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ARTICLE

From New Left to Social Enterprise: A Conceptual History of the Industrial Common Ownership Movement, 1971–2001

Sean Irving

Abstract

This article examines how the ideological outlook of the British worker co-operative movement gradually assumed a neoliberal character. Drawing on methods from conceptual history, it traces the evolution of the movement's key ideas and explores the changing language in which they were expressed. Central to this shift was the emergence of a social-enterprise discourse that reframed an earlier New Left commitment to pursuing worker control "in and against the market" as a conviction that such control could be achieved only "in and through" market participation. The study centres on the Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM), a national federation of worker co-operatives active in Britain between 1971 and 2001. It uses items published by ICOM, material from numerous archives, and oral interviews conducted with some of those involved in the federation's final years.

Keywords: neoliberalism; market competition; business history; cooperatives; socialism

Introduction

This article makes the case that the ideology of the British worker co-op movement underwent a process of neoliberalization. In doing so, it applies methods of conceptual history to a study of that movement's ideology. A core feature of this process was the development of the social enterprise discourse, which resulted in an earlier "New Left" commitment to worker control "in and against the market" being replaced by the belief that such control was only

Email: sean.irving@essex.ac.uk

viable "in and through" the market.[1] The argument presented here results from a study of the Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM), a federation of worker-owned co-operatives with its own central staff and headquarters, that existed in Britain from 1971 to 2001.[2] It draws on archival research conducted across a number of locations examining a range of material published by ICOM, as well as the personal papers of ICOM presidents, businessman Ernest Bader, and Member of Parliament Bob Edwards. It also employs material from oral interviews conducted with former ICOM staff involved in the last years of the federation before its merger with the consumer co-op-dominated Co-operative Union to form Co-operatives UK.[3]

Despite ICOM's centrality to the British co-operative movement in the last third of the twentieth century and its formative role in the development of social enterprise in Britain, only recently has it begun to receive attention from scholars.[4] Further study of the movement is, therefore, much needed for a more comprehensive understanding of both co-operation and social enterprise. A focus on ICOM also casts a broader light, illuminating the changing socioeconomic aspirations of a significant section of the post-1968 New Left. Contemporary observers labeled ICOM, and the members of its affiliated worker co-ops, "new co-operators," and they were generally regarded as counter-cultural figures. Often with good reason, ICOM-affiliated co-operators were seen as being quite distinct in their culture, manners, and indeed their politics from those involved with the far larger Co-operative Union, dominated by the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and were drawn from sections of society quite distinct from the mainstream co-operative and labor movements.[5] As Alex Campsie has noted, "from the 1970s, left-wing thinkers began to challenge the 'facelessness' of traditional social democracy, seeking a more vibrant, flexible form of socialism built from the ground up."[6] This was very much the sentiment one finds expressed within ICOM during its early years.

It is possible to identify a clear and consistent concern over ICOM's existence: that is, the shared and enduring insistence of co-operators to have control over their own lives. Taking

1. Scholars have identified two "New Lefts," a first New Left located in the academy and the intellectual sphere, included figures such as social historians Edward and Dorothy Thompson and those associated with the publication *The New Reasoner.* They distanced themselves from the Communist Party of Great Britain following the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. A second New Left was a more diffuse but certainly more popular counter-cultural movement that arose in the wake of the strikes and protests of 1968. It is this wider social movement to which the term is more commonly applied. It is also that movement addressed in this article when the "New Left" is employed. See Hall, *Life and Times*. This description of ICOM's approach to the market is my formulation and is not the language employed by ICOM. I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to make this clear.

2. It was funded by membership fees taken from those organizations affiliated to the federation.

3. The People's History Museum in the Bob Edwards Papers (BEP); the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick in the Ernest Bader Papers (EBP); The National Cooperative Archive Manchester in the Working Together Oral History Archive (WTOH). Further primary research was carried out at the Bishopsgate Institute; the Working Class Movement Library, Salford; and the National Cooperative Archive, Manchester. These holdings include items published by the Industrial Common Ownership Movement. Such items will, therefore, be cited as published documents. Oral history interviews remain anonymized.

