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COOPERATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS: 
DEMOCRACY AND AUTHORITY IN SOUTHERN 
AFRICAN PRODUCER COOPERATIVES

Michelle Adato

Introduction

In the mid-1980s, economic crisis and political upheaval in South Africa generated strikes across the mining, metal, and textile industries, confronting black trade unions with large-scale retrenchments and dismissals. Attempting to move beyond acts of pressure on employers and the state, unions established producer cooperatives with a range of objectives, among them: providing jobs, keeping workers affiliated to the union, developing workers' skills, capacities and confidence, developing local economies, and as an experiment in cooperative forms of production that could provide lessons and a model for a cooperative sector in a post-apartheid economy.

Through a study of 'democratic management' in cooperatives started by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in Transkei and Lesotho, this research examines how consciousness facilitates and constrains workplace democracy, with implications not only for cooperatives but other forms of democratic organisation. In this way, the study of cooperatives can illuminate the society in which they are embedded, and provide insight into ways in which possibilities for cooperation or conflict are shaped.

The concept of 'democratic management' in cooperatives assumes that both parts of this term - democracy and managerial authority - are necessary for reproduction of the organisation. However, both parts present particular tensions rooted in the society in which they operate. This research attempts to unpack these tensions and understand their bases and implications in a particular locality.

More specifically, this article considers layers of consciousness that facilitate, constrain, and shape forms of democracy and authority in the cooperatives. Historical and contemporary experience in the mines, trade unions and communities, and rural relationships of traditional and tribal authority shape competing conceptions of democracy and authority, and modify in a variety of ways the ideal-typical cooperative organisation introduced by the trade union. This type of cooperative reflects the union's orientation toward a particular model of participatory democracy and the structures reflect a deliberate choice of international models emulated. Members' receptiveness to these forms is facilitated -
but responses to their requirements mediated - by definitions, understandings, structures, language, and activities outside and inside the cooperatives.

This article looks at the effects of this mediation with respect to issues of democracy and authority. A consciousness developed through resistance to employers and apartheid has created the conditions for organising for equality and democracy in production. However, it does not assure that it can be achieved. To do this requires workers coming to terms with a form of ‘democratic authority’ and developing a fuller understanding of democracy - including rights and responsibilities - than their experience has yet offered. These understandings are developing, though slowly, through experience in the cooperatives.

These dynamics have significant implications for cooperative development and viability. In work by prominent researchers in the field, ‘development of a human basis for self-management is considered as vital as assuring a material base for its development’ (Gunn, 1984:192). They also speak to wider questions about the relationship between social and political conditions and democratic process.

Cooperation and Consciousness

Literature addressing ‘cooperative consciousness’ stresses ‘the need for cooperative and participatory values within the enterprise and... the need for cooperative education among members to ensure a consciousness based on those values’ (Gunn, 1984:54). Bernstein (1976) found that specific attitudes and values constituted a ‘participatory/democratic consciousness’, summarised as ‘resistance’, which suggests that people will be less prone to manipulation, and ‘activism’, which gives them a greater ability to create and organise policy. Bernstein recognises contradiction, however, between these qualities and ‘the organisation’s need for stability and obedience to decisions once made’ (Bernstein, 1976:509). According to Bernstein, Mao saw this tension as an inevitable dialectic to be used for periodic reform of the system: activism foments upheaval, followed by consolidation of revolutionary values within a new authority structure. Bernstein resolves this tension differently, advocating a structure allowing authority to flow upward from participants when they are choosing managers or setting long-term policy directly, and letting authority and obedience flow downward when the elected directors make decisions which are to be carried out by the rest of the participants. In this system, activism and obedience are combined within a stable authority structure... (Bernstein, 1976:509).

Gould (1988) also theorises a democracy for the workplace and political life that reconciles democracy with authority. Her theory is presupposed by the
concept of 'equal agency', entailing the equal right of all individuals to make decisions for themselves and act on them. Authority must then correspond to this right, and cannot be understood as a hierarchical relation:

Rather, in any association of agents in a common project, the authority is shared and joint, in the sense that each agent participates in codetermining the decisions. Authority is therefore understood as constituted by the individuals in relations and therefore cannot have its legitimation in anything external to that constitution; nor can it be attributed to any abstract entity such as rule, law, institution, or the state. The source of this authority is distributively in the agency of each of the individuals. Thus authority is connected with authorship or with the creation or production of actions and decisions (Gould, 1988:221).

Rules and procedures are the means by which authority of the members are made effective. Gould's conceptualisation provides a democratic base to a form of necessary authority in cooperatives.

Cooperatives and Context

Though useful, Bernstein's model is limited by a lack of context. Another level of analysis undertakes to understand how the broader social, political, and economic environment shapes the cooperatives or cooperative movement located within it. It is this environment that shapes the consciousness of workers before entering the cooperative and throughout their experience in the cooperative, helping to interpret how actions, perceptions and values from the past are reproduced in the cooperative, and how they are transcended.

