

Co-operation and Consumer Politics in Comparative Perspective: Britain and Sweden during the First World War

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Why did the British Co-operative Movement suddenly abandon its historic commitment to political neutrality in 1917? Recent research suggests that the debate over co-operative political representation should be seen in the wider context of consumer politics, and conflicts over the supply and distribution of important commodities. The first part of this paper re-examines these debates in the context of the Plymouth Co-operative Society, one of the largest retail societies during this period, where the question of political representation sparked a major debate during the years 1917-1920. In particular, attention is paid to the internal debates within the society, and the different views for and against co-operative political representation. Plymouth co-operators were not alone in facing highly unusual and difficult circumstances of course. A comparative analysis of this period may help to reveal some of the broader issues behind the politicisation of the British Co-operative Movement, in the context of an upsurge in consumer politics across Europe. The second half of the paper draws on a local case study in Sweden, and reveals the existence of very similar debates about consumption, class and politics, even though this had a rather different outcome for the co-operative movement.

"In view of the persistent attacks and misrepresentations made by the opponents of the [British] Co-operative Movement in Parliament and on local administrative bodies, this Congress is of opinion that the time has arrived when co-operators should seek direct representation in Parliament and on all local administrative bodies. It therefore calls upon the Central Board of the Co-operative Union to take such steps as may be necessary to put into operation the terms of the above resolution." ⁽¹⁾

So read the amended resolution which was agreed by delegates to the Co-operative Congress in Swansea, in the summer of 1917. It was followed by an emergency congress in October, which set up an embryonic political organisation, and the first official co-operative candidate contested the Prestwich by-election in January 1918. A year later, the National Co-operative Representation Committee was transformed into the Co-operative Party.

Various explanations have been suggested for why the British Co-operative Movement suddenly abandoned its historic commitment to political neutrality in 1917. Some have suggested that the decision was simply a pragmatic response to co-operative grievances with government wartime policy, while others point towards the escalation of class consciousness within the movement. A third interpretation, which has attracted more interest among historians in recent years, suggests that the debate over co-operative political representation should be seen in the wider context of consumer politics, and conflicts over the supply and distribution of important commodities.⁽²⁾ The first part of this paper re-examines these debates in the context of the Plymouth Co-operative Society, one of the largest retail societies during this period, where the question of political representation sparked a major debate during the years 1917-1920. In particular, attention is paid to the internal debates within the society, and the different views for and against co-operative political representation. Did Plymouth co-operators view political action as extreme pragmatism in response to an extreme situation, or were they motivated by other considerations? They were not alone in facing highly unusual and difficult circumstances of course. By the third year of the war there were serious food shortages all over Europe, and the needs of consumers had become a pressing political issue for all governments. A comparative analysis of this period may help to reveal some of the broader issues behind the politicisation of the British Co-operative Movement, in the context of an upsurge in consumer politics across Europe. The second half of the paper draws on a local case study in Sweden, and reveals the existence of very similar debates about consumption, class and politics, even though this had a rather different outcome for the Co-operative Movement.

Plymouth Co-operative Society and the political representation debate

At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the Plymouth Mutual and Industrial Co-operative Society, with a membership of over 50,000, was the third largest retail society in England and Wales.⁽³⁾ Founded in 1860, it had developed an extensive network of grocery stores right across the Plymouth conurbation, and accounted for a significant proportion of retail trade, especially among working-class consumers. Among other activities the society also ran several factories, it had built and leased its own houses, and in keeping with the Rochdale principles, it allocated part of its trading surplus to run a large educational department. In 1914 the society had entered into a particularly active phase of its development, with the election of a young and energetic management team who were

determined to expand the society in all areas of activity. Their leadership was to be severely tested by the events of the war years however. The first challenge was the decision of the Asquith government to subject the trading surpluses of co-operative societies to its so-called 'Excess Profits Tax' (EPT), as part of its rather clumsy attempts to respond to public concern over wartime 'profiteering'. The Plymouth Co-operative Society decided from the outset that it would oppose the tax, and in doing so, confronted not only the government, but also the Joint Parliamentary Committee of the Co-operative Union, which had agreed to accept the tax on the grounds of patriotic expediency. A legal challenge was launched, backed up by a propaganda campaign among the membership and the general public. The society's case was based on two grounds: firstly that there were no profits per member within the meaning of the act, and secondly that the amount assessed was in fact excessive. Despite the stance of the Co-operative Union, the campaign took on a national dimension as 136 other local retail societies pledged their support.

For some co-operators, the conflict over the EPT indicated the necessity for co-operators to seek independent political representation. *"It is time the [Co-operative] Movement had its own Members of Parliament to strongly protest against the position,"* was the view of one member at the quarterly meeting in January 1916. Another speaker reminded the meeting that the co-operative movement could potentially mobilise three million voters if necessary over 'the co-operators' Taff Vale'.⁽⁴⁾ This was not the first time the issue of political representation had been raised within the society. A bitter conflict with local private retailers, which culminated in a milestone libel case in 1905, had provoked a protracted debate within the society about the merits of political representation, whether together with the local labour movement, or independently as co-operators. These discussions came to nothing however, and like the rest of the Co-operative Movement, the Plymouth Society entered the war still committed to political neutrality. But by 1917 much had changed. The eventual vindication of the EPT campaign, following a parliamentary amendment to the Finance Act in July 1917, came hard on the heels of the Swansea Congress, and thus could be attributed in part at least to the increasing clamour of co-operative demands for parliamentary representation.