4. ICOM plays a central role in Sasson, *Solidarity Economy*; The other key study here is Huckfield, *Blair.*

5. For a comprehensive history of the Cooperative Wholesale Society, see Wilson, Vorbugh-Rugh, and Webster, *Building Co-operation.*

6. Alexandre Campsie, "Socialism Will Never Be the Same Again."

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ownership of one's own life, by maintaining ownership of the place in which one worked, and a rejection of the hierarchy and paternalism that characterized employment in British industry under the Fordist production regime of the post-war decades, persistently motivated the new co-operators and shaped the ideology of the movement.[7]

A study of ICOM thus further illuminates the importance of what Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe Braithwaite, and Natalie Tomlinson have described as a concern for "autonomy" among increasing numbers of the British population over the 1970s.[8] They note that this concern for autonomy was articulated both within the New Left and the "New Right." It was in the vernacular of the right that it found its most effective electoral appeal, articulated by figures such as Keith Joseph, Norman Tebbit, and, most significantly, Margaret Thatcher. They presented autonomy as being above all about "choice" in the market, homeownership, and increased consumption. Recovering the lost history of ICOM reveals a different vision of autonomy, one in which it is realized not at the point of consumption, but of production, in collective "control" over one's work life.

Recent studies by Thomas Da Costa Vieira and Emma Foster have argued that the British co-operative movement was disciplined by governments intent on depoliticizing and de-radicalizing it.[9] This article offers something new in that it does not view the co-operative movement as simply the object of government strategy. Inevitably, external factors such as deindustrialization and government policy did shape the ambitions of the worker co-op movement and limited its horizons. However, research for this project points to the need to emphasize the agency of co-operators themselves. While having to work in straitened circumstances, ICOM members were not simply neoliberalized from without; they themselves were active agents in that process. This, however, was rarely their intention. As with much history, this is a story of unintended consequences.

Co-operators did not accept a neoliberal rationality simply because they were persuaded of its superiority. They did so because changed political and economic circumstances required them to do so.[10] They had to reimagine worker co-operation across the period because the legislative and financial environment changed. One might characterize these shifts emanating from government as a type of disciplinary process. However, figures within ICOM were agents as well as subjects. They were agile and energetic in adapting because they saw this as the best means of maintaining control. It was a combination of changed contexts and a willingness to embrace change that resulted in ICOM's ideological evolution. This changing with the times can accurately be described as "modernization." ICOM was only one of many left organizations that had to engage with this process, the Labour Party itself chief among them.[11] Nevertheless, it was a process of modernization that ultimately resulted in neoliberalization.

7. Holden, *Fording*.

8. Robinson, Schofield, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Thomlinson, "Telling Stories About Post-War Britain," 268–304.

9. Da Costa Vieira and Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands."

10. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this point.

11. Murphy, *Futures of Socialism*.

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Concepts and Methods

Neoliberalism is, of course, a highly contested term. Some have questioned its usefulness at all.[12] But it is no more contested or open to interpretation than other political concepts, whether they be socialism, conservatism, or notoriously—liberalism itself. Its deployment does, however, demand definition. In thinking about the neoliberalization of the worker co-op movement, this piece addresses the issue from the perspective of rationality; of ideas and ideology.[13] In this vein, it draws on a definition offered by the political economist Will Davies, who describes neoliberalism as "the disenchantment of politics by economics."[14]

This definition itself, however, requires refinement. One might reasonably argue that, as it stands, it could apply just as easily to social democracy. One can interpret the post-war period as one in which political radicalism was marginalized by social democratic governments concerned with technical routes to economic growth and with the distribution of economic surpluses rather than a redistribution of political power.[15] We must, therefore, stipulate that, at the level of rationality, neoliberalism involves the disenchantment of politics by *market* economics.[16] In this way, we arrive at Wendy Brown's characterization of neoliberalism as constituted above all by a "rationality … a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms." This "neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities … and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors."[17] This rationality is itself political, however, and an acceptance of the primacy of market economics is a product of politics.

