence, in the period from 1945 to 1985 share capital in the UK movement declined by 95 per cent in real terms.<sup>31</sup>

Parallel to this, increasingly large multiple retailers such as Sainsbury, Tesco, Victor Value and Finefare were on the advance, opening completely new build, large and sophisticated supermarkets and hypermarkets.<sup>32</sup> The fierce competitive climate created by the advance of these retailers further hampered the growth potential of co-operative trade. A major reason for the advance of the multiples was, of course the superior organisational efficiency created by their centralised, integrated and standardised structure. The competitiveness of this organisational model had been well known to co-operators at least since the early 1950s. But their ability to reform their own organisational structure along the lines of the retail chains was for a long time only partially successful.

By 1950, the UK co-op movement was still highly fragmented, with more than 1000 independent retail co-ops still in operation. Fifty years later, the number of retail societies had been reduced to 47. Of these, one retail society – the Co-operative Retail Service (CRS) – controlled about a quarter of the total retail trade, while another quarter was controlled by the national wholesale society CWS, which from the 1970s onwards had started to develop its own retail branch. Hence, centralisation of trade had been substantial. In terms of integration and standardisation, however, the movement had been less successful. The buying policies of the different societies remained highly uncoordinated throughout the period. Similar to the German experience, many retail co-ops resented the idea of handing over governance of their supplies to the national wholesale society. Indeed, as the retail societies were getting steadily larger due to the ongoing process of amalgamations, they increasingly chose to integrate backwards,



opening their own warehouses and strengthening their own buying function. They also established loosely organised regional buying groups, seeking better terms by way of voluntary co-operation. National standardisation also largely failed, for many of the same reasons. The increasingly large retail societies created by the drive to centralisation continued to operate, brand and market their stores separately and standardisation of the co-operative outlets remained negligible. Some progress was made in the early 1990s when the CWS together with three other retail societies formed the Co-operative Retail Trading Group (CRTG) as a joint buying organisation for the member societies. But, only a year later a group of regional societies established a separate buying group, the Consortium of Independent Co-operatives (CIC) – an illustrative testament of the persistent inability to effectively standardise and integrate co-operative trade at a national level.<sup>33</sup>

Turning to the relationship between the British co-op and British consumers, it is evident that also this challenge became difficult to handle. The membership figures presented in figure 2 clearly indicate how British co-operators largely failed to adapt themselves to the needs and aspirations of post-war affluent consumers. As in the German case, an obvious reason was the close ties maintained with working class consumers. With the coming of post-industrial society much of the base from which the co-ops traditionally had drawn their members simply dwindled. New growth could possibly have been accomplished by drawing on the increasing consumer awareness characterising the immediate post-war decades. But as Mathew Hilton has shown, the role of the consumers' advocate was not taken by the co-op. Rather, it was taken by independent consumer organisations such as the Consumers Association (CA), and the policy of the co-operative movement soon appeared only 'as a reflection of their agendas.'<sup>34</sup> Finally the co-ops failed to attract new consumers by developing their

economic advantages in new and attractive directions. As in the German case, many societies chose to abandon the traditional dividend on purchase and replace it with a variety of different benefit schemes, often made available to all customers and not only co-op members.<sup>35</sup> But these schemes lacked a clear reference to the traditional co-operative ideal of surplus distribution and they were at the same time no more economically attractive than the schemes offered by the private retailers.

By the turn of the millennium the problems of the British consumer co-ops were multiple. For fifty years, the market share and membership figures had been on a more or less continuous decline. Gradually, however, from the 2000s onwards, the economic fortunes of the movement seem to have shifted. From 2006 to 2010 total consumer co-operative turnover increased by 25 per cent. The combined trading profit of the movement was doubled while total membership increased by 10 per cent.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, much of this revitalisation may be linked to an improved ability within the co-op movement to handle the operational, organisational and ideological challenges facing them.