If more evidence of the need for co-operative representation in politics were needed, then supporters of the move pointed towards a new controversy, from early 1917, over the supply and distribution of food. As the war progressed, it had become increasingly apparent that the price mechanism was inadequate as a device for regulating the food supply. A bad harvest in 1916, and the disruption to merchant shipping from the heightened submarine offensive during the following winter, meant that by the spring of 1917 many basic foodstuffs were in

short supply, and during the winter months in particular, there were fears that the food problem was dangerously close to undermining the entire war effort. The Plymouth Society was forced to introduce a rationing scheme for potatoes in the spring of 1917, and this was followed by similar arrangements for bread and sugar as these commodities became scarcer. By August 1917 183,000 people, out of a total population of just under a quarter of a million, were registered with the society for the consumption of potatoes. Moreover, the society publicised its efforts to keep local prices low, and in doing so protect the general public from the actions of 'profiteers'.

The new coalition government, which took office in December 1916, responded to the problem by creating a new post of Food Controller with extensive authority under the Defence of the Realm Act, and some limited national price controls were introduced from early in 1917. The first controller, Lord Devonport, was not conspicuously successful in his new role, however, and was succeeded in May 1917 by Lord Rhondda, generally regarded as being the more competent in the post. One of Rhondda's first actions was to set in place the machinery for the establishment of local Food Control Committees, which would be appointed by local authorities in order to regulate the food supply in particular districts. In anticipation of this development the co-operative management committee wrote to the Plymouth Town Clerk, to present their case for a level of co-operative representation on the committee which they felt would take into account their status as major distributors of food in the locality. The composition of the committee when it was announced was therefore felt to be bitterly disappointing, for, of the twelve members of the committee, seven were private retailers, and only two were representatives of the Co-operative Society.⁽⁵⁾

The under-representation of working-class consumers on the new committee was to bring the society into marked conflict with the local authorities. A protest campaign was duly launched with a demonstration and a petition to the Mayor, who refused however to meet the co-operative delegation in order to discuss the committee. Sixteen hundred people attended a demonstration in October, and were told by the main speaker that the affair went beyond the question of representation on the Food Control Committee to embrace the wider issue of how business was conducted in the council chamber. Unrest grew as the autumn progressed, and public demonstrations and disturbances provoked the municipal authorities to close the public gallery of the council chamber to the public. By December the matter had come to the attention of the Food Controller himself, and although he was powerless to impose a solution to the conflict, Rhondda was prepared to suggest that the committee be reformed to take greater account of working-class interests. The borough council did indeed agree the

following month to appoint three new members to the committee, but the eventual outcome was disappointing in that it secured only one other co-operative representative. Three thousand people attended the demonstration on the North Quay in protest, and a deputation was sent to the Ministry of Food.⁽⁶⁾

Inevitably, there were increasingly vociferous voices suggesting that the situation would only be addressed once there was independent co-operative representation. The editor of the society's monthly journal, *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, T.W. Mercer, told co-operators that, *"the British House of Commons has become the frontier of the Co-operative Commonwealth. The Municipal Council Chamber is now our first line of defence... Those who resist Co-operation in the workshop and the distributive store must be compelled to accept it in the legislative assembly and the Council Chamber."*⁽⁷⁾ Co-operators found themselves re-encountering their old enemies of the pre-war struggles against the Private Traders' Association, in their guise as local councillors. The war had prevented the municipal elections from being held in the usual way, and had thus undermined the democratic accountability of the council. *"Was there ever such a self-satisfied body of men as the Plymouth Borough Council?"* asked a 'member of the fourth estate', writing in *The Co-operator*. *"They are a law unto themselves – an Assembly of Unrepresentatives, who recognise no authority higher than their own... It is so long since they have faced the electors at the polls that they have quite forgotten the existence of an outside public."*⁽⁸⁾

Plymouth co-operators followed the Swansea congress with interest, and the decision was welcomed by the society's leaders. But moves towards co-operative political action in Plymouth came independently of the Co-operative Union. A series of district meetings during the summer of 1917 voted to establish the Plymouth Labour and Co-operative Representative Association (LCRA), which was **formally (delete formerly)** launched with a demonstration in August. By the autumn, ward organisations had been formed, and the LCRA had voted to affiliate to the Labour Party. Prospective candidates for the municipal elections were selected, and it was also agreed to contest the parliamentary seats. Since this was the first time that Labour had mounted a parliamentary challenge in Plymouth then the result of the 1918 elections, and of a by-election the following year, was hailed as a major advance, even though the candidates were not successful. Even more encouraging were the significant gains made by the LCRA in the 1919 municipal elections. In the eyes of some, at least, the 'fusion of forces' between the Co-operative Society and the trade union movement seemed finally to have brought about the long-awaited breakthrough for Labour in Plymouth.