While Davies's model of disenchantment is a useful source of inspiration, it should be stressed that disenchantment here does not amount to an evacuation of politics entirely from ICOM's worldview. Rather, it was the ambition to transform the market along co-operative lines that disappeared. The shift involved replacing one political vision of markets, as networks that could be structured to promote co-operation and in which transformative changes in ownership were possible, with another that accepted their domination by private capital and competition. This process of "disenchantment" did not amount to full depoliticization, but rather to a softening, then disappearance, of the radical critique of capitalist ownership and the competitive system.[18]

Relatedly, it should be stressed that there was never a simple dichotomy between politics and markets within ICOM. In the 1970s, ICOM was central to what Tehila Sasson has

12. For some of those who reject the utility of the term see Dunn, "Against Neoliberalism as a Concept," 435–454; Vengopal, "Neoliberalism as a Concept," 165–187; Boas and Gans-Morse, "Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan," 137–161; Magness, "Coining Neoliberalism", 189–214. Works that insist on its usefulness include Mirowski and Plehwe, *The Road From Mont Pelerin*; Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*; Slobodian, *Globalists*; Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism*.

13. The definition of ideology adopted in this article was developed by Freeden, "The Morphological Analysis of Ideology."

14. Davies, *Limits of Neoliberalism*, 21. Tomlinson has questioned the extent to which neoliberalism was a discrete policy agenda. See Tomlinson, "Strange Survival."

15. Edgerton, *Rise and Fall*.

16. Davies recognizes this, but it is not conveyed clearly in the "disenchantment" formulation employed here. See Davies, *Limits of Neoliberalism*, 4, 23.

17. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 31.

18. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for insisting on this clarification.

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identified as a resurgence of moral economy in Britain and beyond.[19] She describes ICOM as critical to the growth of a nonprofit network. In its early phase, it was animated by a desire to transform society, but its members understood that to achieve this, they must act, as Sasson describes it, both "in and against" the market.[20] "In" to the extent they operated in markets, "against" in that they did not value financial returns above all else. In the case of ICOM, maintaining worker control was prioritized. It developed a politics of ownership that viewed the extension of worker control as essentially a political effort. While co-operatives would have to operate in the market, persuading workers to establish and maintain them was an essentially political task. By the 1990s, however, it was felt that this control could only be maintained "in and through" the market, via the adoption of market-based strategies for survival.

The method for establishing the neoliberalization of new left co-operatives employed here applies methods of conceptual history to business history. Specifically, I adopt the approach of conceptual morphology devised by Michael Freeden.[21] Freeden has shown how ideologies can be interpreted as being composed of concepts; a central core concept with other adjacent and peripheral concepts arranged around the core. The overall composition of the concepts will affect what a particular interpretation of the ideology looks like. For example, liberalism will have liberty at its core, but various types of liberalism will emerge depending on the adjacent concepts: a composition that stresses self-development, community, and equality will look very different from one that stresses free market action, individualism, and competition.

The great benefit of adopting the model of conceptual morphology is that it lends itself to the study of intellectual change over time. As Freeden himself has noted an important element of the practice "is to encourage a move away from the notion that ideologies are always and only totalizing, doctrinaire, and dogmatic, locked into an unyielding configuration."[22] Ben Jackson, a leading practitioner of Freeden's method, has noted that "political ideologies are flexible intellectual frameworks that aggregate and prioritise a number of political concepts. Ideologies possess a cluster of core concepts alongside adjacent and peripheral ones, but it is by no means the case that a given ideology must always maintain the same internal conceptual configuration."[23] This study shows such conceptual change occurring within ICOM through an engagement with the archival material.

Yet ideologies do not simply change of their own accord; they have no actual agency. They are the product of intellectual interaction, conflictual as well as collaborative. The morphology that takes prominence is often that which seems to make the most sense in the context of changing social circumstances. As Quentin Skinner argued, we should not imagine there are fixed reified concepts, but should instead turn our attention to "the various agents who used the idea, and on their varying situations and intentions in using it."[24] In plotting the

19. Sasson, *Solidarity*, 4–11.

20. Her characterization of ICOM, however, is not entirely correct as it mischaracterizes the role played by Bader beyond the early 1970s. See below.