First, as a consequence of the severe economic problems affecting many retail co-ops, more and more societies already from the mid 1990s had decided to abandon the large scale retail formats which were successfully favoured by the retail chains and instead concentrate all food retail operations in convenience stores and smaller supermarkets. This became an important turning point. Apart from the obvious advantages of reducing the huge costs related to owning and operating large supermarkets, hypermarkets and superstores, the decision helped create a more coherent structure of stores. This became an important precondition for future integration and standardisation. At the organisational level, a merger in 2000 of the CRS and the CWS and the establishment of the Co-operative Group provided further means by which the

movement could more easily integrate and standardise its operations. The merger set the stage for comprehensive restructuring, resulting, in the words of John Wilson, in ‘much greater integration across what came to be known as the “co-operative family”’.<sup>37</sup> The group was later joined by the three largest, regional retail co-ops and by 2010, close to 85 per cent of total consumer co-operative trade in the UK was in the hands of one single society.<sup>38</sup> Although such a full merger of co-operative trade could not hinder a collapse of the German movement, and also preceded the bankruptcy of the Austrian and the urban arm of the Finnish consumer co-ops, it seems to have been the right step for the British consumer co-ops.<sup>39</sup> Finally, member relationship became better coordinated. A true dividend scheme offered to members only was re-introduced, and since the Co-operative Group operated it, it embraced the large majority of co-operative trade across the UK. The co-operative movement also managed to reengage more successfully with modern consumers by developing an explicit stance on ethical trading, sustainability, food quality and animal welfare, becoming, among other things, the UK’s biggest supporter of Fairtrade.<sup>40</sup>

### *Successful adaptation: the Norwegian experience*

By 1950 consumer co-ops held a firm position in Norwegian retail trade in general and food retailing in particular. In the following decades the movement expanded steadily, and by the mid-1970s, the co-operative share of the food retail market had reached approximately 24 per cent. With only limited variation it remained so until the turn of the millennium. During the same period the movement also experienced a steady rise in membership, with a particular burst from 1990 onwards. With more than one million members by 2008, twenty per cent of the population or half of the total number of households held a co-operative membership.<sup>41</sup>

The positive development of the Norwegian movement was intimately linked to how it approached the three revolutions in retailing. Also the Norwegian co-operators took the lead in introducing the self-service service technology, opening the country's first self-service store in Oslo in October 1947. Unlike the Germans and the British, however, the Norwegian movement managed to retain its initial lead. The reasons for this are many. While co-operators in Germany and the UK had shown reluctance to embrace the new, self-serviced and large scale formats, the Norwegian co-operators seem to have been more pragmatic. The general attitude, shared by most co-operators, seem to have been that the future of retailing lay in the larger, self-serviced formats. As formulated by the National Co-operative Association (NKL) in a critical statement to the Consumer Council on the future prospect of home delivery services: 'The efficient store is the large store'.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, competition from private retailers was obviously much less fierce than both in Germany and in the UK. Non co-operative retailing in Norway remained a small-scale affair throughout large parts of the twentieth century. Most private retailers continued to operate on an independent basis and as late as 1990, more than 50 per cent of total food retail sales was still in the hands of such retailers.<sup>43</sup>

Norwegian co-operators also managed more easily to overcome existing building restrictions, to find the necessary finances to establish the new stores and to operate them in an efficient and competitive manner. A co-operative savings campaign sparked off in 1954 had a tremendous effect on the total level of share capital. In the period from 1950 to 1980, and in sharp contrast to both the German and the British experience, members' savings grew eightfold in fixed prices. Increased savings made the establishment of new and larger stores possible. These stores facilitated increased earnings and attracted new customers to the co-op. More members could thus be

recruited, further increasing the amount of savings and share capital. A virtuous circle of growth was thus induced.

Due to the dominance of small-scale retailing, the organisational challenge from the integrated, standardised and centralised chain store did not become a serious treat to the co-ops before the 1980s, when the first serious attempts at developing retail chains started to appear also in Norway. By then a gradual process of centralisation, integration and standardisation had, however, already been underway within the co-op movement for thirty years. In 1990 the co-ops launched the country's first fully integrated retail/wholesale chain, and soon all co-operative stores were organised within a similar chain based structure. Operational procedures, branding, assortment and marketing of the co-operative stores became fully standardised across the different retail societies and all buying became integrated and centralised to NKL headquarters. This development came about despite the fact that the overall structure of consumer co-operative trade remained comparatively highly decentralised. By 2002, 235 independent co-operative societies were still in operation within the Norwegian retail market. But rather than acting as an obstacle to standardisation and integration, this decentralised structure seems to have eased the implementation of such measures. With limited size, the need for common functions such as wholesaling, buying and marketing was more pertinent. This contrasted with the increasingly large British and German societies, which tended to develop as self-sufficient regional retail businesses, controlling their own wholesaling operations and aspiring to be recognised as full blown businesses in their own right and not just a branch of the co-op.

