

RADICAL AGRICULTURE

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URBAN-RURAL FOOD ALLIANCES:
A PERSPECTIVE ON RECENT COMMUNITY
FOOD ORGANIZING

Darryl McLeod

The late sixties saw small groups of people in every major North American city begin organizing food cooperatives. Their motives and methods were diverse: Some opened small stores ("storefront co-ops") while others organized federations of neighborhood buying groups ("food conspiracies"). Riding on a subsiding wave of political and cultural activism, the co-ops formed quickly and initially depended completely on volunteer labor. Not a few organizing efforts were ill-defined and short-lived. In many cities, however, the new groups flourished and common patterns of organization began to emerge. Co-ops in Minneapolis, Madison, and Seattle, for example, rapidly developed networks of self-managed restaurants, bakeries, warehouses, grain mills, numerous storefronts or neighborhoods, and even nearby farms.

This chapter attempts to document the growth and to understand the direction of these new food distribution systems. How do these organizations compare with traditional American cooperatives and how do they differ from the conventional corporate food markets?

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The answer to these questions involves more than a discussion of a few stores and neighborhoods. An urbanized society depends upon a complex food and agriculture system. The organization and regulation of food marketing determines the fate of the farm economy as well as the quality, cost, and type of food distributed. In order to deal with the problems of this complex marketing system many urban groups have found it necessary not only to alter handling and processing techniques within the cities but to encourage diversified ecological farms and compatible rural communities outside the cities. In many regions farmer-consumer associations have formed to deal with marketing, food quality, and food production.¹ These "urban-rural alliances" are necessary if an urban group hopes to provide any sort of viable "alternative" to the American food industry.

The development of this economic link between city neighborhoods and rural settlements is of particular interest to us. The federation of small farms and urban co-ops qualitatively changes the potential and dimension of both groups' efforts. Aside from the obvious advantages of farmer consumer cooperation, people are able to get beyond the narrow self-interest of individual farmers and shopkeepers, which handicapped earlier cooperative movements. When workers begin to view the food economy in its totality rather than in terms of their own niche within it, seemingly contradictory problems (i.e., high food prices, shortages of surpluses, rural poverty) find their common root.

Farms and Markets

The old idea of trying to solve the farm problem on the farm is outmoded . . . modern agriculture is inseparable from the business firms which manufacture production supplies and which market farm products.—John Davis, 1956.

This wholistic approach acknowledges the high degree of interdependence and specialization that characterizes the modern industrialized food complex. Today's food economy depends on more than a few farms, stores, and middlemen; it includes food processors, farm machinery companies, petro-chemical and transportation complexes, packaging and advertising firms, government agencies, university laboratories, banks and many other institutions that

surround the farmer. Attempts to reform (or substitute for) one of these components without altering the others are doomed to failure. One example is the long battle by reformers to preserve the dispersed family farmer in the face of growing centralization and corporate domination of the institutions surrounding him.

One of the first to comprehend the reality of a broad unified corporate food complex and to predict its effects on the farm economy was John Davis, assistant secretary of agriculture under Eisenhower. Back in the fifties, when farm leadership was still painting a picture of independent family farms, farmer-controlled cooperative marketing, and consumer sovereignty in the cities, Davis was talking about contract farming and "vertical integration." He and his colleague Earl Butz went against secretary Benson and all of the farm organizations when they advocated "corporate control to 'rationalize' agriculture production."² The interdependence and the power of this emerging government and corporate agriculture bloc so impressed Davis that he devised one word to describe its totality—*agribusiness*.

Davis's analysis also points to the crucial and dynamic role the food marketing structure plays in determining the way food is grown, the size and location of farms, and, in short, the type of rural economy that will emerge. If we explore the historical interaction of farms and markets in the United States, the importance of this relationship becomes even more striking. Today, one could almost say that the type of agriculture we have is determined not in the countryside, but in the offices and factories of the city. It is not surprising that the changes in conventional marketing structures made by the new cooperative networks have begun to foster new experiments in small-scale, ecological farming.

An American Cooperative Heritage?