21. Freeden, "Political Concepts and Ideological Morphology," 140–164.

22. Freeden, "Morphological Analysis," 124.

23. Jackson, *Equality*, 3.

24. Jackson, *Equality*, 3; Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," 56.

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ideological development of ICOM, we should not imagine it was a predictable, untroubled, or unopposed procession toward a neoliberal position. Many of course did not wish to shift from a radical left politics committed to change "in and against" the market to a position which looked to action "in and through" the market. Large segments of ICOM and its affiliates no doubt even continued to conceive of it as a transformative project right until the end. What I am doing here is making the case that, in its public pronouncement as well as its policy direction, we can clearly trace a morphological shift in the direction of the disenchantment of a radical politics of ownership by market economics.

We can, unsurprisingly, denote the ideology of ICOM as co-operation. For the new co-operators of the 1970s, the core concept was "control," the importance of which has been stated above.[25] What is more, this holds true across the period. Yet the adjacent and peripheral concepts arranged around control shifted over time. Tracing this allows the researcher to chart the way in which ICOM's understanding of co-operation shifted over time. Furthermore, this shift also shaped how control itself was understood and the ways in which it was experienced: core concepts are subject to "diverse interpretations, depending on which adjacent and peripheral concepts are then attached to them."[26] Furthermore, by placing this evolution in historical context, this piece also offers some suggestions as to why this came about.

In the early period of ICOM's history, from the early 1970s to the early 1980s, the concepts arranged around Control were: Democracy, Social Justice, and Transformation. This might be referred to as ICOM's "heroic" phase, given the scale of its ambition. During this period, "control" was to be defended and indeed exported across the economy to other workers interested in common ownership "in and against" the market. This is the subject of section one, the lengthiest section of this article.

Section two examines the second phase under question from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. In this period, Community, Education, and Development come to displace the earlier adjacent concepts to the periphery. In this period, funding from local, central, and European governments became central to the work of ICOM affiliates, and the central office promoted the sort of community work that might get funding in tandem with the older industrial co-ops that sought business on the open market. Consequently, there was a sense that worker control was to be maintained "in and alongside" the market.

By the early 1990s, these concepts had themselves been displaced to the periphery by Leadership, The Market, and Social Enterprise, with the initial trio of adjacent concepts no longer much in evidence. Despite the valorization of enterprise, the allocation of public funds remained important during this period, but increasingly they were received on the basis of successful bids for government contracts, resulting in co-operatives delivering public services of various kinds. It was during this final phase that the language and rationality of the market came to the fore most clearly. Now control was to be maintained where possible "in and through the market," whether those were commercial markets or the market for public sector

25. Their version of co-operation differed from that of the established consumer co-operative movement, the history of which could be traced back to the Rochdale Pioneers. It also differed from the existing, venerable, and largely moribund worker co-op movement aligned with the consumer movement in the Cooperative Union. A lengthier study would be required to set out the morphological divergences.

26. Jackson, *Equality*, 3.

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contracts. The desire to transform the economy via co-operation had been thoroughly disenchanted by market economics.

A couple more brief points on method: In referring to ICOM and its ideology, I do not imagine it was a single conscious agent, or overlook the reality that it was composed of different individuals with different ideas. I have noted it is precisely the contest between these ideas that accounts for ideological change over time. Yet as this is an essentially institutional history, to trace in too great a detail the practical and intellectual contributions of individuals would, at least in piece of this limited length, distort what at a basic level must be a synthetic enterprise. While certain outstanding individuals demand to be considered in more detail, I am providing an interpretation of institutional conceptual change, one grounded in a broad collection of archival evidence. Finally, this piece also makes use of two oral interviews with employees of ICOM in its later stages. These are anonymized. I also use oral testimonies from the Working Together Oral Histories project. I will not dwell on the benefits and limitations of these types of sources, save to say that memory is rarely entirely accurate and one's recollection frequently changes in light of later interpretation. This is a human trait and no criticism of the interviewees to whom I am deeply grateful. Nevertheless, I have treated their evidence with this in mind and advise the reader to do likewise.[27]

