

## **Globalization and Co-operatives**



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University of Saskatchewan**

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THIS PAPER OFFERS SOME THOUGHTS on two of the core concepts at issue in any current study of co-operatives: globalization and identity.\* The research project that is the subject of this book<sup>1</sup> is examining the “impact of globalization on membership identities and practices in selected communities.” In order to address this relationship well, I introduce one further concept into the mix: autonomy. Certainly, when I think about co-operatives and why they are created and sustained in communities, it is related in some ways to a concern about social autonomy. I suggest that an examination of these three concepts and their relationships with one another might provide some background thinking that will help us better understand some of the challenges faced by co-operatives in Canada today.

## **Globalization**

GLOBALIZATION IS TYPICAL of many concepts in the social sciences in that it carries considerable ideological baggage. Its meaning differs depending on whether one is talking to José Bové, the French farmer who attacked a McDonald’s outlet in southern France and led others to burn fields seeded with genetically

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modified crops; to Tony Blair, the British prime minister, who sees globalization as something inevitable and with high potential for the British people and British corporations; to the governments of Zimbabwe or Zambia, which see globalization as a process that marginalizes and impoverishes their people; to the executives of Monsanto Corporation, who look to sell their product innovations in agricultural biotechnology in every market in the world; or to Jan Aart Scholte, a political scientist at the University of Warwick in the UK, who has written an academic textbook on the concept.<sup>2</sup>

Many people, when they hear mention of globalization, think of the José Bovés of this world and why they were attacking McDonald's outlets or burning fields of GM crops in western European countries. Social scientists, however, cannot leave the topic there. We cannot start from the point of view that globalization is what José Bové says it is. We have to look at what he says critically. There is an additional complication.

Not only does the term globalization carry considerable ideological baggage, but it is also a term at the centre of an increasingly developing body of social theory that is challenging other theories and ways of understanding the world in which we live. So, like many other concepts in our social science disciplines—corporatism, autonomy, democracy, human rights—globalization is both a theoretical tool and a term that has varied meanings among individuals and organizations that we study. In referring to it and using it in our research, accordingly, we walk on treacherous ground.

Going back to José Bové and his charred fields for a moment, as a social scientist, I *am* interested in what he says about globalization. When he speaks about attacking globalization by burning these fields, he means a range of things. He is attacking US capitalism, which he sees as the principal motor of globalization; he is attacking Monsanto Corporation, as a typical transnational corporation (TNC) interested in profit at the expense of smaller people everywhere, and small farmers in France in particular; he is attacking a concept of intellectual property increasingly enshrined in domestic and international intellectual prop-

erty regimes; he is attacking “science,” an apparently objective set of disciplines that works hand in hand, in his view, with TNCs; he is attacking an approach to eating and food that empties out long-standing traditions of food preparation and quality at the expense of an agriculture based on industrial techniques of plant production and animal husbandry sustained by a world-wide set of other TNCs associated with the chemical industry. In short, even for M. Bové, globalization is a complex, layered concept, featuring economic, political, cultural, and knowledge components.

In his essays on the methodology of the social sciences—essays that still form a central core to social science thinking on theoretical development—Max Weber argues convincingly that our concepts in the social sciences are built on the meanings of those concepts held by individual persons.<sup>3</sup> So, when social scientists begin to think about whether a concept called globalization might be helpful in understanding certain kinds of events, conflicts, and debates in the social world, they necessarily listen to José Bové, but not just to him. They listen also to Monsanto, the farmers in Zimbabwe, the scientists on the Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Council as well as, of course, to other social scientists who have a similar suspicion to their own: social theories built around globalization as a concept might help us improve our understanding of the world in which we currently live. Perhaps even more interesting, Martin Albrow, a British sociologist, adds one other point to consider when he writes: “Globalization theory puts on the agenda a recasting of the whole range of sociological concepts which were forged for the period of nation-state sociology.”<sup>4</sup>

Many social scientists have engaged in this careful process of reflection when it comes to globalization. After examining the competing definitions of globalization, the political scientist Jan Aart Scholte suggests that globalization involves “the growth of ‘supraterritorial relations’ among people.”<sup>5</sup> Supraterritorial refers to relations that are somehow “above” territory, that is they are relatively unconstrained by one’s physical location. John Tomlinson, a sociologist, characterizes this “empirical

condition” of supraterritoriality as one of “complex connectivity,” a set of “connections that now bind our practices, our experiences and our political, economic and environmental fates together across the modern world.”<sup>6</sup> Associated with this change in the character of social relationships for both authors is “deterritorialization.” The relative importance of physical location as a basis for building social relationships is declining as supraterritorial ties grow in significance. In this respect, globalization is bringing far-reaching changes to the nature of social space: social space is less and less defined by the physical location in which we live.