Some observers have loosely labeled the appearance of the new food groups a "cooperative revival" in the American tradition.³ However a quick comparison of the form and functions of the newer cooperative networks with those of established consumer and farm marketing cooperatives reveals little common ground. Aside from a few experiments with joint farmer-consumer buying organizations during the thirties and perhaps the Farmer Con-

sumer Associations formed recently in many states to certify organic food, real rural-urban cooperation is unprecedented.⁴

The thought of today's huge farm marketing "cooperatives" (e.g., Sunkist, Land o' Lakes, Associated Milk producers) working with any urban consumer group stretches the imagination.⁵

Even the more progressive "Twin-pines" consumer cooperatives have often viewed the unorthodox urban co-ops with hostility. Art Danforth, leading ideologue of the national "Cooperative League," once likened food conspiracy organizers to "agents of Safeway," working to subvert successful cooperative supermarkets.⁶

It is not quite fair, though, to damn past cooperative movements solely on the practices and attitudes of the surviving institutions that call themselves co-ops. A brief look at the development of nineteenth-century cooperatives reveals more subtle distinctions and similarities.

Farm Cooperatives in Perspective

The American farmer has never glorified the ideal or accepted the condition of self-sufficiency. He has always seen himself as a creature of the marketplace. . . .—W. A. WILLIAMS, 1969

Both American consumer and farm cooperatives trace their origins to the small English industrial town of Rochdale. By 1844, this small community of flannel weavers had long been battered by fluctuating world markets and economic crises. Facing a broken strike and a severe depression, these twenty-eight producers felt compelled to abandon the illusory comforts of the "invisible hand." They set down a successful three-stage plan for the development of a "Cooperative Society."⁷ A consumer purchasing co-op was to be set up immediately and run on certain principles (modified to become the famed Rochdale principles). Soon thereafter "production cooperatives" would be organized (the weavers reopened their mill and ran it cooperatively). Finally, their town would become one of many "cooperative settlements": ". . . as soon as practicable this society shall proceed to arrange the powers of production, distribution, education and government; or in other words establish a self supporting colony of united interests or assist other Societies in establishing such Colonies."⁸

erate or that cooperatives were bad businesses. A closer look at these assumptions by USDA researcher L. S. Tenny revealed that cooperative business failures had not been "unduly great." In fact: "The same factors working in a privately owned organization would have brought about the same disastrous results."¹⁶

This was an era of rapid centralization of corporate power and regular, economic depression; few small businesses found survival easy. The farmers tried to keep their co-op enterprises small, controllable, and within the local community. In a world of big and expanding urban markets, this tactic meant slow death. It also contradicted the second broad objective of the farm cooperative movement—to stabilize the food and agriculture system in such a way that the economic status of the independent family farmer was preserved. The local associations were faced with a dilemma. In order to improve their position in the marketplace, they would have to become large enough to bargain with and supply the new factory processors and shipping trusts. The farmers would have to become a very small part of a large, centralized organization which extended far beyond their local community and the limits of real cooperative control.

An attempt to reconcile this contradiction between size and local membership were the cooperative federations. Starting in 1893 with the California Fruit Exchange, many locals organized together to use larger processing plants or to make long distance shipments.¹⁷ But organizing federations was slow going, and they were limited in their urban activities and effective size.

It is conceivable that the local associations could have been more effective and still have remained within the community had they expanded in a different way. The cooperatives could have assimilated a variety of related functions and services within the rural towns. Experience in other countries has demonstrated that "multipurpose cooperatives," organizations that provide credit, supplies, machinery, research, and other related services, are most effective in building a strong economic community.¹⁸ Partial self-sufficiency at the local level was a form of bargaining power never widely used. As it was, most nineteenth-century co-ops were formed around narrow functions and had few ties with other local institutions (today cooperative functions are made narrow by charter laws). One notable exception was the SVEA community

in Minnesota.¹⁹ Starting in 1896 with a Rochdale-plan creamery, this Swedish farm community took over the phone system, the local bank, an insurance company, the village store and, by 1910, had their own grain elevator. The members of this cooperative, most of them old Farmer's Alliance members, soon ran the county government. This type of rural cooperation may have been carried to its logical conclusion in the "agrarian socialist" government of Saskatchewan, Canada, and for a time in North Dakota.²⁰

Beginning in 1912 with the Sun Maid Raisin Growers, the cooperative federation movement was eclipsed by another form of organization—the Centralized Cooperative.²¹ These associations were much larger, with tens of thousands rather than thousands of members. By 1925, sixty-one of these centrals had a larger total membership than the five thousand remaining locals and federations combined.²²

If the old associations were formed to serve expanding new markets, these new "co-ops" promised to create and control them. Often organized by outside businessmen, farmers would join or subscribe to the marketing co-ops' services as individuals rather than through the old locals. There was debate in cooperative circles as to whether these organizations could really get farmer support or whether they were even cooperatives.²³ The management of these associations aimed at becoming the bargaining and promotional agency for the crop of an entire region.