Phase One, 1971–Early 1980s: Democracy, Social Justice, Transformation

"Industrial Common Ownership means a society of men and women who enjoy and control their labour and its reward," stated a 1972 pamphlet issued by ICOM. "We stand for a responsible form of control," insisted a 1975 issue, "which is shared by those who do the work."[28] Considered in terms of conceptual morphology, it is *control* that occupies the core conceptual position, and the adjacent concepts during this phase were, as will be demonstrated, Democracy, Social Justice, and Transformation.

DEMINTRY

ICOM itself emerged out of a predecessor organization of the name DEMINTRY (the Society for Democratic Integration in Industry), the key figure behind which was Ernest Bader. A colorful figure, Bader had in 1951 taken the extraordinary decision to transfer ownership of his successful family-owned chemical firm, Scott Bader, into the hands of its workers.[29] More specifically, Bader characterized this remarkable shift as the establishment of common ownership, with the Scott Bader Workers Association receiving ninety per cent of the company shares. While there would still be wage differentials, a new democratic governing body would vote on all matters related to remuneration, to investment and dividends, and would have ultimate responsibility for the strategic direction of the new Scott Bader Commonwealth.

27. For lengthier reflections on oral histories, see Ritchie, "Introduction."

28. ICOM, "A Description of the Industrial Common Ownership Movement," v.

29. The Scott in the company name is his wife Dora's surname. Hoe, *The Man Who Gave Away His Company*, 120–142. Other significant figures in.

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A convert to Quakerism, Bader regarded common ownership as a prerequisite for the personal self-development he believed was at the heart of the Christian message. Autocratic management, he insisted, was antithetical to human flourishing.[30] Rejecting models of codetermination, Bader made the materialist case that the only way to ensure control and thus the democracy necessary for self-development was worker ownership. Along with Wilfred Wellock and George Goyder, Bader thus founded DEMINTRY.[31] Its methods for encouraging public ownership were to appeal to businessmen like Bader, stressing the ethical and even spiritual benefits such a transfer of ownership and control could bring to those beneficent enough to do the decent thing and follow Bader's lead. This paternalistic approach was inspired by more than just Quakerism. "It's not my idea," he insisted, "Robert Owen and Gandhi thought of it before."[32]

By the early 1970s, however, he and others involved in DEMINTRY, such as the Christian Socialist Paul Derrick, came to see Common Ownership as being more than a route to spiritual salvation and self-development.[33] Given developments in the global economy, in particular rising inflation and increasing industrial unrest, they came to believe that common ownership could, if its principles were applied throughout industry, transcend the standoff between capital and labor and, by extension, help deal with the inflationary crisis.[34] This was particularly pronounced in Britain, where the prevalence of strikes resulted in industrial unrest being labelled "the British disease" by international media.[35] Worker owners were unlikely to press for wage rises when they could recognize that their remuneration came directly from a share in company profits. Equally, they would not wish to damage the health of their company by doing so. Furthermore, responsible worker ownership would be more accepting of the falling rate of profit than private capital and more willing to continue operating businesses, even at a loss, until conditions recovered. This commitment to social transformation became one of the key adjacent concepts of the movement.