The importance of context, and its relationship to cooperative consciousness, is implied by theoretical critiques of cooperation within a hostile and hegemonic capitalist system. Most influential perhaps is Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which theorised means by which the capitalist system would constrain alternative ways of organising social and economic life. Baldacchino (1990) uses Gramsci's work to problematise the task of developing cooperative values within a capitalist society, arguing that unless adequate consideration is given to environment, the co-op will fail, in democratic if not economic terms.

Advocates of self-management on the Left also argue that workplace democracy has the capacity to transform its environment. Gramsci's earlier work argued that a system of workers' democracy, whereby workers take over production from management, would provide 'a magnificent school of political and administrative experience', developing the consciousness and skills to rule in a socialist society (Gramsci, 1919, reprinted in Williams, 1975:103-106; see also Greenberg, 1986). Drawing on perspectives from classical democratic theory
(primarily, JS Mill and GDH Cole), Pateman (1970) argues that experience in cooperative organisations nurtures democratic values, preparing workers for such participation in the wider society.

Greenberg (1986) is less optimistic. In his study of cooperatives producing plywood in the northwestern United States, he found that although the cooperatives produced participation and to a limited extent nurtured feelings of mutual responsibility and equality within the cooperatives, there were no spillover effects to the society. In fact, experience in these co-ops in many cases seemed to ‘enhance and nurture their small-property/petit-bourgeois orientations’ (Greenberg, 1986:137). Comparing these co-ops in the US to experiences elsewhere, he found that the wider political context is determinate. Analyzing four contrasting political settings, Bernstein concludes that self-management cannot be prefigurative or transformative without countervailing forces to the logic of the market, such as a working class party, cooperative or egalitarian culture, socialist ideology, revolutionary movement, or government committed to economic democracy.

Several other empirical studies examine worker self-management in specific political and cultural contexts more conducive to workers control than the US. These include studies in Portugal (Bermeo, 1986), Peru (McClintock, 1981; Stephens, 1980), Chile (Espinosa and Zimbalist, 1978), and Algeria (Clegg, 1971). In all these cases, workers self-management developed in the midst of political and social upheaval, and was profoundly influenced by these environments in which it was born and grew. Although there were important political educative effects, these studies also demonstrate that socialist or nationalist movements with self-management platforms - even those with state commitment - do not guarantee that self-management will result. Within each of these cases, competing political agendas and differing social conditions nurtured, constrained, and shaped the particular character of each experiment.

Carroll (1970) emphasises the importance of social cohesion within the cooperating group. He argues that in Latin America, this is found mainly within ethnically distinct immigrants, religious sects or revolutionary political parties. Examples exist of small communist or left-wing enclaves operating successful collective organisations in Columbia and Chile, where broader efforts to organise peasants collectively have broken down in these countries. A common enemy is also important. Carroll concludes that in Latin America, ideological commitment and rebelliousness of co-op founders is an essential ingredient for a successful co-op movement.

However, there is no formula for successful cooperation, and some very successful peasant cooperatives - particularly those for supply and marketing - have not included an ideological component. Worsley (1970) argues that while
some co-ops are articulated to socialist or nationalist movements, others are ‘very hard-headed business associations of individual producers, and little more’ (Worsely, 1970:29). He notes that, in fact, it is sometimes argued that infusing co-ops with political ideas is a distraction, reducing efficiency and placing burdens of political development and welfare that these embryonic organisations cannot cope with.

Zimbabwean and South African cooperative initiatives have suffered under this burden. In both countries, many of the major cooperative efforts had revolutionary roots and political objectives. They developed through members skilled at resistance and under a heavy ideological load. Zimbabwean co-ops were seen by many to be the ‘vanguard’ in the ‘transition to socialism’ (England, 1987:123); in South Africa, some thought co-ops could in the long run ‘topple capitalist industry’ (Philip, 1989:37). In Zimbabwe the political impetus for cooperative development came mainly from ex-combatants of the war of independence, who had contact with the idea from other southern African countries, Eastern Europe, the USSR and Cuba. Co-ops were seen as an alternative to going ‘back to work for the old bosses’ and the start of ownership of the means of production collectively by the people. Ex-combatants were joined by peasant farmers, farmworkers, and the urban unemployed. None of these groups had experience in business management, and the leadership of ex-combatants was imbued with the experience of ideological mobilisation but not production processes (England, 1987).

Democratic management also met complications. According to England, the co-op experience in Zimbabwe has taken place where any history of democracy in struggle are extremely weak, where the expressed level of class consciousness is very low, and where organisations of class struggle are at best embryonic (England, 1987:13-40).

Members had no previous experience with democratic procedures, or the organisation of work discipline, decision-making processes and accountability. Although there was much deviation from the ideal, England argues that through these struggles with democracy, which involved much more than ‘bourgeois’ democratic voting procedures, co-ops contributed to processes of class formation and the building of working class democracy.

This experience has parallels with that of many South African cooperative initiatives, though with some different sets of conditions and outcomes. For example, England suggests that the absence of strong democratic trade unionism in Zimbabwe, and its presence South Africa, offers greater possibilities for South African cooperatives which can link with the trade union movement. On one level, time has challenged this hypothesis, with South African trade unions
lacking the experience and skills to act as adequate cooperative support organisations and their cooperatives faring not much better than other initiatives facing the same set of objective constraints.