How should we interpret the decision to seek political representation for the Co-operative Movement? Two main schools of thought may be distinguished. Co-operative historians, mindful of the movement's long tradition of political neutrality and ambivalence towards the state, argued that the apparent 'volte-face' at the Swansea congress in 1917 should be seen as a pragmatic reaction to the exceptional circumstances of the war. Specific grievances such as the conscription of co-operative employees in preference to those of private traders, failure to consult the movement over rationing schemes, and the decision to subject retail society profits to taxation were all influential. According to G.D.H. Cole, in his centenary history of the movement: "*What brought the Co-operative Movement into politics was not a conscious will to unite on a common political programme or to form a new party in any ordinary sense, but a feeling of acute grievance and a disbelief that co-operation could ever look for fair treatment from Governments unless it took matters into its own hands.*"⁽⁹⁾ An alternative interpretation suggests that the decision to enter politics was not an isolated development, but the result of the general swing to the left within the labour movement as a whole, which was symptomatic of the class tensions engendered by the war. Even before the outbreak of the war there had been closer collaboration between the Co-operative Movement and trade unions, and in 1917, "*Below the bitterness of the immediate grievances... lay a matured ideological and class-based political philosophy.*"⁽¹⁰⁾ More recently this interpretation has been criticised as a teleological account which places too much emphasis on the speeches and writings of a confident and committed minority of activists who dominated the congress. For the majority of rank and file members, it is argued, the overwhelming concern was the trading function of the movement, and most co-operators had not the slightest interest in politics.⁽¹¹⁾ Nonetheless, there was a significant overlap between membership of the Co-operative Movement and the rest of the labour movement, and co-operative societies represented a potentially rich source of funds to impoverished local labour organisations.

Both these interpretations have their merits, not least in that they reflect the plurality of opinion within the contemporary Co-operative Movement. The issue of political representation was an extremely controversial one, and left the Plymouth Society, and indeed the entire Co-operative Movement, bitterly divided - as many saw it, to the detriment of its wider interests. In Plymouth, the split was institutionalised, in the form of two factions, the White ticket and the Blue ticket, which competed with each other in the society's internal elections. The 'White' faction, which had taken control of the society in 1914, represented the 'labourist' strand within the movement, for which co-operation was the 'third pillar' of working-class politics, along with the trade union movement and the Labour Party. There was

an element of pragmatism here as well, in that the 'fusion of forces' was promoted as a means of overcoming some residual animosity between sections of the local labour movement, in the wake of a bitter strike by co-operative society employees in 1915. The strike was supported by elements of the Dockers' Union, but not by the Trades and Labour Council. But the underlying reason was the natural affinity of the different strands of the working-class movement. According to one co-operative speaker, addressing a LCRA demonstration in November 1917, *"it was hardly fair to assume that the Co-operative Movement had come into politics simply because of the taxation of its dividends. For years men of ideas, who stood for democratic culture and the education of the masses, had worked for the day when Co-operators and Trade Unionists would act together."*⁽¹²⁾

In 1919, however, there was a marked change of emphasis within Plymouth Co-operative Society, with the election of members of the 'Blue' faction to the principal posts within the society. These members supported the traditional co-operative position of strict political neutrality, and were concerned that the actions of the war years, even if justified at the time, were now in danger of compromising the society's business activities. Like many adherents to the 'Blue' faction, the in-coming president, J Hayne Pillar, was a staunch Liberal, who had served on Plymouth Borough Council since 1905. He summed up the position of those who felt that the movement for political representation had gone too far: *"We have to admit that there are times when democratic associations have taken a stand to safeguard their own interests. There was such an occasion when the question of excess profits was being dealt with by the Government. A stand had to be made to prevent an imposition on the movement. That stand was made, but somehow or other the Plymouth Society was led perhaps a little farther than was really anticipated at the outset."* Others were concerned that by aligning itself with the Labour Party, the society was in danger of becoming the *"milk cow for others to drain dry."*⁽¹³⁾ **(Delete single inverted comma)** A heated and disruptive debate occupied the society for much of 1919. Opponents to the LCRA claimed that the new organisation had been set up unconstitutionally, at a time when many members were absent serving in the war, and even that its existence was illegal under the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts. This last claim could not be upheld, but the chairman of the Education Committee, who was a particularly staunch opponent to political activity, attempted to sabotage LCRA activities by refusing to let rooms for their meetings. Others simply appealed for the society to *"drop its petty quarrelling and step out upon a higher plane and get on with the business."*⁽¹⁴⁾ The matter eventually came to a head at a special meeting of members in October 1919, called under the society's constitution to debate a General Committee proposal to disaffiliate the

society from the LCRA. The meeting was reported to be very well attended. LCRA supporters wore red buttonholes to declare their allegiance, and draped the balcony with banners bearing the legends, "*Labour saved you £47,000*" and "*Fight the Profiteers, not one another.*" The proposed amendment was defeated by 668 votes to 332, and two prominent pro-Labour co-operators spoke afterwards of their hopes that the meeting had finally decided the matter.⁽¹⁵⁾ It had certainly left the way open for the LCRA to contest both the municipal elections of November 1919, and the Plymouth Sutton by-election shortly afterwards. Yet the vexed question of political representation was not solved, and the debate was to simmer on into the following year.