By 1971, "it was plain that the DEMINTRY style of gentle exhortation was not going to achieve the transformation of society that it sought." So, the decision was taken "to change the name and the emphasis and to appeal not just to businessmen but to Trade Unions, politicians and the general public."[36] A new activism was required to meet the challenge of the moment, and we can regard this as a further adjacent concept to control. Thus, ICOM was established, with thirteen founder enterprises.[37] Alongside ICOM, Bader and other business backers previously involved with DEMINTRY established Industrial Common Ownership Finance (ICOF). It would make funds available to new start-up worker co-ops.[38]

30. Bader, "Why I Started," EBP 1/145D.
31. For more on these figures, see Sasson, *Solidarity*, 147.
32. Hoe, *The Man Who Gave Away His Company*, 108.
33. Derrick was, in 1960, a founder member of the Christian Socialist movement and a member of the Economic Research Council.
34. ICOM: Newsletter of the Industrial Common Ownership Movement (Summer 1971).
35. Cronin, "Strikes."
36. ICOM: Draft of advertisement for ICOM (1973) BE/9/1.
37. ICOM: *A Description.*
38. ICOF continues to operate as Co-operative & Community Finance.

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Tehila Sasson has given a central role to Bader and his network in the inception and promotion of a new form of global nonprofit network.[39] Doubtless, Bader did much to "create an industrial model that would replicate" Scott Bader's "ideas in the world of development aid" and, at least among many in this network, "its model of stakeholder capitalism was seen as part of a decolonized and decentralized vision of international society in both rural and urban economies." It is not, however, the case, as she suggests, that ICOM itself was heavily involved in nurturing this network. While it would always cultivate global links, it was rather Scott Bader that retained the lead, even running annual lecture series and making their premises available to provide training to start-ups in the developing world. This would continue to occupy Ernest Bader in particular, long after his association with ICOM was curtailed.

The extent to which the early years of ICOM were characterized by a conceptual arrangement centered on control, with Democracy, Social Justice, and Transformation as adjacent concepts, is further demonstrated in a draft of a document produced by the movement, which would inform subsequent publications. It insisted that "democratic control of our own business enterprises can give us control over the most important aspect of our lives" and that "when this happens we shall truly learn the art of democracy." Another chapter declared that "if we want social justice, then common ownership of industry is the one certain method for achieving it in a free society." The final chapter pointed toward the "New Horizons" and the transformation such an arrangement would make possible.[40]

Markets and Statism

The new co-operators of ICOM belonged to a New Left that rejected statism while looking toward a post-capitalist future.[41] Essentially, ICOM argued that capital was too important a resource to be left to irresponsible capitalists—who used it only to enrich themselves at social expense. Rather than capital employing labor, as had been the practice since the emergence of capitalism, "labor must employ capital"—a phrase oft-repeated within the early movement. This was as much an anti-statist vision as it was anti-capitalist. The nationalization of large parts of British industry according to a top-down model, and often leaving in place the same management structures developed under private ownership had characterized the post-war years.[42] This must never be repeated, and indeed its legacies within the nationalized industries must, ICOM insisted, be reformed. "It is often contended that the state must participate in industry in the public interest," however, "there is no need for this to involve direct interference in men's control of their own work."[43] A co-operative economy in which production and consumption remained guided by markets was the favored vision of political economy. ICOM's core goal was to expand the worker co-op movement, and it produced advice targeted at potential future co-operators working within existing, if often struggling, businesses.[44]

39. Sasson *Solidarity*, 146–154.
40. ICOM: Draft of Ideals and Objectives (1971), chapters 9, 10, 11. BE/9/1.
41. Coates, "Britain in the 1970s," 141–166; Maccaferri, "From 'Old' to 'New' Politics," 401–417.
42. Tomlinson, "Nationalization," 187–215.
43. ICOM: Draft of Ideals and Objectives (1971), chapters 9, 10, 11. BE/9/1. It is important to state that such gendered language would be unthinkable in the ICOM of the late 1980s and 1990s.
44. ICOM*: How to Change to Common Ownership.*

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The reference to the employment of capital reveals that markets were still regarded as indispensable because they limited the potential of state bureaucracies. Furthermore, there was a confidence that "the distortion of the market system will cease with common ownership" because the worker-owners of an enterprise would get no automatic advantage from an increase in their numbers, i.e., from an expansion of the business. Yet despite the continued existence of markets, ICOM's socioeconomic vision remained one in which ownership of capital had been radically transformed along popular lines and in which markets functioned by co-operation rather than competition. This was to be achieved by extending worker control "in and against" the market.