On another level, the trade-union experience of members introduces contradictory influences in the co-ops - both facilitative and constraining. In the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) co-ops, many members have experienced democracy previously, primarily in the trade unions and some in other organisations, and this has facilitated its introduction and use in the co-ops. Some have not, and some are hearing the word democracy for the first time. Even for those who have experience, the nature of their experience - such as active involvement in union structures or ordinary membership - significantly influences their understandings of democracy and skills in using it effectively in the co-ops. For those with more developed understandings, ‘democracy in business’ introduces a new set of challenges and problems that democracy in political organisations can more easily afford. For others, limited understandings can lead to practices that are debilitating in the co-ops. But for all members, experience in the cooperatives presents workers with the dilemmas, opportunities, rights and responsibilities of a new kind of very direct, participatory democracy.

The NUM Cooperatives

The first NUM cooperative was formed by former Foskor mineworkers in Phalaborwa, dismissed after a lengthy and violent confrontation between NUM members and mine management backed by the police. This co-op, a t-shirt printing operation, started production in 1988 with 25 workers (in 1989 this grew to about 50 but by 1992 decreased to 21). The NUM cooperative program, undertaking cooperative development on a broad scale, was born out of the 1987 mineworkers strike. This strike, the largest in the union’s history, involved 320,000 workers. Fearing intimidation in the hostels, many miners went home during the strike, to the Transkei, Lesotho, and other areas in southern Africa. The workers set up a network of strike committees in their home areas in order to facilitate communication with the union; the Transkei had 28 district committees, Lesotho had 10 regions. Fifty thousand workers were eventually dismissed, with 30,000 reinstated selectively and the remaining 20,000 ‘retrenched’. Those not rehired included much of NUM’s leadership: shaft stewards, and members of branch committees, regional committees, and the National Executive.

After the strike, workers and the union decided to maintain the committees as a means to manage cases, grievances and compensation. They were also a basis for organisation in areas which had long been impenetrable by political organisations, including unions, perceived as a threat by government authorities. NUM was in a unique position to organise in the Transkei because of its vast number
of members from the area: 6,400 in the strike committees alone, and many more in the mines. Transkei authorities risked widespread political disaffection if it interfered with mineworkers’ access to information concerning their cases. The Lesotho military council was in a similar position, and despite conflicts within the government, the Basotho Mineworkers Labour Cooperative is registered (Philip, 1990; NUM, 1990; NUM, 1988).

The idea for a cooperative program grew from the Phalaborwa experience, and the desire by the union to do more for retrenched workers than negotiate a one-time payment on their behalf. The objectives of the cooperatives were to provide jobs and subsistence for the ex-mineworkers, to build skills and develop experience in workers’ control of production. The program was also part of a broader strategy for the economic and political development of the communities where the ex-mineworkers live. This development was intended to break the cycle of migrancy and misery that characterised the lives of workers and their families in these economically barren regions (NUM, 1988).

The first blockmaking co-ops were started in the Transkei in late-1988 and Lesotho in early-1989. The next stage of development involved agricultural projects, vegetable and poultry production, starting in late-1990. These products were chosen because of high demand, shortage of local producers, labour-intensity of the methods, and the fact that they met social (housing and food) needs (NUM, 1988). By 1993 there were 13 agricultural and poultry co-ops, four block-making co-ops, and two craft co-ops operating in the Transkei and Lesotho. In addition, the Phalaborwa co-op is still in operation, there are three agricultural and poultry groups in Swaziland, and six groups have been training in preparation for starting construction co-ops in the Transvaal. In total, the co-ops have over 400 members (NUM, 1993).

The NUM cooperative programme is the largest and most developed of the trade union co-op initiatives. The staff consists of coordinators, education officers, organisers, and trainers. NUM does in-house training, hires other organisations to carry out specialised training and monitoring, and gives loans to the co-ops for capital purchases and production inputs. It is effectively functioning as a development/service organisation, and works with other development organisations in the regions to coordinate develop efforts. The Transkei and Lesotho have elected regional structures mirroring union structures, with a National Executive Committee made up of the chairpersons and secretaries from each co-op, plus several members. Each region also has five elected office bearers.

Within the co-op, structures reflect those suggested by the union in its training modules. Management functions are carried out by committees including a chairperson, secretary, treasurer, coordinators for production, marketing, and
transport, and a bookkeeper. As with the regional structures, all management positions are elected by the general membership on a yearly basis, though in practice some co-ops hold elections more often. The only exception is the bookkeeper, who is appointed to assure accumulation of skills.

**Authority and Management**

The role of management:

The roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority of the management structures are developed in training modules conducted by the union before each cooperative starts production. However, the issue of management, and ‘democratic management’ in particular, has been particularly problematic. Co-op members’ previous experiences with management and responses to authority are reproduced in the cooperatives, resulting in problems with productivity and cooperation.