In the light of this protracted internal debate within Plymouth Co-operative Society over political representation, most of which was faithfully recorded in the society's journal, it seems that both interpretations of the co-operative movement's entry into politics can be sustained. The decision taken at the Swansea Congress in 1917, and further debates over the foundation of the Co-operative Party, and its affiliation with the Labour Party, were not unanimous, but revealed the huge diversity of opinion within what was a broad movement. There was also a third strand of the debate, which has received more prominence in recent research. This suggests that co-operative interest in politics should be seen as part of an ongoing debate over the forms and meanings of consumption, and an expression of dissatisfaction with and challenge to existing systems for the distribution of the food supply in a time of scarcity.⁽¹⁶⁾ The co-operative movement's conflict with the government over the Excess Profit Tax during the first years of the war was undoubtedly catalytic, but it took place against a background of escalating conflict within the retailing sector during the early twentieth century. Like many retail societies, the Plymouth Co-operative Society had faced hostile campaigning from independent private traders during the early 1900s. With the involvement of the state in the supply and distribution of food during the war, co-operators showed a growing tendency to analyse conflicts over retailing in political terms. Far from implying an abandonment of the visionary side of the movement, political action represented a new strategy in the wider co-operative commitment to reforming the social relations of consumption, based on the political power of consumers organised as consumers.

Towards a comparative analysis of consumer politics: a Swedish case study

Plymouth Co-operative Society was an unusual society, and it is not my intention to suggest that the debates which took place here were necessarily typical of the wider Co-operative

Movement. Yet the dilemmas faced by the co-operative movement were by no means confined to Plymouth. The question of political representation, whether independently or in partnership with the wider labour movement, was a controversial issue for co-operators across Europe. Co-operators and socialists sometimes demonstrated more mutual suspicion than fraternal solidarity in their relations, while at the same time acknowledging a considerable overlap in membership at the grassroots. The Second International resolved at its 1910 congress to recognise consumer co-operatives as a legitimate weapon of the working class, a decision which was agreed and endorsed by the International Co-operative Alliance. Even so, political activity was never uncontroversial for a movement historically committed to political and religious neutrality. The French Co-operative Movement split into socialist and non-socialist wings in 1895 with the foundation of the socialist Bourse de coopératives socialistes. Reunification took place in 1912, but many remained opposed to what they regarded as the accommodating attitude of the 'neo-co-operators' towards capitalism. In Germany, even after the SPD voted in 1910 to recognise consumer co-operation, divisions remained within the Co-operative Movement between those who aligned themselves with social democracy and those who did not. Meanwhile, if the Rochdale system of co-operation in Britain remained the model for those who favoured political neutrality, the socialist Co-operative Movement in Belgium provided an alternative vision.⁽¹⁷⁾

Changes within the retailing sector, the increasing hostility shown by private traders, and the question of the taxation of co-operative surpluses gave rise to debates about the co-operative attitude to politics, and the relationship between co-operation and other political movements, in the years before 1914. For the British Co-operative Movement, as we have seen, it was the experience of the wartime food shortages, and the involvement of the state in the supply and distribution of scarce food, which was catalytic in the reassessment of the relationship between co-operators and the state. But this situation was by no means confined to Britain. Trade blockades and submarine attacks on merchant shipping severely disrupted the food supply throughout Europe, and left urban consumers in most states facing severe shortages by the winter of 1916-17. The second part of this paper examines consumer responses to this situation in Sweden, drawing on a case study of the naval town of Karlskrona in the south of the country.

Although Sweden remained neutral during the First World War, its population was nonetheless vulnerable to the disruptions to the international food supply. By the winter of 1916-17 there were serious shortages of most essential foodstuffs, and as elsewhere in Europe, the experience of queuing for food quickly became part of everyday life. The

Karlskrona labour council (**arbetarekommun**) insert 'e' into 'arbetarkommun'; brackets not inverted commas? attempted to channel popular dissatisfaction at the situation, and from 1915 began to hold public meetings on the high price situation, or 'dyrtiden', calling for action from both the national government and the local authorities. During the spring of 1917 however, as the situation in the country worsened, it found itself temporarily overtaken by events. The introduction of rationing for bread and flour early in 1917, and the severity of the shortages of both these goods and of potatoes, provoked a growing wave of public disturbances throughout the country during the month of April. In Karlskrona, as in other military towns, the main impetus came from the many conscripted sailors and soldiers who were stationed in the town, and who gathered one evening at the end of April to protest against the declining quality of their rations.⁽¹⁸⁾ Joined by members of the civilian population, they formed a substantial crowd of 5000 (out of a population of not much more than 20,000), which marched up to the main square and met the local Admiral-in-chief with a cry of "*More food, more bread!*" The Admiral responded that he would meet a delegation of five individuals, and asked the rest of the crowd to disperse peacefully. When this was ignored, the chairman of the labour council appealed to the demonstrators in the name of the Swedish people's reputation for 'calm and self-control', and also asked for the crowd to disperse. The bulk of the demonstration did then depart, but tensions remained high, and in the immediate aftermath there was some violence and damage to the property of prominent local merchants. Meanwhile, during the same evening, the labour council was holding its own meeting to discuss the food question. A special committee had drawn up a petition to the local authorities, which contained various proposals for alleviating the local situation, and was to be handed in by a deputation of twelve labour representatives the following Saturday. Once again a large crowd gathered outside the town hall when the deputation entered to hand over the petition, and labour leaders appealed again for calm. The annual 1st May demonstration, three days later, was thought to be the largest seen in Karlskrona, with 8000 people taking part. The food issue remained prominent, with banners bearing the slogans, "*Bread for the people*", "*Down with profit-making on basic provisions*", and "*We demand a ban on the export of all basic provisions*". But it passed off peacefully, to the relief both of the authorities and the labour movement, anxious to avoid losing control of popular feeling to the emergent revolutionary left. The whole situation was largely defused by the decision of the authorities to accede to several of the petitioners' demands, which seems to have improved the situation. Moreover, the authorities reacted swiftly to stamp out expressions of discontent within the

military population: all military personnel were confined to barracks, and required to wear uniform at all time, and soldiers were forbidden from gathering in large groups.