How co-operation was to be established at a societal level within a market framework was not given much consideration by the movement. Reflections on how noncompetitive, co-operative markets might be established and sustained are absent. An awareness of debates in the history of political economy about the viability of market socialism of the type that had taken place during the socialist calculation debates in no way troubled the thinking of the new co-operators.[45] They were ultimately activists who believed that a cumulation of essentially political acts of co-operation, bringing about common ownership and democratic control of industry, would, over time, transform society. Economic theory was not their concern. The genial attitude toward markets was, however, to prove a key prerequisite for a later accommodation to neoliberal thinking in the form of social enterprise.

A Conciliatory Appeal

The idea that common ownership constituted a new, transformational form of political economy that could speak to the concerns of both labor and capital, thus overcoming those basic oppositions, can be found in ICOM's initial publications. The very first ICOM newsletter insisted that "we believe that basic changes … in industrial ownership are essential if inflation is to be brought under control and if a real sense of partnership and common purpose is to be achieved in industry."[46] Its initial pronouncements were at times as critical of the Trade Unions as they were of employers: "All the energy of the Unions these days is absorbed in getting more wages in order to minimise the effects of inflation," an ICOM pamphlet complained. Efforts are directed at "wrestling marginal benefits of working conditions … all this merely helps the acquisitive and society to persist along with its lack of social accountability."[47]

ICOM's ambition to transcend divisions of labor and capital involved an early attempt to remain nonaligned in a party-political sense; hence its criticisms of parties across the board. Bader and his allies, Paul Derrick and Roger Sawtell, regarded a fondness for centralization on the part of Labour politicians and Trade Union leaders as one of the key barriers to promoting

45. O'Neill, "Who Won the Socialist Calculation Debate?," 431–442; Lavoie, "A Critique of the Standard Account of the Socialist Calculation Debate," 41–87.

46. The centrality of the battle against inflation is evident from the fact that the newsletter also addresses Nixon's decision to take the dollar off the gold standard with all its attendant consequences. ICOM Newsletter (Summer 1971), 1–2.

47. ICOM: Trade Unions and Common Ownership (1972), 10–20.

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common ownership.[48] Furthermore, an equivalence between the approaches of the two major parties to the economic malaise was drawn: "Conservative government does not intend to do anything at all to promote partnership in industry and the Labour party seems to have forgotten that is pledged by its Constitution to secure for workers by hand and by brain the full fruits of their industry."[49]

One product of this nonalignment was interest in the movement across the political spectrum. An April 1974 parliamentary meeting setting out the aims of the new federation was attended by a diverse set of MPs, including former Trade Union leader and Spanish Civil War veteran Bob Edwards.[50] Yet also present were significant figures within the Conservative Party such as Alan Clarke and key future allies of Margaret Thatcher, Keith Joseph and Norman Tebbit.[51] In certain respects, their vision of co-operation echoed Bader's in that they believed co-operative enterprise could overcome the divisions between labor and capital. However, they shared no such hopes for the abolition of capitalism by co-operative means.[52]

As late as 1973, Bader, still apparently retaining the DEMINTRY approach, went so far as to take out a full-page advertisement in *The Times* with the headline "Common Ownership Enterprise: Why I Believe This is the Positive Step to End Industrial Anarchy." Bader's advertisement concludes, "If you own a business, or are a director, or substantial shareholder … and would like to develop your business among common ownership lines and enjoy the privileges and security which it brings – and at the same time take a giant stride towards industrial peace and prosperity in this country- write to me."[53]

The Left Turn

Despite the conciliatory nature of ICOM's first years, it is clear that by 1974, the movement had taken a decidedly leftist turn, aligning itself with workers rather than bosses and the labor party rather than the conservatives. From this point on in its early life, ICOM would pursue its aims of Democracy, Social Justice, and Transformation from a position on the political left while regarding itself as part of the broader labor movement. Bader himself, however, was not pleased with the new direction and resigned from the Presidency of ICOM in 1974, leading to the election of Edwards.[54]

A key figure in politicizing ICOM during this early period was Manuela Sykes, who was appointed part-time organizing Secretary for the first five years of ICOM's existence and would

48. Sawtell was a stalwart of the co-operative movement from the late 60s until his death in 2022. He was involved with enterprises such as Scott Bader, Trylon, and Daily Bread, all affiliated with ICOM.