In 1922 the Capper-Volstead Act gave federal endorsement to these questionable "cooperative" tactics of the centralized co-ops. The law gave the cooperative managers extraordinary powers to enforce future production contracts on farmers and to regulate and standardize farm produce. These central bureaucracies were even exempted from various antitrust statutes.

Business and government leaders hoped the centralized co-ops would act as "bargaining agents" for the thousands of farm operators, thereby bringing the troublesome farmers in line, much as the unions did for labor. Special powers and government endorsement were not enough however, to enable the central association either to gain the loyalty of the average farmer, or to really distinguish co-op marketing tactics from those of their agribusiness counterparts. Just two years later (1924) farmers essentially gave up on any sort of "cooperative" farm program and returned to

their familiar cry for expanded export markets and tariff equality under the new McNary-Haugen Bill.²⁴

Today the Agricultural Cooperative story hardly needs telling. Out of the seven thousand surviving cooperatives, the one hundred largest account for half the total sales and assets. Several "cooperatives" are among the nation's five hundred largest corporations.²⁵ [Today, talk of a "return to farmer control" is good for a few cynical chuckles from old-time farmers.]

*Consumer Cooperatives: From Twin Pines to
Cooperative Supermarkets*

The development of *urban* consumer cooperatives followed a pattern similar to that of the agricultural associations. The first real city co-ops got their start in the tight ethnic communities of European immigrants who brought the cooperative heritage from the old country. As the surrounding minority communities melted into the great American majority, the small isolated stores were left to fend for themselves in the world of business. These stores might have faded away with their original communities had this not been the "Age of Reform." Early in the twentieth century, a few reformers saw consumer cooperation as a "scheme for social reorganization," a way to check growing corporate producers' domination and replace the "profit motive with the service motive."²⁶

One of the most influential of these progressives was Dr. James Peter Warbasse, founder of the Cooperative League. The twin pines symbol Warbasse designed and the league he financed have become synonymous with the idea of consumer cooperation in the U.S. Unfortunately, Warbasse epitomized some of the worst traditions in American Cooperative organizing. He began a one-man, Owen-like crusade to organize cooperatives for "the common American." Like the many cooperative idealists who followed him, his singular means precluded genuine collective ends. Saddest of all, Warbasse and his league began a tradition of separation of producer and consumer cooperatives.²⁷ He had no faith in the ability of farmers or workers to organize their own enterprises. Warbasse taught that without expert management or something called "consumer control" the production cooperative would al-

ways become either a business failure or a profit-seeking private business. As a result the league became a barrier to the development of a "full cooperative,"²⁸ or any workable alternate food or agriculture system. Today, while they still promote the idea of "a new cooperative owned and controlled by farm and urban cooperatives,"²⁹ the league has never developed a complete critique of the food marketing system to which they claimed to offer an alternative.

Left with a few stores that had lost their communities, and a program with no broad appeal, the league began to advise cooperatives on business practices and to lobby the federal government for official sanction. The prescription for the ailing co-ops included expert management, centralized administration for efficiency, and competitive expansion. The Rochdale principles were diluted even further. Membership control became a meaningless voting ritual; patronage dividends became a token sales gimmick and the Rochdale home settlement expansion was replaced by an ethic of corporate growth and merger.³⁰ The twin pines co-ops were swept up by the same chain-store revolution and supermarket concentration that changed private food retailing and the eating habits of America.

Though twin pines leaders advocated and endorsed prevailing business methods of food marketing, they could not have comprehended the importance of the changes that mass-merchandising and corporate concentration were to bring to the food and agricultural system of America. The industrialization of farming and food processing that followed the chain-store revolution came at the expense of the very farmers and consumers the cooperatives represented. Chain stores began in the late twenties as a very profitable method of integrating back to suppliers and circumventing the traditional "terminal markets" and the thousands of small middlemen.³¹ Unfortunately, this antiquated system of small distributors and "ma and pa" stores was the only access to urban markets the small farmer had. It was "a marketing system shaped to fit this [small-farm] agriculture," and its obsolescence signaled the decline of a dispersed agriculture system in the U.S.³² When the real concentration in retailing began in the late forties and fifties, most small stores and farm co-ops were left in the dust. Today three-quarters of all the food sold in this country is sold in

"super-markets" (chains with sales of over \$500,000) with the four largest accounting for nearly one-third that total.³³

Today, twin pines literature discusses the tough competitive food retailing business, the narrow profit margins, and modern, efficient supermarkets. Cooperative spokesmen offer pathetic plots "to convert a national chain to a cooperative."³⁴ Supermarkets are efficient if one accepts the "silent violence" of chemical food technology³⁵ and the ecological nightmare of frivolous food packaging.