The protests in Karlskrona during the spring of 1917 were by no means isolated incidents, but took place against a backdrop of hunger demonstrations across Sweden, some of which resulted in direct and violent encounters between the authorities and the demonstrators. These events can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand it is possible to see them as spontaneous expressions of frustration, born of the acute food shortages and difficult conditions faced by many working-class families at that time, but without a longer term political significance. The reformist leaders of the labour movement, concerned not to lose control of the situation in an atmosphere of extreme political volatility, were at pains to emphasise the unorganised, and therefore ineffective, nature of the demonstrations. As the summer approached, the protests seemed to die away as quickly as they had arisen.

Alternatively, the hunger demonstrations may be seen as a manifestation of popular support for the revolutionary idea, in the wake of the February revolution in Russia, and the fall of the conservative Hammarskjöld government in March. The success of the demonstrations in forcing concessions from food committees in many places seemed to be a vindication of the syndicalist tactic of direct action, and supporters of the revolutionary left also drew encouragement from the role played by military personnel in towns such as Karlskrona. The leader of the Social Democratic Party, Hjalmar Branting, tried to take control of the demonstrations in Stockholm, and channel the anger of the crowd into demands for universal suffrage, but he was unable to prevent a split within the movement, and the foundation of a revolutionary left wing party.

What was the role of the Swedish Co-operative Movement in the hunger demonstrations of 1917, and the associated debates over rationing and the distribution of the food supply? This question is not easy to answer, as it is probably fair to say that the Swedish Co-operative Movement has been under-researched, certainly from a labour movement perspective.

Certainly the 'kristiden' or time of crisis of the First World War has provoked more interest with regard to the reform or revolution debate than the politics of the food supply. From the point of view of the co-operative movement, even though the question of political action was of course debated during the period, the outcome was also different compared to Britain, in that the Co-operative Federation (Kooperativa Förbundet - KF) remained committed to the Rochdale principle of strict political neutrality. Indeed, the KF was critical of the British decision to enter politics, and declared that: *"Seen from our position it appears that the movement could very well benefit from the sympathies it [already] enjoys in different circles,*

without needing to engage itself in electoral struggles with the existing political parties."⁽¹⁹⁾

In practice, the position was probably rather more ambiguous, given that the KF enjoyed a fairly close relationship with the social democratic labour movement, especially at the local level where membership frequently overlapped. There was also mutual support between the two organisations. The KF had actively and openly supported the general strike in 1909, and the labour movement supported co-operators in their disputes with private enterprise, most notably in the KF's conflict with the margarine cartel in 1908-10.

This was also the case in Karlskrona, where the consumer co-operative society seems to have worked closely together with the wider labour movement. It was a small society, which ran two shops in 1900, and had a modest membership fluctuating between about 200 and 400 in the years before the war. During the war the society attempted to keep its prices as low as possible, but was hampered in its efforts by the sheer difficulty of getting hold of sufficient supplies.⁽²⁰⁾ This meant that most of the initiatives for political action over the food supply were taken by the labour council. Nonetheless, closer examination of the way in which this consumer politics was articulated reveals some important similarities between the two cases, despite the much less significant role played by the co-operative society in Karlskrona. In the first place, the problems with the food supply were attributed not merely to the war, but to the failures of the capitalist system of distribution. The drastic price rises of August 1914 were caused by 'the most hateful profit hunger, profiteering (ocker) on misery'. A well-attended public meeting early in 1915 condemned the destruction of competition by 'monopolies and trusts' and the failure of the government to introduce regulations to curb this. The meeting agreed a resolution pressing for the temporary suspension of customs duties on corn imports, and the agreement of a fixed price for corn.⁽²¹⁾ The banners at the 1915 May Day demonstrations carried a word which was rapidly becoming commonplace in the labour vocabulary: 'jobberi', which was to become a familiar allegation during the war years, and seems to correspond with the English term 'profiteering'. Nor was profiteering merely attributable to the large trusts. Despite the pre-war efforts of the Social Democratic Party to base its appeal on a broad alliance of the 'little people' or 'småfolket', it seemed unavoidable that the situation would drive a wedge between urban consumers and rural producers. Local fishermen were rumoured to be taking their catch as far away as Denmark where they could get a better price, while farmers sent their milk to Stockholm for the same reason, or even slaughtered their animals in preference to milking them. When the authorities set a national price for firewood they were condemned for setting a price *"which the farmers and forest*

owners of Blekinge never dreamed that they could get, even if profiteering in wood had continued unchecked."(22)