Following Held et al., we can begin to assess the scope of these changes by looking at three properties of supraterritorial relations.<sup>7</sup> First, we can observe shifts in *extensity*, the degree to which cultural, political, and economic activities are stretching across new frontiers, creating a global space. For example, if we are interested in the globalization of the agrifood industry, and note that trade in processed foods is engaged in by a larger number of countries and at higher levels than it was twenty years ago, we can argue that the exchange of foods is becoming more extensive over time. Second, we can assess *intensity*, changes in the magnitude and regularity of interconnectedness. Continuing with our agrifood example, if we observe that more imported foods are now featuring in the daily meals of people in these countries and that they are displacing locally produced foods, then we can argue that the exchange of foods is becoming more intensive. Third, Held and his colleagues draw our attention to the property of *velocity*, changes in the speed of global interactions and processes. If, thanks to improvements in communications technology and in transportation, fresh and processed foods are distributed more quickly around the world, so much so that they are consumed in foreign countries at virtually the same time that they are consumed where they are harvested and processed, we can say that the velocity of agrifood trade is increasing.

Together these three properties contribute to a fourth—*enmeshment*, changes in the interdependence of the global and the local. Suppose we look at an apple grower in the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia. If

apples from both Chile and South Africa are found increasingly in BC grocery stores in the winter and spring, while they were not present twenty years ago, and if they appear in sufficient quantity at prices such that they displace local apples, we can say that local consumers and apple growers are more enmeshed in global economic processes today than they were two decades ago. What happens in this small, beautiful valley is more closely linked to what is happening globally in the agrifood industry. This enmeshment goes both ways. If some farmers in this valley were to become concerned about the increased presence of foreign produce and burn down some supermarkets in protest, then we can be almost certain that this local act will have global effects. Its meaning will be transmitted across the globe, perhaps emboldening other farmers concerned about the globalization of food production, while perhaps worrying agribusiness corporations profiting from this business.

Contrary, then, to what might have happened in the past, globalization is not just a matter of the rich and the famous travelling the globe. Rather, it involves changes to the lives of more people in more walks of life, living in an even more diverse range of local communities. Robertson offers the concept of “global unicity” for understanding how these changes are linked to one another.<sup>8</sup> Unicity comes first from a global context of trading rules, of international regimes including those related to the environment, of cultural transmission, and of corporate activities that has an ever-increasing impact on how individuals and groups relate to one another in their local settings. Second, it arises from the creation of global frames of reference, often referred to as *globality*, within which social actors increasingly understand who they are and how they should orient their activities. More people than ever before think of the world as one place. Accordingly, even acts of resistance, whether these be attempts to prevent massive depopulation of agricultural areas or to secure the traditional family in a strong religious community, are taken with an eye to what is happening globally. Demonstrations by farmers about agricultural policies, for example, are now more often targeted on what is happening during negotiations for an

Agreement on Agriculture at the World Trade Organization (WTO) and co-ordinated with the protests of their counterparts with similar concerns in other parts of the globe. In the same vein, religious fundamentalists make effective use of current communications technologies to broadcast widely their message about resisting secularization, thereby seeking to build alliances with other religious communities with similar concerns around the globe.

When social scientists talk about globalization, therefore, they are referring to a complex phenomenon that occurs in many aspects of our lives. I have spoken above about agrifood business, using the example of the distribution of fresh fruit. There are examples in other domains. In the areas of banking and finance, an area of frequent activity by co-operatives, foreign exchange markets now reach fully around the globe (more extensive) and involve trades of about a trillion dollars per day (more intensive). These trades take place almost instantly, thanks to computers (higher velocity), and affect the lives of people in many localities (prices of imported and exported goods go up and down depending on the exchange rate). In the social realm, migration to Canada now draws from all parts of the globe, not just Europe (more extensive); we have been admitting between 200,000 and 250,000 immigrants per year since the 1980s (more intensive); people can get here more quickly by airplane than in the past (higher velocity), and many of our cities are becoming much more culturally diverse (more enmeshment of the local and the global). In politics, the rules of the international trade regime at the WTO now bind the activities of 130 states, including China (more extensive); these rules affect systematically a large range of policies, even to the point that they influence how policymakers think about and design domestic policies (more intensive). Meetings on the interpretation and implementation of these rules go on almost constantly (higher velocity), and the economic fates of a larger number of workers and firms are affected by them (greater enmeshment of local production with global rules).

