

Catalonia celebrates its cooperative heritage

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Locals and foreign holidaymakers who have visited Barcelona's prestigious Museu d'Història de Catalunya in recent weeks have been reminded of the significant role which cooperatives have played in Catalonia's social history.

The museum, in a converted warehouse down by the city's redeveloped docklands area, has been staging an extensive exhibition of Catalonia's cooperative past going back to the mid-nineteenth century. The exhibition, held in the large ground-floor foyer of the museum, featured rare photographs of early consumer cooperatives, productive cooperatives, agricultural cooperatives and fishermen's coops. The displays also highlighted the early lead that the Catalan cooperative movement took in providing schools in working-class areas, at a time when schooling was primarily privately run or in the hands of the church. A powerful photograph from the early twentieth century, for example, shows children and their parents from La Flor de Maig (the May flower), a very successful Barcelona-based consumer coop, taking part in a mass excursion into the countryside. As well as operating seven branches, La Flor de Maig ran its own school and also owned a farm.

The early Catalan cooperative movement was influenced by developments in other countries including France and Britain, and indeed two advocates of cooperation, Fernando Garrido Tortosa and Joan Tutau i Vergés, travelled to Rochdale in 1861-2 to find out for themselves what was happening in Lancashire. British visitors to the exhibition in the Museu d'Història won't have failed to have noticed a familiar photograph of the Rochdale Pioneers included in the display. But Catalonia rapidly proved that it was fertile ground for its own strong indigenous cooperative movement: the exhibition carried the appropriate name **Catalunya: terra cooperativa** (Catalonia, a cooperative land).

Organising the exhibition (which ran from November last year to February this year) was undertaken jointly by the museum and the Catalan cooperative research organisation La Fundació Roca Galès, which takes its name from another early

Catalan cooperative pioneer. Josep Roca i Galès (1828-1891) was a working-class activist, cooperator and republican who founded one of the first cooperative newspapers in Catalonia, “La Asociación”, in 1866. Today La Fundació Roca Galès, among its other activities, carries on his legacy by publishing its own monthly magazine Cooperació Catalana, bringing together the different arms of the contemporary cooperative movement. (Perhaps the main difference these days from Roca i Galès’s is that the language of communication within the cooperative press has changed from Castilian Spanish to Catalan).

One of those people who was most actively involved in assembling and curating the exhibition on behalf of the Foundation is Marc Dalmau i Torvà, a founder member of the workers’ cooperative La Ciutat Invisible (the Invisible City) which runs a community bookshop and resource centre in the Sants area of Barcelona. Marc Dalmau stresses that the exhibition benefited enormously from being a genuinely cooperative endeavour. “The work of producing the exhibition was the fruit of the cooperative efforts of many people. Twenty or so people collaborated in the research, writing, editing and design of the display boards,” he explains, adding that others also participated by helping find the funding necessary and sorting out the administrative arrangements. “Working collectively is perhaps more difficult to coordinate in practical terms and can be slower – but the end result is always a richer one,” he argues.

Marc Dalmau stresses that one of the main reasons why it has been important to remember his country’s cooperative past through the recent exhibition is because of the insights which can be gained for the present and future of cooperation in Catalonia. “Recovering the memory of the past goes far beyond nostalgia. It’s a way of generating reference points relevant for the present, feeding the imagination and providing us with roots which can enable us to build to a future based on greater social justice,” he says. Certainly, the strong emphasis on popular self-organisation and autonomy which has been a feature of Catalan cooperative endeavour over the years resonates strongly in today’s Catalonia, where a significant percentage of the population is actively engaged in a lively struggle for new political and social structures, most notably in the movement to return Catalonia to the independence

from Spain which it had early in its history and which it also enjoyed again briefly in the 1930s.