Before the war, the labour council and its affiliated trade unions had showed themselves willing to support the struggling co-operative society, by helping to publicise the society among their own members, and lending **delete 'its'** support in specific campaigns, such as the KF margarine boycott in 1909. As food prices rose after the start of the war, there is evidence that some within the labour movement now saw co-operation in a new light, as a genuine alternative to existing systems of distribution. A labour meeting to debate the high price of milk was told that more commitment to co-operation would have prevented the profiteering of the trusts.⁽²³⁾ The Dockyard Workers' Union, which organised the largest body of workers in Karlskrona, was campaigning hard to secure 'crisis supplements' (kristidstillägg) **delete inverted commas** for its members, but warned that in itself this presented no solution to the problem; instead, *"a lively interest in co-operation is just as necessary as improved wages."* Certainly, membership of the co-operative society more than doubled from 247 in 1913 to 671 the following year, and the society took out a front page advertisement in *Blekinge Folkblad* to explain the workings of the dividend system to potential members. It was also agreed, partly for financial reasons, that the society's chairman should be the Karlskrona delegate to the Social Democrats' first 'inflation congress' (dyrtidskongress) **delete inverted commas** in December 1916.

Although the high prices were consistently attributed to the actions of capitalist profiteers throughout the course of the war, there was however a subtle shift in emphasis, which replaced the 'period of inflation' or 'dyrtiden' of the period up to 1916 with the 'period of crisis' or 'kristiden'. With basic commodities not merely soaring in price, but vanishing altogether from local shops, the focus of the labour movement campaigns turned towards local control of the food supply. Shortly after the beginning of the war the Swedish state had taken action to establish local food committees on a county basis, in an attempt to regulate the food supply, and the machinery was quickly in place in most of the towns. The Karlskrona committee began to take some limited action from the beginning of 1915, exploring the possibilities for making bulk purchases of commodities such as wheat and rye grain which could then be sold at the lowest possible price in a municipal shop. These actions were criticised by the labour council as inadequate, and there were also complaints that the provision made for the sale of goods below the free market price – bacon for example was sold for less than 1.85 kronor per kilogram compared to anything up to 3 kronor **delete inverted commas on kronor** – was exercised indiscriminately, with the result that supplies had frequently sold out altogether

before working-class consumers could purchase them. With the introduction of bread rationing in early 1917, the situation became even more acute. Criticism was directed towards the government for allowing food exports to continue, and for setting the ration so low as to 'gamble with the people's health'. Although some speakers acknowledged that the situation in Karlskrona was relatively good compared to the privations in the north of Sweden, there was also some resentment that there seemed to be adequate military supplies in the town, despite the shortages in the civilian shops. But the greatest concerns arose over evidence that the rationing system was still failing to ensure that scarce goods were distributed fairly to all citizens.⁽²⁴⁾ The petition handed in to the local authorities in the wake of the hunger demonstration demanded that "*substantial measures be taken to ease the burden of this crisis on those members of society with less means.*" The proposals included: tighter controls to prevent black market trading; a ban on wholesale purchasing before 11 am; an increased bread ration for workers on low incomes – offset by a corresponding reduction for all those with higher incomes; the sale of potatoes and firewood to be organised through the food committee; and a reorganisation of this committee to include the appointment of one or more paid employees, and the "*election... of more people who have the support and trust of the ordinary people.*"⁽²⁵⁾ **Double inverted commas at start of quote; italics?** Perhaps mindful of the tense situation prevailing throughout the country, the authorities showed themselves not unwilling to meet these demands, and only a few days later it was reported that the response to the petition had been very satisfactory. Yet despite these concessions, the allegations that essential provisions were not distributed fairly 'to those with less means' continued. Speakers at a labour meeting, called to debate the issue, expressed their concerns that those with the luxury of a telephone could often secure their supply at the expense of those for whom the only option was to wait in a queue.⁽²⁶⁾ There were also demands that the food committee should conduct more of its business in public, and that it remained largely unaccountable despite the inclusion of more labour representatives.

Conclusion: A new consumer politics?

The popular political protests of the years 1917-18 have often been considered within the framework of broader debates about the escalation of radical class consciousness, and the revolutionary stirrings which shook much of Europe in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Neither of the two local case studies examined here can be considered to have to have been in the forefront of these developments. Plymouth and Karlskrona were both naval dockyard towns, where it has often been assumed that political radicalism was subsumed by

loyal support for the navy and hence for conservatism. However, even if the dockyard workforce did not display the radicalism of its counterparts on the Clyde or in Gothenburg, an examination of consumer **delete inverted commas** politics reveals these towns in a rather different light. Labour activists in Plymouth and Karlskrona certainly made some attempt to link their experiences of the events they were caught up in to wider political currents. In the co-operative and labour sources there were dramatic references to the war having 'shaken society to its foundations'.⁽²⁷⁾