The modern supermarket depends upon the ability of science and factory to alter some very fundamental natural qualities of food. Freshly harvested food has certain well-known tendencies. Chemical enzyme activity continues within the harvested fruit or vegetable and its taste, appearance, and nutritional value change rapidly with handling and the passage of time. As with all living things, harvested food is susceptible to bacteria, fungus, and the attacks of other living organisms. Using their arsenal of sprays, fumigants, additives, and processing tricks, food technologists have been able to duplicate or preserve the appearance and even the taste, but rarely the nutritional value of food products.³⁶

Food processing technology has only given food the appearance of durability and freshness, while sacrificing essential nutritional and living qualities. It has attempted, at a very high price, to tailor food to its own marketing schemes.

As a recent Agriculture Extension Service publication declares: "The old simple concept of food as a staple, basic commodity and of a sovereign consumer with a clearly defined demand for food is being cast aside. Industry seeks to create consumer demand for differentiated products and then to tailor the marketing and production process accordingly. This is a process that has been effectively used in the production and marketing of automobiles, television sets and numerous other consumer items. . . . The demands of the supermarket for specific quantities and qualities are being transmitted to the processors and producers and are being acted upon."³⁷

There is little doubt as to what kind of food the supermarket demands; between 1929 and 1958, per capita consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables declined 30 percent while processed food consumption increased 152 percent. The value added to raw

produce by food processing increased 325 percent between 1939 and 1957.³⁸ The same modern industry that strives to make potentially durable appliances and automobiles quickly obsolete has tried to transform perishable, healthy food into a durable, lifeless commodity.

Interestingly enough, supermarket technicians make no pretense of efficiency. A 1966 government technical study, "Food from Farmer to Consumer," concludes that when it comes to food retailing: ". . . efficiency is secondary to merchandizing. The paramount aspect of retailing is affecting the consumer's decisions—the decision to enter the store and the decision to select from the items displayed."³⁹ In 1970 the food industry spent well over \$3 billion on food advertising and another \$9 billion on food packaging⁴⁰ (compared to \$300 million on nutritional research in 1967). As for profits, that small 1 to 2 percent sales margin always translates into a healthy 15 to 20 percent real profit (return on investment).⁴¹

In retrospect, twin pines cooperatives were a classic case of confusing community service with business survival. Had they not chosen to compete and expand by the supermarkets' rules, cooperative managers reply, there might be no consumer cooperatives left at all. But meager "extra" services that twin pines co-ops offer are not enough to compensate for the damage their presence does to any remnants of a popular "alternative" consumer cooperative. Not since the early fifties have twin pines supermarkets let social concern or political strife interfere with business profits. As the manager of Berkeley's "cooperative" natural foods supermarket declared, while ignoring the decisions of the store's membership council, "My first duty is to see that the store survives."⁴² Words guaranteed to discourage any beleaguered believer in cooperative consumer control or economic democracy.

The New Community Food Cooperatives: The Urban-Rural Link

American cooperatives began as something a lot of farm and city people needed, and became something a few organizers wanted. If, in fact, we are experiencing a "cooperative revival" in the American tradition, we have little to look forward to. After the

initial wave subsides, the most we can expect is a few more cooperative businesses and perhaps a couple of zealous cooperative crusaders. Cooperatives have done little or nothing to reverse trends toward larger farms, ubiquitous supermarkets, deteriorating food and environmental quality, and the general loss of initiative and self-determination on the part of the common American.

Fortunately, there are numerous characteristics that tend to distinguish today's new community co-ops from the old cooperative movements in particular, and from conventional food marketing in general. In order to understand the most important of these distinctions, it may be useful to think in terms of three roles a cooperative or any economic "alternative" institution might play in a given situation.