Just as important, these various dimensions of globalization are often linked. Fresh fruits are more easily distributed across the globe be-

cause global rules on trade and intellectual property make it more difficult for countries to block their entry. Religious fundamentalists in one part of the world are able to work with those in other parts of the world because migration has brought a greater diversity of religions to a larger number of places. Foreign exchange markets are so active because so many more firms are trading goods and services, and many more people are travelling to more and more areas of the world. Tourism has become an industry serving the ordinary people in many countries, not just the rich and the elite as in the past. Accordingly, what happens in the local places in which we live is affected to a larger extent by global events. Conversely, local events can have a global impact.

## Identity

ONE OF THE COMMON QUESTIONS faced by researchers interested in co-operatives is whether globalization is undermining the kinds of identities that have traditionally supported co-operative formation and maintenance. What do we mean when we speak of “identity”? For individuals or communities, it involves a process of construction of the self, of who they are. It involves giving the self some meaning based on a social attribute or a set of social attributes that are given priority over other sources of meaning.<sup>9</sup> These attributes might be nationality, ethnicity, occupation, sexual orientation, gender, religion, local place of residence, and so on. Individuals and groups give their actions meaning by reference to a symbolic identification with one or more of these attributes. So if someone comes up to you and asks, “Why are you a member of this co-operative?” you might answer, “I am a farmer,” or “I am a member of this parish,” or “I work here.” These identities are invariably constructed depending on the social and cultural context in which people live.

In order to think about the relationship between identity and globalization, I begin with the work of the sociologist Manuel Castells, who distinguishes three forms of identity building, each with a different origin.<sup>10</sup>

1. *Legitimizing Identity*. This identity refers to a system of meaning that is introduced and cultivated by the dominant institutions of society. Such an identity generates a *civil society*, a set of institutions and organizations that reproduce that identity. Being “Canadian” refers to this kind of identity. There is a set of institutions ranging from our Parliament and our flag to perhaps our health-care system, our annoyingly vigorous federal-provincial conflicts, our service clubs, and our voluntary associations that reinforce the idea of being Canadian.
2. *Resistance Identity*. Some actors may be in positions or living in conditions that are devalued or stigmatized by the logic of the dominant institutions in society. Accordingly, they try to build trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from those permeating the given society. Some Indigenous peoples, for example, have formed resistance identities in Canada. Their experience in the country, whether living on impoverished reserves or being sent to residential schools, has led them to construct a different meaning system, and they resist being called Canadian because that term implies assimilation and acculturation to them.
3. *Project Identity*. Some individuals try to build a new identity that redefines their position in society, and they use this act to challenge some fundamental components of social structure. Think, for example, of the suffragette movement at the turn of the century, when women were seeking the right to vote in national and provincial elections. In this process, they constructed a new identity for themselves and represented themselves as full members of society—as “persons”—even though the law at the time did not recognize them as such. In redefining their identity to

include being persons like men, and being the political equal to men, these women were changing their place in Canadian society, and what is more, changing that society as well.

In the period prior to the present globalizing era, what Castells refers to as the legitimizing identity tended overwhelmingly to come through the nation-state. The nation-state had sufficient authority and sovereignty that it could define such critical things as the boundary between the private and the public, that it could intervene in the economy to promote full employment or in society to ensure that health-care services were provided universally. It could call for the singing of the national anthem or the flying of the flag, or provide support to culture.

Accordingly, when persons and organizations sought to define a new identity and to promote for themselves a new position in society or to create a new social structure, their project identity was constructed within the context of the nation-state. After all, if we think back to Marx's plans for the labour movement, which had such a project, it was to found what he called a "dictatorship of the proletariat." The workers' movement's first objective was to gain control of the nation-state. Similarly, when the suffragettes were seeking to define a new place in society for women based on political equality with men, it was again an institution of the nation-state—the electoral system—that was their target.

Now let us turn to the present globalizing era. Without necessarily going into detail at this point, the redefinitions of space and time brought on by globalizing processes have had a decided impact on the nation-state as we know it. Suffice it to say that most states no longer have the capacity or the sovereignty to make as many of the crucial decisions on their own that affect the lives of their citizens that they once were able to do. The nation-state is no longer in nearly as strong a position to provide that legitimizing identity noted above. It no longer is as dominant a force in providing the umbrella for the trade unions, the voluntary associations, the co-operatives, the cultural groups, and the interest groups that constitute what we call civil society. Power has leached out into the global sphere.