Management is an essential function in any organisation. Any business, under cooperative or individual ownership or control, requires a managerial function. Cooperative management includes, for example, organising production schedules, checking on budgets, purchasing, pricing, debtor control, decisions about growth, purchasing of new equipment, and new areas of business (Cornforth, et al, 1988).

In the co-ops studied, co-op workers generally see the roles and responsibilities of management much more narrowly. In the mines workers only saw management when they had a disciplinary case, when they were dismissed, and on occasion when a manager came down to inspect the site:

> Underground managers, you never know his job because he sometimes comes to underground, but not often. When he is coming, we know they say we must wash all the stones, keep the site clean... They are good at discharging people, it's then that we see the manager.

Lower-level supervisors jobs were described as ‘instructing us to do this and that’. Former shaft stewards had other contact with managers, but no one in the co-ops had previously been exposed to the full range of management tasks that are part of running a business.

The effect of this kind of management role model on the cooperatives is problematic in three main ways. First, ‘management’ is a bad word in many co-ops and the management function is often resented, making it problematic to establish divisions of responsibilities and lines of authority. Language becomes significant in this context. The term ‘management’ at many co-ops is not used; instead the term ‘coordinators’ is substituted, and trainers usually do not use the same word when referring to co-op management as used for managers on the
mines. Many workers said that they had ‘no managers’ in the co-op.

The second problem is that if management tasks are not fully understood then they are left unattended. The third is that because management functions are even less understood by co-op workers not responsible for those tasks than by those who are, they are also resented. In many cases, managers said that workers resented them going to town, even if it was for meetings or purchases concerning the co-op. At several co-ops managers said they had to do record and bookkeeping after hours or at home, because workers complained when they were in the field and coordinators were in the office. However, members frequently mention the fact that mine managers did not work with them, whereas co-op managers do, as one of the main reasons they prefer the co-op. It is meaningful and thus must also be viewed in positive terms. However, it is problematic when managers end up doing double shifts, or as happens more often, record-keeping gets neglected. The extent to which managers work in production is also a reflection of their own uncertainty over what their management tasks are. The challenge is to increase members’ and managers’ understanding and valuation of management tasks so that managers can strike a more viable balance between management tasks and production work.

Resistance to authority:

Whether or not there are ‘managers’ or only ‘coordinators’ in the co-ops, the question of authority and hierarchy - who can give orders to who - is a constant locus of conflict. Bernstein’s (1976) ‘resistance’ and ‘activism’ are present here, but with contradictory consequences. A consistent characteristic of the co-ops, identified as an impediment to the co-ops’ development by managers and members, was a particularly combative response of workers to authority. One production coordinator explained that:

There are always accusations that you are being like the bosses in the mines. For example, a comrade will come late and dig one hole, then ask permission to leave. When you refuse, you seem to be a manager, you say to him, ‘no, man you arrived late and you say you must now go’ and he says ‘you think you are a chief boss’ and all such things.

Tied to this is a rejection of the ‘manager’s’ objectives. According to an NUM staff member, ‘productivity is seen as a capitalist plot. It’s not a progressive thing’.

Some problems have stemmed from definitions and understandings of equality in the co-op. A frequent response to a coordinator giving instructions has been ‘we are all equal here, who are you to tell me what to do?’ According to one coordinator, ‘everyone wants to be their own boss. No one wants to be seen as
directed by someone’. The definition of a co-op is described more in terms of an absence of a boss than in terms of cooperation. According to one co-op chairperson,

we come to a decision that people must not come to work if they’ve drunk some beers, but he is going to do that and say, ‘no its my co-op, nobody is going to tell me. I’m going to drink my beers and go to my co-op’.

Discipline, as perhaps the most familiar characteristic of working life, is given a great deal of attention but solutions are difficult to impose. Co-op managers try to find an alternative to the discipline imposed in the mines, without regard for a person’s situation. This usually involves talking to the person accused, trying to learn what the cause of the problem was and how to resolve it. The importance of cooperation to the co-op’s survival is discussed. It becomes particularly difficult to dismiss someone, even when the rules call for it, because of the distaste for retrenchment and empathy for a worker facing unemployment: ‘If the code indicates someone should be dismissed, we will not dismiss... because we are fighting for the unemployed’. Dismissal is also difficult to impose because the person may organise other workers to stop production until the worker is reinstated. Though they have the formal authority, managers often do not feel they have the informal authority to impose discipline.

Co-op members use tactics learned in dealing with management on the mines to resist authority in the co-ops. In one co-op, when disciplinary rules were established to sanction absenteeism, workers started to be absent in groups, knowing that if everyone ‘stayed away’ it would not be possible to single out individuals for discipline. In an incident at another co-op, when the chair and bookkeeper went inside to work on the workplan and cashflow, the sun was hot and members all put down their tools together demanding that the managers come to the field. In this case, the chair used tactics he had learned from management on the mines to get them back to work, calling them one by one to convince them to go back. Co-op managers who were formerly union officials find that skills learned in the unions help immensely in the cooperative: knowing how to work with people, calm them down, persuade and educate them.