Norwegian co-operators also seem to have tackled the challenge from the increasingly affluent consumer more adequately than many other co-ops. The movement's consumer aspirations were redefined within a commercialised frame.

Consumer protection was linked to the task of rationalising the existing system of distribution and any initiative taken in the broader field of consumer protection primarily became a means to attract trade and not an obligation in itself. The democratic aspects of consumer co-operation were redefined along similar lines. Growth in membership was viewed as important primarily as a means to increase trade and improve the general availability of capital. When the membership department of the NKL, in its 2000 *Annual report*, defined an 'active member' for purposes of statistical analysis, the definition was simply all those 'making 60% of their daily household consumption in the consumer co-operative.'<sup>44</sup> In 1991 an electronic membership card and a national membership programme was launched comprising the large majority of the existing retail societies. The scheme soon developed to become the most popular membership programme in the Norwegian food retail market, engaging more than one million members or close to half of the total number of Norwegian households. As we have seen, the British co-operators from the beginning of the new millennium replicated a similar approach, providing impetus for new membership growth.

Overall, the Norwegian co-operators seem to have tackled the fundamental challenges of the post-war food retail market well. In fact, the co-ops themselves were among the prime proponents of many of the changes taking place, outperforming the private retailers in the introduction of large scale retail formats and developing the country's first fully integrated, centralised and standardised retail chain. At the same time, they managed to retain some of the fundamental features of the co-operative alternative. As the overall size of the retail societies remained limited, the possibilities for members to have an actual say in their co-op were quite well maintained. The movement also continued to distribute a substantial proportion of the surplus as dividend. In 2000 more than 60 per cent of total surplus was redistributed in the form of

dividend on purchase. By comparison, the equivalent figure in the UK was 25 per cent.<sup>45</sup>

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The historic survival and growth of consumer co-operative enterprises during the second half of the twentieth century was intimately linked to how these organisations managed to handle three major, ongoing transformations in the food retailing market; the supermarket revolution, the chain store revolution and the consumer revolution. Co-ops that failed to handle these transformations efficiently went into decline, while co-ops which successfully approached the challenges, managed to remain in business and in some instances even prosper.

The divergent development of the German, British and Norwegian consumer co-ops provides testimony to this overall framework. Where the Germans largely failed to adapt efficiently to the three parallel challenges of the post-war food retailing market the Norwegian consumer co-ops proved more successful. In Great Britain a delayed adaptation seem to have paved the way for a revival of consumer co-operative trade from the turn of the millennium onwards, after the movement had been on a more or less continuous decline during the entire second half of the twentieth century.

Understanding how the Norwegian consumer co-ops managed to adapt better than the German and also the British movement to the challenges of the post-war retailing market, a complex set of factors needs to be considered. The competitive climate facing the Norwegian movement during the first decades of the post-war period was clearly much less fierce than was the case in Germany and Great Britain. The Norwegian co-operators also managed to stay independent from the class struggle logic of socialism and maintained their legitimacy as independent organisations comprising not only workers but also farmers and fishermen. The situation in both the UK and

Germany was very different. Both remained largely urban movements, strongly enmeshed in the culture of the working class. Public support for co-operative trade was thus primarily limited to one fraction of society – the industrial workers. The German movement was clearly also disadvantaged by a legal and political framework that at times was hostile to the co-operative form of enterprise. Also in Britain, the co-op's relationship with the Labour party was at times strained, while in Norway by contrast the co-ops sustained broad political support, with not only Labour but also the Liberal party and the Farmers' party being in favour of the co-operative way of doing business.<sup>46</sup>

More internal factors also mattered. Differences in the availability of capital clearly shaped the possibilities of the three movements to invest in larger and more efficient retail outlets and wholesale facilities. While members' savings grew substantially in the Norwegian movement during the 1950s and 1970s they declined in Germany and the UK. Organisational culture also mattered. Norwegian co-operators were more willing to adopt new types of retailing and wholesaling technology, and they accepted that traditional co-operative virtues had to be adapted and sometimes abandoned if the co-operative form of retailing was to survive. The British by contrast, and also the Germans, retained a more conservative and in some instances utopian outlook. In Britain, even when multiple retailers had overhauled the market position of co-operative trade, co-operative managers continued to advocate utopian missions of societal transformation along co-operative lines.<sup>47</sup>

The Norwegians also seem to have been advantaged by their continued reliance on small and medium sized retail societies. This increased the retail societies' need for common functions and thus helped push forward necessary processes of integration and standardisation. At the same time, the retail societies continued to hold some leverage in



their day-to-day business operations and, most importantly, they continued to hold full economic responsibility. What essentially had been developed in this process was a national chain store on co-operative lines, fruitfully combining the advantages of central coordination with the advantages of local responsibility and local market knowledge.