I

Cooperatives get their start because they are sensitive to a need in a certain area. . . . They survive if they stress survival rather than ideals of individual members' participation as realistic goals.

—Howard Adelman, 1969

Initially, the purpose of the cooperative simply may be to provide immediate economic benefits for its members. In this first role, group economic action can increase member savings, provide new services or create additional social motivation or bargaining power. These initial benefits have been the primary focus of nearly all American food and farm cooperatives. Conventional cooperatives often have been transitional, partly because these limited needs are soon filled and partly because they could be replaced by private firms.

Most of the new food associations differ from the old even in the immediate needs they were created to meet. Conventional cooperatives were usually started in times of material hardship and economic uncertainty. The sixties, on the other hand, were times of material prosperity, but cultural upheaval and political unrest. The neighborhood and storefront co-ops are still very much concerned with food prices and nutritional quality (some more than others), but community economic sovereignty and changes in interpersonal relationships (e.g., man to woman, worker to manager) merit equal if not greater emphasis. Some may view the new cooperatives

as a base from which to continue their attacks on capitalist institutions and others as an opportunity to implement more satisfactory interpersonal relationships, but all seek more than just cheap food.⁴³

The new groups are not concerned with business survival so much as with continuing to meet the basic needs of their own communities. If one of the new storefronts or neighborhoods loses local support or internal consensus, it is not "saved" by business reorganization or consolidation as were the twin pines stores: it simply closes down for a while. The working groups stress the goods and services they provide each other rather than those a private wage could buy. Paying themselves uniformly low "subsistence wages," the workers have expanded into many food-related processes and produce a wide variety of goods and services consistent with their low-consumption, ecological life-styles. Storefronts in Minneapolis operate on a gross margin of 10 percent across the board, less than half that of the largest chain stores. Yet the co-ops have no exclusive membership or any other method of discriminating benefits and obligations other than the neighborhood one lives in. Their efforts have begun to produce unique social institutions. In Minneapolis, there is a restaurant with no prices—for two years, people have paid what they could for good, well-prepared meals.

This is definitely not the model for cooperative organizing recommended by the Cooperative League or by government community development projects. A closer parallel might be the original vision of the Rochdale Weavers. Or, perhaps, the municipal economic sovereignty documented by Peter Kropotkin in his idealized, *Mutual Aid* description of the medieval "free cities."⁴⁴ Of course, one limitation is that, despite the best efforts of food cooperatives, free clinics, and tenants unions, living in America's cities is not "free" in any sense of the word. Unless the cooperatives are able to grow rapidly and meet a wider range of human needs, the self-sacrifice that working in a co-op requires might become only a phase in a person's development—sadly analogous to the Peace Corp, community lawyers, Vista, etc. Such a transient workforce would undermine the continuity the groups and community need in order to grow and develop.

... consumer cooperatives alone have measurably lightened the burden of existence for a great many people. Their weakness consists in the fact that they have not altered the contents of the modern social order even when they have altered the method of distribution.

—Lewis Mumford

A second role of an "alternative" co-op may be to develop and implement new forms of organizations and alternate techniques of production or distribution. Traditional cooperatives promised to cure the ills of the industrial food system, yet they failed to alter its basic organization of production or its technical methods. Their leaders were enthralled with miracles of the new technology, were blinded by specialization, and were infatuated with the large centralized firm. The new cooperatives, on the other hand, have experimented with neighborhood councils, planning and accounting methods, work-teams, preorder food systems, recycling, bulk-packaging, and ecological farming. Today people seem to be less intimidated by the mythology of markets and capitalist efficiency and entertain fewer utopian fantasies of quick improvements without fundamental restructuring.

The new community food cooperatives differ in another way from traditional cooperative businesses in that the latter have usually failed to "decentralize" individual responsibility for community economic growth and for day-to-day management decisions. A key trait of traditional cooperatives (as well as capitalist and state capitalist institutions) is that they make the investment and management decisions of a large group the responsibility of a few individuals.⁴⁵ The ability of people to be leaders in some situations and followers in others, to be both teachers and learners, or to contribute their varied talents in the work place is stifled by these business bureaucracies. Broader-based management techniques would not only be more consistent with cooperative ideals, but would foster greater individual freedom and creativity while making small, powerful management groups superfluous.