At two co-ops, resistance to the authority of coordinators was less of a problem. Three women members of one co-op said they listened to the coordinators because they ‘want the co-op to develop’ and because ‘we don’t want people on the outside to laugh at us’. Willingness to cooperate was greater at co-ops with larger proportions of women, and where the chairpersons were older and respected members of relatively cohesive communities. Co-ops with the biggest problems in this regard had many male members with managers who were young or women.
Another tension arises between managers regarding lines of authority. The problem arises where managers feel that their position of authority exempts them from listening to other managers. Several co-op managers recognised this as problematic. One co-op secretary explained that, as the co-op driver, he must obey the transport coordinator even though he is the secretary. This was important to benefiting the co-op as a whole, not just individuals.

‘External Authority’ and compliance:

Workers’ response to authority is contradictory, with passivity also a problem. Accustomed to a passive role in the workplace on a day-to-day level, workers do not take responsibility for decisions. According to one manager, they ‘want to be told what to do by the coordinators’. This was perceived as a problem because, according to one co-op chairperson, ‘it is important for members to learn to think for themselves’. Unaccustomed to ‘owning’ their workplace, workers can have difficulty building a sense that the co-op is their own. This manifests itself in viewing the co-op as belonging to the coordinators, expecting payment from the union for their work, or not taking care of equipment.

The trade union is given a great deal of authority. Although the union stresses that the co-op belongs to the members, and that wages must come from production, many still expect wages to come from the union. The workshops given by the union also hold substantial authority. Union authority is often summoned where managers do not feel they have their own. For example, members will respect something managers tell them because ‘they learned it in a workshop’. The deskilling and undermining of self-reliance and confidence that has been fundamental to apartheid leaves workers with a sense that authority lies outside of themselves, accepting from the union staff the same information or instruction that has been rejected coming from someone inside the co-op. Workers also see the union staff as the real ‘management’. According to a co-op chairperson,

I discussed with the Production Coordinator that we must put an old car up there and say its from the regional office, because when they see cars coming from the regional office its then that they work...

People are used to being managed, to the old style management, when they see managers it’s then that they work. They take the regional office as the top management. When the region comes they say ‘managers are coming’, they fear that if they are sitting down they will be discharged by the management.

In contrast with other producer groups in the Transkei (McIntosh, 1988; Mvelase, 1987), relatives of tribal authorities or others with influence or power in the community did not tend to be voted or otherwise find their way into
positions of authority in the co-ops. In three significant cases in the history of the NUM co-op program, individuals have attempted to claim authority in the co-ops and issue threats based on their relationships to chiefs or other powerful people. Eventually, each of these individuals was driven out. That this was possible could be attributed to the independent power base of the NUM, which provides a material and ideological alternative.

Where the co-ops are subject to tribal authority with respect to access to land and water, there is value in having relatives of headmen or chiefs in the co-op for purposes of negotiation and freedom from harassment. However, chiefly authority was not perceived to make someone a good leader in the co-op. In fact, in these regions where tribal authorities often lack legitimacy, electing relatives of chiefs was generally perceived to be a bad idea, because ‘these people do not help us’. That the NUM co-ops have yearly elections is itself in contrast with some other producer groups in the Transkei which have been more subject to external influence (see McIntosh, 1988). The differences between inherited and elected authority is recognised. The qualities regularly cited as looked for in electing co-op leaders is discipline, willingness to work hard, honesty, respect for others, caring for others, education, skills, experience, and ability to communicate (particularly to the outside, i.e. English).

Accountability and respect:

Managers given too much authority, because of their education in relation to other members or because they have commandeered it, have abused their power. Where there has been great disparity in the level of education between managers and members, systems of accountability can break down. At one co-op with only three educated coordinators filling all seven positions on the management committee, there eventually was no sharing of information, little effective participation by members, and either corruption or members’ perception of corruption on the part of managers. Distrust spiralled and the co-op went into crisis.

Managers gain respect from workers by respecting them. They want to be given instructions in a ‘respectful’, not ‘an oppressing way’, talked to, not shouted at. Nearly every person interviewed said ‘we will respect coordinators if they respect us’ - taking instructions is not necessarily resented but the manner is important. Workers are particularly sensitised by having been treated disrespectfully in the workplace and elsewhere in the society, and disrespect is associated with management. It is also the development of self-respect and enhanced self-esteem that is one of the most valued aspects of the co-ops.
Democracy: Meanings, Yearnings

Decision-making:

The question of which decisions are made by all workers, and which are delegated, has been grappled with in cooperatives across the globe. NUM prescribes its own resolution in a training module, based on successful structures from international experiences. However, meanings given to cooperatives and democracy that members bring with them to the co-op introduces different ideas and this issue persists as a point of struggle.

The union’s Projects Department training materials state that ‘Democratic control in the co-op means that every member must have a say in the direction and plans of the co-op’. ‘Policy decisions’ are those that effect this overall direction, and are made by all members in general meetings. ‘Practical decisions’ are technical decisions, those needed to carry out policy decisions (such as ordering seeds or servicing vehicles). These are delegated to managers (NUM, undated). Such a division assumes that practical decisions are also democratic because they are a means of implementing the decisions taken by the general membership.