By the 1970s the British and German societies by contrast were fewer and on average much larger, both in terms of trade and in terms of registered membership. Although highly centralised, this structure made it more difficult to obtain the necessary standardisation and integration of functions on a national scale. The large regional societies were less inclined to hand over authority to national federations than were the smaller Norwegian societies. Instead they tended to develop as self-sufficient regional retail businesses, controlling their own wholesaling business and running stores of numerous different types and under numerous different brands.

Being based on a selection of three cases, the present analysis has, in principle, little to say about the reasons for the divergent development of consumer co-operative trade in other countries. In this respect, more research is needed. A major aim of the present paper has, however been to inspire more research along the lines presented here. Much can be gained by studying how consumer co-operative enterprises in other countries have approached the post-war challenges to their operational, organisational and ideological environment and how differences in approach have shaped these organisations' developments. As our basic knowledge of developments in different countries becomes more sophisticated, there also might be a substantial potential in developing broader historical comparisons including more countries in one systematic analysis.

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## Notes

- 1 Substantial parts of this essay draw on research first presented in my unpublished PhD thesis, Ekberg, "Consumer Co-operatives". See also Ekberg, "Consumer co-operatives: British and Norwegian".
- 2 The most comprehensive comparative study of the historic development of consumer co-ops in Western Europe is still Brazda and Schediwy, eds., *Consumer Co-operatives in a Changing World*. In addition, a number of nation specific studies have been published, often in native languages. For Finland, see Perko, *Med förenade krafter*; Kallenautio, *Lamasta uuteen nousuun*. For Sweden, see Kylebäck, *Konsumentkooperation i strukturomvandling*; Kylebäck, *Konsumentkooperation, del 2*; Kylebäck, *Federation eller Konsum Sverige?*; Hwang, "Folkrörelse eller Affärsföretag". For Norway, see Lange et.al. *Organisert Kjøpekraft*; for Great Britain, see Sparks, "Consumer co-operation in the United Kingdom". For Germany see, Fairbairn, "Rise and fall"; Prinz, "Consumer Co-operatives' History"; Prinz, "Structure and Scope". For Austria, see Schediwy, "The Decline and Fall"; Hauch, "From Self-Help"; Knotzer, "Vom Marktführer". For Belgium see, Strikwerda, "Alternative Visions" For Italy see Zamagni, Patrizia and Casali. *La Cooperazione*; Battilani, "How to beat"; Menzani and Zamagni. "Cooperative Networks. For Spain see Medina-Albaladejo, "Consumer Co-Operatives in Spain".
- 3 A broader examination is provided in Ekberg, "Consumer Co-operatives", 17-33.
- 4 See e.g. Brazda and Schediwy, "Federal Co-Operative Systems"
- 5 Furlough and Strikwerda, "Economics, Consumer Culture". 33
- 6 International Joint Project, *Making membership Meaningful*, 3.
- 7 One example is Hallsworth and Bell, "Retail Change".

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8 A short, but similar approach is Williamson, "Consumer Cooperation in Postwar Period". See also Birchall "A Comparative Analysis".

9 Sparks, "Delivering Quality".

10 A similar analytical scheme is applied by retail analyst Leigh Sparks in a study of the development of the British consumer co-operatives during the 1980s and 1990s. Sparks focuses explicitly on three distinct transformations within the retailing environment; 'the development of new formats, the development of the corporate brand and the importance of logistics, and shows how the co-ops have been unable to measure up against the multiple retailers in adopting these three strategic components. Sparks, "Being the Best?", 14. Along similar lines Patrizia Battilani in her study of the Italian consumer co-ops argues that the post-war progress of the Italian movement was related to three basic factors, namely 'technological innovation, the creation of a system of firms and the definition of new consumer co-operation ideals and significance'. Battilani, "How to beat", 109. These are basically the same factors as outlined by Sparks, as well as those applied in the present analysis.