In the food cooperative communities of Seattle, Minneapolis, and Berkeley a conscious effort has been made to keep all decision-making in the hands of the working groups and neighborhoods.⁴⁶ With the aid of newsletters, informal planning, and regular meet-

ings, a workable consensus management process has evolved in Seattle and Minneapolis. Successful restaurants, bakeries, warehouses, and stores are run on this basis day to day, while broader issues are discussed at all co-op meetings. The people who attend these central meetings are not elected representatives; rather, their "liaison" role is similar to that of European workers councils' "revocable delegate."⁴⁷ This process contrasts with the "one man, one vote" system and the "patronage dividends" investment technique of earlier cooperatives. This organizational form places limitations on the size of the economic or neighborhood unit (about twenty people is the most that can be expected to agree), but it usually means that when an important crisis arises it will be resolved, not voted away. The consensus process puts the responsibility for every economic decision upon each individual, for one objection can stop the works.

This increased individual responsibility and activity works in part because such techniques as visible markups, preordering, rotated jobs, open books, and source identification make the food distribution process almost transparent. A relatively simple idea like preordering has a wide variety of implications and has greatly improved certain aspects of alternative food distribution.⁴⁸ Preordering almost naturally establishes a rhythm more suited to the various forms of perishable food. Preordering also discourages compulsive patterns of buying so typical in traditional supermarkets where the buyer is faced with a wide variety of choices. Through some relatively simple planning at the group level, "impulse-buying" and distribution costs are greatly reduced. Purchasing decisions are based on household planning rather than on the confused quagmire of supermarket packaging and advertising.

An important by-product of the preorder system is a stock of information that can be used to form a more direct link between farmers and urban consumers. Ever since the Homestead settlers stopped producing for nearby tables and became raw material sources for food processors and shippers, one "farm problem" has been to reconcile supply with the fluctuating demands for food-stuffs. When combined with good communication links, a few joint handling facilities, and diversified urban-fringe farms, last year's ordering information can be used to coordinate production with consumption and encourage a steady flow of fresh food to

urban communities. A good example is the Common Market in Madison, which serves several hundred neighborhood groups. Before the beginning of each season the surrounding farmers meet and divide the projected food orders among themselves; each producer is then given a verbal guarantee of the order and price he can expect to receive.

A real reorganization of urban marketing through preordering and other innovations will require an altogether different type of farm technology and economy. Modern agriculture, with its large mono-cropped regions and short harvest seasons depends upon, and caters to, a multitude of processing and packaging techniques for storing and shipping food long distances. Millions of dollars are spent on government inspection, grading, culling, preserving, and bulk transportation so that a few large firms in California might provide half the country's fruit and vegetables. Such a system only seems rational if you think in large-scale terms—carloads of food, huge food-processing factories, and a penny profit on every pound. The problem is that people eat all year and demand a wide variety of foods in small quantities. So even more food dollars are spent to break down these large lots and to package, process, and preserve food for supermarket retailing operations. These operations consume an ever-larger portion of the food dollar and the nation's resources.⁴⁹ The end product of this massive industry and government effort is, in almost every way, inferior to fresh food right off the farm. The recurrent crop shortages, transportation problems, and absurdly high raw produce prices of recent years cast doubt on the wisdom of regional crop specialization, long distance shipping of foodstuffs, and the very industrial foundations of the modern food industry. Placed in the midst of these monocultures and huge food factories and supermarketing wonders, small diversified farms would be an aberration. But in the context of the preordering networks that are beginning to develop, such urban-fringe farms are not only desirable but necessary. A well-managed polyculture farm⁵⁰ produces a wide variety of animal and vegetable products in small quantities. Its rural, ecological, and social ramifications dovetail nicely with the aspirations and efforts of today's urban neighborhoods. Urban food organizing has been able to provide the new experimental "organic" farms with more than a dependable, predictable year-round outlet for its variety of produce.

Work brigades and other community groups have frequently gone to work on the farms, exchanging labor and ideas. A symbiotic economic union of these neighborhoods and rural settlements could provide an environment where a more rational and flexible *information technology* could begin to supplant the nutritionally destructive and energy-wasting *storage technology* of conventional food marketing.