In spite of this instruction, in practice the notion that ‘everyone makes all decisions’ is the dominant interpretation. Part of the problem may lie in translating language: for example, one literal translation offered for part of a Xhosa explanation of the policy/practical division was ‘running a co-op by decisions taken collectively doesn’t mean everyone participates’. But another part of the explanation lies in the resonance that the message of participation has with workers, long denied other opportunities for democratic decision-making. In many cases members believe they should be involved in all decisions, even the smallest of practical decisions. Many see this participation as the rule of the co-op. When asked about whether managers can take practical decisions on their own, one member responded that ‘it does happen that managers taken decisions without members, but they shouldn’t because they are not allowed to’. One co-op chairperson lamented that

at the moment we are afraid to make decisions [on our own] because if we do... the comrades might not know what is really happening, so we don’t want them to see us as the management.

Another production coordinator said that ‘If you make a decision alone you will create problems because all the people will reject it’.

However, as co-op members gain more experience with democratic decision-making, a learning process takes place and different forms of participation are tried. Considerations of productivity carry more weight, and workers begin to discern which issues are most important to them and require their participation. Sharing of information becomes a satisfactory substitute for consultation. For
example, at the earliest stages, everyone stops work to have a meeting when there is a decision to be made. Later, feeling that this takes too much time from production, they wait until after work. Many co-ops have now come to the point where coordinators can take certain decisions collectively without asking members, and report it to members afterward. However, even where this is taking place in practice, the rhetoric of member participation in all decisions remains dominant.

Democracy - definitions and understandings:

The question of respective decision-making responsibility - and definitions given to a co-op - reflect a more fundamental issue of meanings, interpretations, and yearnings surrounding the word and practice of democracy. ‘Democracy’ is a term and a practice introduced to many co-op workers previously in the trade union. This experience has helped to generate enthusiasm for and familiarity with debate, decision-making and elections. Some say they have heard the word democracy on the radio, some ‘from the ANC’; others said they have seen it in the schoolbooks of their children. Some members said the co-op was the first place they had heard the word democracy or seen what it meant. Familiarity with its workings and an understanding of its complexities is largely to be found among former shaft stewards and others who have held positions in the union structures. This is partly attributed to levels of education and personal characteristics of those who get elected to leadership positions in the union and co-ops, but also to their direct experience with democratic practice in the union.

Some of the definitions of democracy offered by workers include ‘majority rules’, ‘everyone must have a say’, and ‘everyone does the same work’. The problems with the second two lie in the issues of decision-making and division of labour discussed above. ‘Majority rules’ can be particularly problematic, and is often interpreted in a mechanistic fashion. As one co-op chairperson recognised, ‘it can not be like this if the majority wants something bad for the co-op’. The greatest danger is the majority wanting to distribute too much of the co-op’s income as wages; two co-ops have suffered serious financial crises as a result.

As described by some co-op leaders, democracy can be misunderstood, misused, or both. One coordinator described the situation he perceived at his co-op, where ‘the word democracy is taken as having any meaning if desires are not met and the authority of the coordinators is resented’. Another co-op leader lamented that ‘members believe that being able to do anything they want constitutes democracy’. Democracy is equated with ‘freedom from oppression’. One co-op chairperson explained that:

People want to be trained in democracy. We need to learn about democracy in business. If you try to tell people to do something,
some may say, 'You know what happened in the mines, we decided to leave the mines because people were oppressing us, and now you are starting to oppress us...'. If you try to increase productivity, people will claim you are fighting against their personal rights, their human rights. Yet they are in business, they have to produce, even if you have a hangover or something like that.

One co-op chairperson who used to belong to one of the first co-ops where 'people refused to do things because of democracy', said this was not a big problem at his new co-op, with a smaller proportion of ex-mineworkers, 'because people here are not that familiar with democracy'. He also felt they had benefitted from lessons learned from experiences of the early co-ops.

Another problem perceived by one co-op chairperson was lack of commitment to the union and co-op idea on the part of members who were dismissed from the mines because they were ‘caught in the crossfire’ during the strike, but not politicised, nor even supportive of the strike. Once in the co-op they wanted money but had no commitment to cooperation and little understanding of democracy. In this situation, the workshops may not be effective:

They learn about democracy from the workshops. But you can explain democracy to someone who has learned from their parents. It is very difficult to educate someone who knows nothing of democracy or organisation. He just understands that it means rule of majority, by the people for the people. For example, you are budgeting and suggest using R2000 for expenditures and R1000 for wages. They want the other way around. They say money is coming from customers tomorrow which can be used to buy materials. And you try to argue with them that the co-op will fail, but they are the majority and the management are few. They say you are a dictator and they are the majority, because they have been given democracy.

Here again, co-op members have undergone a learning process. At one co-op, there were two incidents where the majority wanted to take a decision that was technically or financially destructive and three people persuaded the majority of why they should compromise. At another co-op, a woman explained that ‘democracy means majority rule but we try to reach a consensus so we discuss things. The majority would not decide to take all money for wages because we will be killing our co-op and destroying our future’. One co-op chairperson, formerly a shaft steward for two years, described a lesson he learned in the coop around democracy and production:

people must bring up their views, so we don’t just do things on our own, but we do things that the people want done. The word democracy is so nice, especially during the meetings. But when
we are working practically, I’m not sure we need that name, especially in the field... Here at work, I only think one person must be responsible, not everyone saying do this, do this...