There are of course some important contrasts between the two case studies which I have presented here, not least in the relative strength and influence of co-operation in the two towns. We still need to know more about the different forms which co-operation could take in different local contexts, and what was likely to influence its growth. In Plymouth, food politics was dominated by a very large **co-operative society (lower case c and s)** which was by far and away the strongest and most influential labour organisation in the town. In Karlskrona, the consumer co-operative society was really too small to have much impact on consumer politics, and food protests were co-ordinated instead by the local labour council and its affiliated trade unions. Despite these differences, reactions to the food situation, and analysis of its causes were fairly similar. In particular, the politics of food turned around two important issues. The first of these was the moral critique of the capitalist system which allowed individuals to benefit materially from the scarcity of essential goods. The term 'profiteering' – in Swedish 'ocker' or more commonly 'jobberi' – seems to have emerged as a new concept during the course of the war; there are no references to this in the local sources at least before 1914. But from the point of view of the co-operative movement in both countries, this has to be seen in the context of the co-operative challenge to capitalist systems of distribution and exchange. Co-operators were profoundly concerned at the growth of monopoly capitalism, which undermined consumer interests through its ability to fix prices. The Swedish Co-operative Federation fought several conflicts with food cartels in the period before 1914. Plymouth Co-operative Society was large enough to circumvent problems of supply by expanding its own independent production activities. By 1918 its holdings included a 2500 acre farm, and its own milk depot, bakeries, sausage and jam factories. In this way, co-operation could largely retain its traditional autonomy from the state. The main area of concern for the co-operative movement in both Britain and Sweden, up until 1916, was probably the degree to which co-operative surpluses should be liable for tax. As we have seen, the decision that co-operative surpluses should be eligible for Excess Profits Tax was catalytic in pushing the British movement towards political action. In Sweden, the

KF had used its informal political contacts to negotiate over the tax question throughout the period, and made a modest intervention in the 1917 election on the issue of tax. However, as the supply of essential foodstuffs became scarcer, and some form of rationing became inevitable, co-operators could certainly not afford to ignore the role of the state. In both the cases considered here, food control arrangements became a key source of conflict, especially from 1917. Campaigners argued for the need to give working-class consumers a voice in organising the practical matters of food distribution, and there were constant concerns that the arrangements were abused or violated against the interests of the least powerful. In this, Plymouth co-operators found themselves embroiled in renewed conflict with small independent shopkeepers, against whom they had successfully fought off an attempted boycott during the early 1900s. Many private traders also sought influence through municipal politics, and this was to bring them into conflict with the Co-op over the composition of the wartime Food Control Committee.

Inevitably, these conflicts were framed in terms of class. For some labour activists, committed to socialism and the class struggle, awareness of profiteering and the inequalities of food distribution contributed a new element to working-class consciousness, a point which was also recognised by the government: *"The wage earner is... also a purchaser, and in him are combined resentment against being cheated as a purchaser, and disinclination to do his best as producer in an industrial system which tolerates the 'profiteer'."*(28) The **less well off** or 'mindre bemedlade' found themselves united in the common experience of queuing for scarce supplies. Frequently, of course, this experience was also defined by gender, in that the heaviest burden fell on working-class women consumers. In the words of a prominent Plymouth co-operator: *"Labour is on the doormat again!... represented by the persons of thousands of working-class womenfolk and kiddies waiting in the rain for Margarine and Meat... Few happenings have gripped the public imagination as firmly as this spectacle of long files of people standing in the wind and rain for food."*(29) Recognising that women would soon be enfranchised, some co-operators suggested that the politicisation of consumers marked the emergence of a new, 'feminine' politics, concerned with household and family. This supports the claims of some historians that the involvement of the state in these areas, during the First World War, helped to redefine the relationship between consumption and citizenship. For example, Belinda Davis has shown how the experience of food scarcity in Berlin during the First World War helped to give working-class women a political voice as 'minderbemittelte' consumers in opposition to the 'profiteering' activities of producers, merchants and retailers. In the articulation of their demands urban consumers *"functioned as*

a catalyst for the transformation of relations between state and society", a process which was to contribute to the foundation of the modern welfare concept of citizenship. The vocabulary of consumer politics which she describes in Berlin is one which is familiar from the events examined here, whether co-operatives were involved in the debate or not.⁽³⁰⁾

If the First World War marked a turning point in the changing relationship between consumers and state, then this process was bound to have important consequences for consumer co-operation. The debate had different outcomes in Britain and Sweden. In Britain the Co-operative Congress resolved to establish a Co-operative Party, which worked closely together with the Labour Party, although many co-operators remained ambivalent about or even downright hostile towards the political views of the labour movement. In Sweden, the KF decided to retain its political neutrality, and act instead as a non-partisan pressure group, although from the 1920s it developed closer relations with the state as the quasi-official (corporatist even?) representative of consumer interests. Nevertheless, the different forms which co-operative involvement in politics ultimately took in Britain and Sweden should not conceal the similarities in the issues faced by the movements, which would repay further comparative study. The two case studies considered in this paper suggest the existence of very similar debates over the politics of the food supply during a time of scarcity. In recent years, social historians have demonstrated that issues of food and consumption have to be taken seriously in working-class politics, where more emphasis previously had been placed on conflicts in the sphere of production. Comparative analysis of the politics of the Co-operative Movement would have to be considered in this context.

Endnotes

(1) Co-operative Congress Report, 1917. In: A. BONNER, *British Co-operation: A Survey of the History, Principles, and Organisation of the Co-operative Movement in Great Britain and Ireland*, Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1961, p. 142-3.