Accordingly, globalizing processes are changing the social, territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity.<sup>11</sup> As people move from the rural areas or Aboriginal reservations to the cities, or from one part of the world to another, they regroup in their new locations and reconstruct their own personal narratives, their own histories. As the anthropologist Appadurai notes, their identities become more slippery, less localized. In general, groups are no longer as tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogeneous as in the past.<sup>12</sup>

Under these conditions, what happens then to those in our societies who are unsatisfied with their situation, who wish to build an identity that redefines their place in society, and who wish to transform the overall social structure? Those individuals who wish to build a project identity, as Castells calls it, no longer feel content with focussing on the nation-state and working within national civil society. So where can they turn? What becomes more likely is that they will turn to communities where they feel a sense of solidarity and support to search for meaning and to build a resistance identity. What we now call “identity politics” is the search for relevant communities and the building of those communities for resisting change, particularly for resisting the effects of globalization. Where people turn to build these communities is much more fluid; it might be the localities in which they live, or it might involve new social spaces involving transnational connections; or it might involve some combination of the two.

## **Autonomy**

**W**ITH THIS UNDERSTANDING of globalization in mind and some hypotheses about the impact of globalization on identity building, a crucial component of co-operative formation, we

can now turn to focus more specifically on co-operatives. In doing so, however, I introduce a third concept or idea, and one that is central to co-operative practices, that of social autonomy. Autonomy is another concept that has a controversial and debated place in the social sciences and humanities. It is also one often characterized as being particularly Western, or European, in origin. I do not want to dwell on these debates here. Rather, I would like to assess what autonomy might mean in a country like Canada.

David Held, the political philosopher, offers us a liberal understanding—he sees autonomy as the capacity of individuals to shape the conditions under which they live.<sup>13</sup> Social autonomy thus exists when this capacity is available to individuals rather broadly across a society. Held identifies a series of conditions necessary for the existence of autonomy, ranging from being physically healthy, to being educated, and to enjoying basic political and civil rights. In this understanding, autonomy is present in Canadian society, albeit somewhat unevenly.

Others take a stronger position. Cornelius Castoriadis, a French philosopher of Greek origin, argues that even in a formally democratic society like Canada, heteronomy (being unselfconsciously subject to the power of another) can prevail over autonomy.<sup>14</sup> What is important in his view is that a society have a place for politics, public spaces where citizens are freely able to ask themselves, “Are the rules and the laws under which we exist the right ones?” “Are they just?” “Could they be better?” For Castoriadis, therefore, autonomy exists when a society is more reflexive, more able to look at itself critically, and where its members are free, have access to public spaces, and possess the resources, the understanding, and the education needed to interrogate their society and its laws.

What is also clear about autonomy in this sense is that it involves an act of the imagination. Castoriadis terms it the “radical imagination.”<sup>15</sup> Individuals and groups are able to imagine different futures, different ways of living, different arrangements in their own lives. They are able

to take an idea, talk about it, imagine how it might work in practice, and then take action to see if they can get it to work.

A reading of the histories of co-operatives in many fields suggests that these organizations were often assertions of autonomy in this sense. Whether it be farmers seeing markets for storing or transporting grain or for buying milk being destroyed through monopoly or oligopoly power, or rural communities unable to gain access to investment capital because of the disinterest of large banks, the individuals affected imagined a different set of arrangements and a more promising future. They chose to act together; they sought to create these arrangements and that imagined future.

The key questions for many studying globalization, then, are the following: In the presence of globalizing processes, is autonomy in this strong meaning more or less likely to obtain? Do these processes detract from the opportunities for identity construction that would permit the working together, the imagining together, and the social commitment that are inherent to the co-operative instinct? These are difficult questions. Their difficulty is such that team-based, interdisciplinary research is necessary for their investigation. At this point, I can offer only some preliminary thoughts on the answers. There would seem to be aspects of globalization that might lead to pessimism and others that support some optimism.

Let me begin with the pessimistic side. Globalizing processes in the economy have clearly brought on an acceleration of the advance of capitalism into virtually all aspects of our own economic lives in Canada. They have also linked our economic situations more closely to advances of capitalism into almost all parts of the world. This linkage between the local and the global can have profound, highly unpredictable effects in our daily lives. Why, for example, should the devaluation of Thailand's currency, the baht, in 1997, a country with which Canada trades very little if at all, trigger in the following months a 15 percent decline in the value of the Canadian dollar against the US currency? Such a rapid change in the value of our currency can have profound effects in the

daily lives of millions of Canadians. And when these economic processes are supported by an increasingly global consensus among political and economic elites in favour of neoliberalism—the idea that markets work best when left alone—fatalism can often result. Citizens get the sense that there is something inevitable or unchangeable to such economic processes; they are so global, so strong, so dominant, that it is fruitless to challenge them.