He also recognised that the legitimacy of that authority in the field lies in the shared and joint constitution of the policies he or she is carrying out:

What is most important is that what we are really doing in the field is what we have planned. What we do is extracted from the word democracy because it was democratically agreed by everyone. Its o.k. to use the word democracy because when you instruct someone to do something it comes to his mind that I was part of this. If something has been planned by one person then he can say, no this is not mine, it was planned by you, so whatever happens I don’t care, it’s your problem.

As this comment indicates, the experience with democracy of those in leadership positions in the trade union manifests itself in more developed understandings of democracy in the co-ops. This can be seen as well in their critical reflections on other members’ views of democracy in the quotations above. However, experience in the co-op seems to enhance their understandings of the dilemmas and responsibilities of democracy. Reflecting on his own learning process in the co-op, this chairperson said he had first heard of democracy in the NUM, but ‘when we talked of democracy we said we wanted a people’s government. We never explained where does this work or when’.

Another issue concerns elections, seen as a democratic right and a solution to problems. In the earlier co-ops, people were elected in and out of positions, ‘to such an extent that they don’t gain experience in their jobs’, as recognised by one staff member. At one co-op with only three literate coordinators and a wholly illiterate membership, frequent elections were called because workers did not trust the people they elected, illiteracy and innumeracy preventing them from knowing whether management was honest or not. Skill development and education around democracy is critical to assuring accountability and effective participation. One bookkeeper expressed his belief that ‘democracy can work in the co-op, but education is the first thing needed. Without it there won’t be any democracy. There will be “ultra democracy” wrong democracy. A misinterpretation’.

The practice of having long debates over numerous issues - part of the democratic process in the co-ops - can be linked to the practice of lengthy debate in the union’s regional structures which can last for days, according to the Projects Department Coordinator. This tradition is facilitative of the democratic process which can otherwise be lacking in cooperatives where members have not had this experience. However, what works in the union can also be cumbersome in the cooperative, where as a business there are necessary considerations
of efficiency. It is particularly important, then, for co-ops to clarify which issues require full membership decisions and which can be delegated.

Equality:
Co-op members are all aware of the requirements of formal equality, guaranteed in the co-ops’ constitutions, and most assert that all members are treated equally. There is, however, sometimes a gap between rhetoric and practice. For example, though women are equal to men in all ways under the constitution, they are quite disproportionately under-represented in management structures. Because they are sometimes more literate than the men, they end up performing management tasks 'behind the scenes'. In one co-op, where two relatively educated young women were elected as production and marketing coordinators, men objected to their handling money. This was because they 'did not work in the mines' and the co-op's money was said to be ex-mineworkers' money, effectively preventing them from carrying out their jobs.

Responsibility and democracy:
As argued above, many co-op members, particularly those who have held leadership positions in the union, emphasise the role of responsibility in democracy. Some definitions include 'sharing ideas and responsibilities', 'mutual responsibility toward one another and towards one another's problems', and (in contrast with enabling one to do 'anything') it is where 'one must not do his own thing... but rather what the people want'. Democracy has been seen as a means of being responsive to workers' personal needs, where people share problems, learning that they are 'one and the same thing', and making decisions based on mutual caring and the needs of the collective.

Democracy has other benefits in the co-ops. Co-op workers find that democracy improves the quality of their decision-making. Inputs from many individuals can help to compensate for lack of expertise. Workers may have different experience and knowledge, such as farmwork or growing vegetables at home, that they can contribute in a collective decision-making process. Most coordinators feel some lack of confidence and prefer to be able to consult with others. Responsibility is thus also shared if a wrong decision is made. Workers expressed the importance of accountability when the possibility of incompetence or bad motives exists; according to one, 'if it were not a democracy, the workers would have to take [the chair's] decision, even if it ends up destroying the co-op'.

Despite 'inefficiencies' and problematic definitions, democracy in the co-ops encourages engagement, challenge, and is empowering to workers as they assert their right to information and influence the decisions that effect them on a daily basis. The importance of workers’ experience taking on responsibility at the
co-op is illustrated by one co-op chairperson’s evaluation:

At the mines, I only went to work to get my wages at month end, I wasn’t concerned with anything else. What I knew to do was to pick up rocks and take them somewhere, not how to use them to get gold. I didn’t know how much it would cost to blast a site, how much income would come from the blast. Here at the co-op, I know how much yield will come from what size plot, how much income to expect from it. I know much more now.

He said the co-op had also given him confidence; for example, to pressure the local headman to give them land, and to take further steps if not satisfied.

Conclusion

Cooperative consciousness goes beyond a Marxist definition of working class consciousness involving a “conception of an alternative society, a goal toward which one moves through the struggle with the opponent” (Mann, 1973:13), to add the ability to act to realise that vision, once the material conditions for its realisation are offered. This requires a participatory and democratic consciousness that involves not only activism and resistance but responsibility and a respect for authority legitimated by its base in joint authorship.