(2) The most important accounts of the formation of the Co-operative Party include G.D.H.COLE, *A Century of Co-operation*, London: Co-operative Union, 1944, chs. 15 and 19; A. BONNER, *British Co-operation*, p. 140-3, 189-194; T. CARBERY, *Consumers in Politics: A History and General Review of the Co-operative Party*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969. More recently, see S. POLLARD, *The Foundation of the Co-operative Party*. In: A. BRIGGS and J. SAVILLE, eds., *Essays in Labour History*, vol. 2,

London: Macmillan, 1971, p. 185-210; T. ADAMS, The Formation of the Co-operative Party Reconsidered. In: *International Review of Social History*, 32 (1987), p. 48-68; P. GURNEY, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, c. 1870-1930*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996, ch. 8.

(3) For the Plymouth Co-operative Society, see R. BRISCOE, *Centenary History: A Hundred Years of Co-operation in Plymouth*, Manchester: Co-operative Press, 1960; M. HILSON, *Working-Class Politics in Plymouth, c.1890-1920*, Univ of Exeter PhD thesis, 1998, chs. 3 and 4.

(4) *Plymouth Co-operative Record* (hereafter *Record*), January 1916.

(5) The trade/organisation of the twelve members of the committee were as follows: 3 grocers, 1 builder, 1 ice merchant, 1 butcher, 1 baker and 1 dairyman; 1 representative of the Trades and Labour Council; 2 representatives of Plymouth Co-operative Society; 1 representative of women's organisations. *Co-operator*, 1.9.1917.

(6) *Co-operator*, September 1917 *passim*; 5.10.1917; 13.10.1917; 17.11.1917; 19.1.1918; *Record*, September 1917.

(7) *Record*, Oct 1917.

(8) *Co-operator*, 19.1.18.

(9) G.D.H. COLE, *Century of Co-operation*, p. 269.

(10) S. POLLARD, *The Foundation of [...]*, p. 201.

(11) T. ADAMS, *The Formation of [...]*. See also the exchange between Pollard and Adams. In: *International Review of Social History*, 32 (1987), p. 168-79.

(12) *Record*, November 1917, p. 280-1.

(13) *Record*, October 1919.

(14) *Record*, June 1919.

(15) *Record*, October 1919.

(16) P. GURNEY, *Co-operative Culture*, esp. p. 209-11.

(17) For the co-operative movement elsewhere in Europe see the essays in E. FURLOUGH and C. STRIKWERDA, eds., *Consumers against Capitalism? Consumer Co-operation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840-1990*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999; especially E. FURLOUGH and C. STRIKWERDA, Economics, Consumer Culture and Gender: An Introduction to the Politics of Consumer Cooperation, p. 16-17; B FAIRBAIRN, The Rise and Fall of Consumer Cooperation in Germany, p. 283-288; also E. FURLOUGH, *Consumer Cooperation in France: The Politics of Consumption 1834-1930*, Ithaca: Cornell

- University Press, 1991, p. 119-166; O. RUIN, *Kooperativa Förbundet 1899-1929. En organisationsstudie*, Lund, 1960, p. 134-169, 279-287, 317-343.
- (18) *Blekinge Folkblad*, 28.4.17, from which the following account is drawn.
- (19) *Konsumentbladet* 1917: p. 28; cited in O. RUIN, *Kooperativa Förbundet*, p. 317. Unless otherwise stated, translations from the Swedish are the author's.
- (20) On co-operation in Karlskrona, see A PÅHLMAN and W SJÖLIN, *Kooperationen i Karlskrona, 1869-1939*, Stockholm, 1940.
- (21) *Blekinge Folkblad*, 5.8.1914; 3.2.1915.
- (22) Folkrörelsearkivet i Blekinge län, Karlskrona arbetarkommun protokoll 13.2.1917; 28.6.1917; 21.12.1918.
- (23) Folkrörelsearkivet i Blekinge län, Karlskrona arbetarkommun protokoll 21.12.18; Karlskrona Marinmusei arkiv, MVAF protokoll 31.1.1916; 8.12.1916.
- (24) *Blekinge Folkblad*, 19.7.1915; 11.10.1915; Folkrörelsearkivet i Blekinge län, Karlskrona arbetarkommun protokoll, 25.1.1917; 13.2.1917.
- (25) *Blekinge Folkblad*, 30.4.1917; 3.5.1917; Karlskrona Marinmusei arkiv, MVAF protokoll 11.5.1917.
- (26) Folkrörelsearkivet i Blekinge län, Karlskrona arbetarkommun styrelsen protokoll, 7.8.1917.
- (27) *Record*, January 1917; *Blekinge Folkblad*, 2.4.1917. On the disturbances in Sweden during 1917, see C.G. ANDRÆ, *Revolt eller reform. Sverige inför revolutionerna i Europa 1917-1918*, Stockholm: Carlssons, 1998.
- (28) Ministry of Labour, comment on labour situation for week ending 27.7.1919, cited in B. WAITES, *A Class Society at War: Britain 1914-1918*, Leamington Spa: Berg, 1987, p. 222.
- (29) *Co-operator*, 9.2.1918.
- (30) B.J. DAVIS, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000; F. TRENTMANN, 'Bread, Milk and Democracy: Consumption and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century Britain', in M. DAUNTON and M. HILTON, eds., *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, Oxford: Berg, 2001, p. 129-163.

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