11 Figures have been compiled from a variety of sources and should be interpreted with care, Brazda, "Consumer Co-operatives in Germany"; EuroCoop, *Consumer co-operatives – Statistical Review*; Ekberg, "Consumer Co-operatives"; Coop NKL, *Annual Report*, various years; Sparks "Consumer co-operation in the United Kingdom"; Co-operatives UK, *Performance and statistical review*. The dotted lines indicate that figures are based on estimates.

12 Figures have been compiled from a variety of sources and should be interpreted with care, Brazda, "Consumer Co-operatives in Germany"; NKL, *Våre Tall 1907-2005*; Coop NKL, *Annual Report 2008*; The Co-operative Union, "Co-operative Statistics", various years; Co-operatives Europe, *European Co-operatives 2009*. The population data are taken from Heston, Summers, and Aten, "Penn World Table Version 7.0".

13 In 2001, a large commission on the British co-operative sector concluded that 'The current estimate of membership of the UK Co-operative Movement, of around 10 million, we believe is a substantial overestimate and the true membership figure may be less than two million.', The Co-operative Commission, *Co-Operative Advantage*. The overestimation is probably fairly systematic throughout the period and therefore does not affect the overall trend.

14 Brazda, "Consumer Co-operatives in Germany", 202-3.

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- 15 Ibid., 214.
- 16 Prinz, "Consumer Co-operatives' History", 5.
- 17 Brazda, "Consumer Co-operatives in Germany", 201-2
- 18 Prinz, "Consumer Co-operatives' History", 6.
- 19 Brazda, "Consumer Co-operatives in Germany", 187-8
- 20 Brazda, "Consumer Co-operatives in Germany", 190.)
- 21 Ibid., 191
- 22 Fairbairn, "Rise and fall", 295-8.
- 23 Bamfield, "Rationalization and the Problem of Re-Positioning".
- 24 This was most certainly an overestimate. In 1938 a separate report from the Co-operative Union noted that 'the trading membership of the Co-operative movement is at least 1,000,000 less than the total membership figure', Cited in Jefferys, *Retail Trading*, 55
- 25 Figures from The Co-operative Union, *Co-operative Statistics*, various years.; UK National statistics, *Social Trends No 36* (2006); UK National statistics, *Population Trends No 123* (2006); The Co-operative Commission, *Co-Operative Advantage*.
- 26 Lambert, "Self-Service Review"; Powell, *Counter Revolution*. Important recent studies of the introduction of self-service and supermarket retailing in the UK include Shaw and Curth, "Selling Self-Service"; Alexander, Shaw, and Curth, "Promoting retail innovation "; Shaw and Alexander, "British Co-operative Societies"; Alexander, "Format Development".
- 27 See Shaw and Curth, "Selling Self-Service".
- 28 Lambert, "Self-Service Review", 95.
- 29 Co-operative Union, "Report of the 92nd", 322.
- 30 Co-operative Union, "Report of the 100th", 52.
- 31 Bamfield, "Rationalization and the Problem of Re-Positioning", 160; Paxton, "Consumer Co-operative Capital", 67-71.
- 32 For an overview, see Seth and Randall. *The Grocers*.
- 33 'Co-ops form £2bn buying group', Co-operative News (7 November 1995)
- 34 Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 178.

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- 35 Walton, “The Post-War Decline”.
- 36 Friberg et al., “Politics of Commercial Dynamics”.
- 37 Wilson, “Co-operativism meets City Ethics”, 16. The essay also interestingly shows how an important precedent for the merger was the successful fending off of the hostile take over bid for CWS by Lanica Trust Ltd in 1997.
- 38 Co-operatives UK, *UK Co-operative Economy*.
- 39 See Kallenautio, *Lamasta uuteen nousuun*; Schediwy, “The Decline and Fall”.
- 40 Friberg et al., “Politics of Commercial Dynamics”.
- 41 Coop NKL, *Annual report 2008*.
- 42 Printed in the co-operative journal *Forbrukeren*, 17:3 (1962), 65.
- 43 Lange et al., *Organisert Kjøpekraft*.
- 44 Cited in *Ibid.*, 535.
- 45 Figures estimated from NKL, *Våre Tall 1907-2005*; The Co-operative Union, *Co-operative Statistics 2000/2001*.
- 46 Gurney “The Battle”, 967.
- 47 The contents of the presidential addresses of the Co-operative Union in the early 1950s are indicative, see Ekberg, “Consumer co-operatives”, 161-5.

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