Appropriately, therefore, after an extensive review of Catalan cooperation from the early nineteenth century to the dark days of the Franco dictatorship, the exhibition in the Museu d'Història de Catalunya ended with a comprehensive set of display boards featuring the present-day state of cooperatives in Catalonia. In general, the movement today is in good heart. Over 200 new coops were established during 2018 (continuing an upward trend in recent years) and in all there are around 4,215 registered cooperatives in Catalonia. Of these some 3,000 are workers' cooperatives. The growth in workers' cooperatives has been driven partly by worker-run take-overs of failing traditional companies, partly by activists engaged in social change but also as a response to unemployment which was particularly high among young people following the 2008 financial crash. A change in the law in 2015, enabling workers' coops to be established with just two worker-members, has also helped this growth. Workers' coops are federated in the Federació de Cooperatives de Treball de Catalunya.

There is also an active consumer cooperative sector, several with many years' trading experience. Abacus, for example, has just celebrated its fiftieth birthday, having been founded in 1968 in the dying years of the Franco regime. Abacus (a hybrid coop with both consumers and workers forming its 1m+ membership) operates a chain of almost 50 shops, selling books, stationery and toys. Cooperative 70, a consumer coop in the town of Caldes de Montbui thirty kilometres from Barcelona, also has deep roots having been formed two years after Abacus.

Perhaps more traditionally, Catalonia has some very powerful agricultural coops, taking about 40% of total farming output. Three-quarters of olive oil production is in the hands of coops, and cooperatives are also very important in dried fruit and rice production and distribution. The challenge now, according to Marc Dalmau, is to bring together this established cooperative sector with new agro-environmental cooperative initiatives, including recently established smaller-scale ventures exploring organic and ecological farming.

Cooperative interest in education is also continuing in the present day, with around forty coop schools coming together in their own Federació de Cooperatives d'Ensenyament de Catalunya. There is also a housing cooperative tradition in Catalonia, which has been moving in recent years towards more genuinely collective, bottom-up, forms of housing tenure.

The six independent federations, those respectively for workers' coops, for consumer coops, for housing coops, for cooperative schools, for the cooperative farming sector and for service-based cooperatives, come together in the main Catalan cooperative organisation COOPCAT (la Confederació de Cooperatives de Catalunya).

What of the future? Marc Dalmau suggests that the way forward for cooperatives in his country is to engage with some of the key social and environmental issues of our time. He mentions such things as ethical investment and microfinance, socially useful production, responsible consumption, renewable energy, recycling and waste management and the cooperative delivery of key public services such as education and housing.

As the very last display board in the exhibition put it, predicting where Catalan coops would be in the year 2030, "We *can* put into practice a transformative social and economic model which is at the service of people, the environment and the territory of Catalonia".

Side box

Cooperative history in Catalonia is closely linked to broader socialist and working-class Catalan history. Early pioneering coop efforts, often relatively informal, began in the middle of the nineteenth century, but the movement became more consolidated later in the century, following the passing of a new Law of Associations in 1887. The first conferences of Catalan coops took place in 1898 and 1899.

The early years of the twentieth century saw a significant leap forward, with among other things the creation of a Federació Regional de Cooperatives de Catalunya in 1920, linking some 125 coops. This was the time, too, of attempts to unite smaller local consumer coops in Barcelona and elsewhere into one big cooperative society, although initially only a small number of coops participated.

The Catalan cooperative movement really came into its own in the years from 1931 to 1936, following the ending of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the creation of the democratic Second Republic. Valuable legislative changes gave greater protection to cooperatives and by 1936 there were 241 cooperative societies with more than 84,000 members in the Catalan coop federation. Women cooperators established their own Women's Federation in 1932. The role of women in the movement, including that played by the socialist and cooperative leader Micaela Chalmeta, is increasingly being recognised.

The coup by Franco in 1936 led initially to a time of revolution in Barcelona and to a lively debate between advocates of cooperation and those anarchists who favoured full collectivisation of business assets. But following the military victory of fascism in 1939, the cooperative movement went into a rapid decline. Those cooperatives which endured found themselves effectively controlled by the state, through the placement of loyal Francoist followers in key senior positions.

The Franco years still cast a long shadow, and arguably much of the strength of today's independence movement in Catalonia comes from the less than fully effective transition to democracy after Franco's death which still allowed authoritarian attitudes to remain in Spain in areas like the police and judiciary. For the cooperative movement in Catalonia today, the importance of looking back beyond Franco to what was a more radical and optimistic time cannot be over-emphasised.