A good case study of an attempt to operate America's food system without the aid of harmful chemical technology and without changing the basic marketing structure is the so-called organic food movement. About six years ago a number of food eaters, merchants, and farmers set out to change the destructive dietary and farming habits of Americans by supplying them with "organically grown" fresh produce and grains. In the beginning everything seemed to be going for the "clean-food" entrepreneurs. Consumer demand was incredible. Declaring organic food 1971's "glamour business," *Barron's Financial Weekly* predicted that by 1975, 40 percent of the nation's food supply would come from the "health food industry."⁵¹ However, a few years later "nature's bounty" had begun to sour. Organic produce had a reputation for poor quality, high prices, and outright fraud. As demand dropped off, the "organic" food industry was left with the dubious distinction of making good, wholesome food a middle-class luxury.

The industry's problems were more than growing pains. By using the professional farmers, machinery, and handling techniques of the chemical food industry, it was doomed before it began. Without doing the necessary groundwork, organic growers produced an inferior product at twice the cost. Overnight wonders like California's New Age Organic Food Distribution Center ran aground simply because they were unable to devise the new production and distribution techniques demanded by organic foods. Many firms have been bought out by the very food industries to whom they purported to offer an alternative.

III

From yet a third perspective, cooperatives can be part of a community-wide effort to develop and assert cultural identity separate from surrounding institutions and outside control. Often a prolonged strike, boycott, political protest, or just a wide dis-

parity in culture or world view will prompt a group of people to begin to supply their own basic needs. Sometimes these impromptu efforts develop into community cooperatives. In Berkeley and Palo Alto, for example, "food conspiracies" were organized nearly five years ago as part of a tenants union strike. Other times these food networks were more short-lived. In the 1919 Seattle general strike, workers and farmers organized neighborhood milk depots and community kitchens that served over thirty thousand meals a day.⁵² In May 1968, French students, workers, and peasants established a complex provisioning system amidst the barricaded Paris streets.⁵³ Rural federations of self-managed cooperative production units were well developed by agrarian anarchists during the Spanish Civil War, 1936 to 1939.⁵⁴ However long these "insurgent communities" may last, they broaden the potentials and motive power of any food organizing effort and should be recognized in any evaluation of cooperative institutions.

In the same light, it is impossible to understand the food cooperatives of the sixties without taking into account the cultural and political upheaval that prompted their organization. In this particular description, we have emphasized the practices and organizational forms the co-ops developed, rather than the theory or "movement" behind them. This emphasis should not obscure the fact that nearly all the co-op organizing was a conscious effort to preserve and develop the revolutionary and cultural energy of the period. On the other hand, few co-op workers see their "alternative" institutions as ends in themselves or as a substitute for the necessary transformation of industrialized society. Conditions have obviously changed from those of the sixties; the political spirit and cultural enthusiasm have waned. Yet the economic crises and raw material shortages of the seventies make this type of organizing even more desirable and effective.

One of the major failings of earlier cooperative movements was their lack of defined goals or general theory from which to evolve. A cooperative that survived as a business was almost always the one that had left its founding community and original purpose far behind. Who would guess that a giant supermarket complex like the Berkeley twin pines co-op was begun by the Finns, the most radical of all cooperative organizers. Today, because their communities have coalesced around a similar world view, many co-

operative federations have adopted common principles or "operational guidelines." Both can be used as points of departure and as measures of progress independent of outside norms.

One of the best examples of this defined inner-community federation is the "cooperating community" in Seattle.⁵⁵ Other cities achieve the same effect through regular newsletters and "all-co-op" or "all-conspiracy" meetings.

If they are to avoid the fate of the organic food merchants, the cooperative food networks must develop broader, more innovative rural-urban alliances. Buying and selling food is simply not enough. Cooperative farms outside of Seattle and San Francisco are having trouble sustaining themselves even though they sell all their produce. Efforts at joint warehousing, transportation, and labor exchanges have met with only mixed success. Most regions have temporarily settled on a combination of preordering and "farmer's markets" (in cities that have them). Part of the answer is more efficient, "single exchange" marketing arrangements coupled with more sophisticated polycultural farms.⁵⁶ And part of the answer lies in not having specialized farms at all. The trend is toward rural communities that absorb more of the culture, industry, and people of the cities and urban groups who do more farming.

During their brief history, the new cooperative food network has made a significant break with American cooperative tradition. By taking a broad rural-urban approach and by making a radical departure from normal business practices, they have demonstrated that cooperative organizing need not be the futile diversion from fundamental social change that earlier cooperative movements have become. Already their accomplishments have confirmed the creative and practical potential of self-managed economic units and have provided a glimmer of the ecological rationality that must govern any viable food economy.

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