When this advancing global capitalism has the effect of ever-increasing production of greenhouse gases in eastern Canada, the US, and in many other countries, and these begin to destabilize weather patterns to the extent in the Canadian prairies that some ask whether traditional economic activities such as the growing of grain have a future, pessimism is difficult to resist. Again, the processes seem so large, so global, so out of the control of individual persons like you and me, they seem to invite heteronomy and resignation. By extending the reach of events across a global space, structures such as global capitalism and processes such as global climate change would seem to shrink, if not remove completely, opportunities for autonomy.

When it comes to co-operatives, the impact of globalizing processes on identity formation might also be relevant. I suggested above that these processes destabilize long-standing identities based on place of work, on community ties, on religion, and even on nationality. The neoliberal ideology of globalism favours an idea of rugged individualism and entrepreneurship that represents community-based co-operation as less entrepreneurial or as outmoded. The pressure towards individualism also often has a highly gendered impact, increasing the divide between women and men in some social settings. Finally, it adds to the long-standing devaluation of communal processes inherent in many First Nations communities.

Where might there be grounds for optimism? If we draw a little on our knowledge of history, one might argue that the forces of monopoly or oligopoly capitalism faced by farmers in western Canada at the turn of the twentieth century may have appeared just as strong, just as

unchallengeable, just as inevitable as the globalizing economic forces appear to us today. And yet those farmers took action. Or if we think of the poor rural communities in Québec, where credit was nonexistent and capital was held in the cities by rather foreign, English-speaking banks in Montréal, poverty might also have seemed permanent and inevitable. And yet again, Alphonse Desjardins, using the ideas set out by Friedrich Raiffeisen in Germany, persisted with his ideas of *caisses populaires* tied to every parish. Relatively speaking, the economic forces may not appear any more dominant to us today than they did to our ancestors a century ago.

Remember, as well, that Castoriadis's notion of autonomy puts a great emphasis on imagination and on finding social spaces where discussion, debate, and deliberation can give life to that imagination. Arjun Appadurai, an anthropologist who has written extensively on cultures and globalizing processes, makes the argument that these processes also create new opportunities for social imagination.<sup>16</sup> The very linkages between global processes and local life that seem to produce the weight of economic inevitability, also open up vistas for the imagination that were not available before for many people. Appadurai argues that it creates a basis for "emancipatory politics."<sup>17</sup>

Take, for example, Indigenous peoples. Advances in transportation, information, and communications technologies have permitted the development in many Aboriginal communities of relationships not previously possible. These include relationships with other Aboriginal communities and First Nations in Canada, and with Aboriginal peoples in other parts of the world, whether in Central and South America, northern Europe, Russia, Southeast Asia, or Africa. Building on these relationships, some members of Aboriginal communities have added an international identity as Indigenous peoples that now sits alongside their local identity as Cree or Haudenosaunee and so on. They are talking about "rights" that they might have as "Indigenous peoples" and are doing so in transnational policy spaces, whether at the UN or through linked web sites.

Some believe, therefore, that the possibility for new forms of translocal and transnational relationships that are created through globalizing processes provides a basis for the kind of co-operation that might be needed to counter global capitalism and to challenge some of its most destructive social effects. These relationships might provide the basis for new types of identity construction, and perhaps new forms of co-operation. If we consider the possibility that feelings of resignation, views about the irreversibility of some of globalization's effects, beliefs that we have reached the end of history and the triumph of modernity—if we can remember that all of these perceptions are themselves creations or representations of the world favoured by the powerful—then we can be a little less pessimistic. And if Appadurai is right that globalizing processes have created new vistas for the social imagination, not only here in Canada but also in most other parts of the globe, then local acts of imagination and assertions of autonomy might prove to be stronger and more possible than we think.

To my understanding, the establishment of co-operatives and the will to sustain them in the face of many obstacles are very much local acts of imagination and autonomy. Further research is needed on how these new forms based on co-operation and how these acts of imagination might be possible under globalizing conditions. Perhaps then researchers can make suggestions about what changes to laws and public policies are needed to ensure that these actions and practices are welcomed and sustainable over time. For these reasons, then, research on the relationship between globalization and the sustainability and potential growth of co-operatives promises to be an important contribution to understanding one of the most important questions of our time: What is the relationship between globalization and autonomy?

## Endnotes

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