The development of a strong and effective labour movement in South Africa has demonstrated the existence of a consciousness among the working class leading to organised resistance to employers and the state. But another level of consciousness, facilitating workplace democracy, is less developed at present. Most of these co-op workers as a group demonstrated solidarity and a consciousness of their interests as a class vis-a-vis employers during the 1987 mineworkers strike. However, when there is no longer a familiar enemy (the bosses), and the responsibility is more direct, cooperation becomes more difficult and new forms must be learned through experience. The definition of democracy as ‘freedom’ and particularly ‘freedom from oppression’ can be understood in terms of the experience of apartheid as well as accompanying discourses of resistance movements. A transitional and new South Africa will generate redefinition.

There has been much in South African society militating against cooperation. Baldacchino (1990), following Gramsci, emphasises how the cooperative logic is subsumed by socialising agents that legitimate the principles fashioning capitalist production relations. In South Africa workers are affected not just by capitalist production relations but by inequality on the basis of race, class, gender and birthright, extreme poverty and poor education, and a fundamentally undemocratic society. There are also competing influences in the society that facilitate cooperation. Workers’ activities in their workplace, communities and organisations have generated solidarity and experiences of participation and
cooperation.

The democratic values of trade unions are responsible for the interest in workplace democracy and their development of producer cooperatives. But it is not enough to institute democratic structures. Democracy in its variety of forms must be understood through education and experience by all participants. Otherwise democracy may remain at the rhetorical level, be instituted mechanistically or ‘partially’ — i.e. the rights without the responsibilities.

The trade unions have been important arenas for the experience of democracy, its value, dilemmas and responsibilities. This is demonstrated in the cooperatives by the developed understandings and practices of many former union leaders who are now elected leadership in the co-ops and co-op regional structures. However, simply belonging to a large democratic organisation does not necessarily guarantee an understanding of democracy — one’s position and nature of participation in that organisation shapes that experience — and other conditions in the society have not facilitated that understanding. Furthermore, the nature of trade union activity generates skill at resistance, and the experience of apartheid and workplace social relations engenders a dislike for authority that further complicates efforts to create and fuse democracy with lines of managerial authority that are necessary in a cooperative.

Through experience of participatory democracy in the cooperatives, with all its dilemmas, complexities and rewards, understandings and capacities are being built, slowly but steadily. The cooperatives force consideration and resolution of tensions between participation and efficiency, equality and hierarchy, and individual and collective interests, important in all democratic organisation. Whether it be through cooperatives or other forms of organisation, it is through the experience of participatory democracy that these understandings are built.

NOTES
1. Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at the African Studies Association of South Africa (ASASA) bi-annual meeting on 17-18 June, 1993 and at a Symposium on ‘Work, Class and Culture’ hosted by the History Workshop and Sociology of Work Unit at University of the Witwatersrand on 28-30 June, 1993. This research was made possible in part by grants from Fulbright and the Social Sciences Research Council.

2. Currently, three such union initiatives still exist. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA)-affiliated Sarmcol Workers Cooperative (SAWCO), started in 1985, now has three projects in operation involving approximately 30 workers. The South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU)’s Zenzelema Clothing, opened in 1989, is a factory owned by a union-affiliated trust, presently employing approximately 113 people. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) first began cooperative development in 1988; its co-ops now have over 400 members.

The development of economically viable cooperatives in general in South Africa, initiated by a wide range of organisations, has been constrained by many factors, in varying combinations: members drawn from the most economically and politically marginalised sectors of society, with low levels of education, skills and confidence; dependencies developed on skilled staff and donors; unrealistically high goals and expectations; an overemphasis on politics to the
neglect of business considerations; inexperienced support organisations; insufficient support services; little history of cooperative forms of production; a harsh economic climate; and others. Some co-ops have met varying degrees of success. However, this broader discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

3. Gunn draws this point, and that in his quote in the following paragraph of this paper, through a summary of work of Jaroslav Vanek (1975) and Paul Bernstein (1976).

4. Unless otherwise cited, all data in the following two sections I collected through interviews, meetings and participant observation during April through June, 1992. The co-ops researched were located at Flagstaff, Tabankuhi, Umtata, Engcobo, Ixopo and Cala in the Transkei, and Lesotho, and Thaba Bosiu in Lesotho. I would like to thank co-op members and all participants in NUM's cooperative development programme with whom I spoke. In particular, Kate Philip and other members of the Projects Department staff and office bearers in the Transkei and Lesotho, for facilitating this research and for their valuable contributions to ideas explored in the fieldwork. Thanks also to staff members Stanley Mashebula, Amos Mlungwana, Malineo Nkasi and Puseletso Siale for providing translation, useful observations and good company while in the field.

5. Because I am referring to individuals with management functions, ‘coordinator’ and ‘manager’, will be used interchangeably.

6. Learning processes are also facilitated by the Projects Department, which is responding to problems described in this study through new educational inputs.

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