49. ICOM: Draft of Ideals and Objectives (1971), 6.

50. Edwards first became involved with ICOM due to his established relationship with Scott Bader Commonwealth, where he had been a trustee since 1963. He initially encountered the company as Secretary of the Chemical Workers Union when he sought to resolve a strike at the company in 1955. Hoe, *The Man Who Gave Away His Company*, 103–105.

51. List of Attendees at parliamentary meeting, BE/9/3.

52. Jackson also notes ~Peter Jay, advocate of monetarism, was a supporter of co-ops. Jackson, "Currents," 823–850.

53. Advertisement in *The Times* (January 2nd 1973) BE/9/5.

54. Letter of congratulations from Roger Sawtell to Bob Edwards, BE/9/5.

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continue to play an important role within the federation beyond that.[55] Sykes fought and won an intellectual battle over the nature of common ownership with the journalist Robert Oakeshott, who had been attracted to the new movement.[56] While Oakeshott wished to pursue a model which would allow workers to contribute various amounts of capital in return for varying rates of return and differentials in influence over management and direction, Sykes insisted that returns on investment should be equal, with organizations managed democratically according to one person, one vote.[57] Sykes also had strong links within the Labour Party itself, having worked for the Durham MP David Watkins.[58] She quickly established a good working relationship with Bob Edwards. Indeed, the relationship between Sykes and Edwards was the motor behind ICOM's successful attempts to build strong alliances within the Parliamentary Labour Party.

A prime example of this leftward, and avowedly party-political turn, was securing the Secretary of State for Industry, and leading light of the Labour left, Tony Benn as the keynote speaker at the 1975 ICOM Annual General Meeting.[59] While Benn had been seen as a champion of technocracy in Wilson's first government in the 1960s, he had been converted to a more libertarian vision of socialism. He had taken a lead in offering support to workers who had spontaneously taken charge of companies facing bankruptcy and committed to run along co-operative principles, such as Meriden Motorcycles in Wales.[60] Many within ICOM, in contrast to Bader's initial vision, regarded themselves as part of this wider upsurge in labor radicalism, and Benn, viewing the federation in a similar light, commended its members for their commitments to economic democracy. From 1974 onwards, then, ICOM can be regarded as part of a broader coalition made up of radicalized workers; an expression, despite Bader's intentions, of the same spirit as that animating the wildcat strikers of the period, or indeed the factory and shipyard occupations on the Clyde, on Merseyside, or in Manchester. In this respect, it was a fellow traveler with other organizations dedicated to "worker democracy" such as the Institute for Workers' Control.[61]

The following year, ICOM had a major stroke of luck. Each year, members of the House of Commons enter a ballot out of which 20 numbered balls are drawn at random. Those whose names are selected are able to propose a piece of legislation that will be voted on by the entire house. If the legislation is passed, it becomes law. David Watkins was one of the lucky few. He proposed a Common Ownership Bill that would establish, for the first time in UK law, legal recognition of common ownership enterprises. This would allow easier establishment of new worker co-ops, superseding the 1852 Industrial and Provident Societies Act. Furthermore, the

55. The fact that Sykes herself had a desire for a parliamentary career as a Labour MP may have motivated her advocacy for this politicization. The ambition was not to be realized.

56. Oakeshott, *The Case for Workers' Democracy.* Oakeshott went on to found Jobs Ownership Limited in 1979, which in 2006 was renamed the Employee Ownership Association.

57. WTOH interview with Jim Brown, 5–8.

58. WTOH Interview with Roger Sawtell, 7.

59. ICOM Newsletter (January/February) 1975.

60. Benn, *Arguments for Socialism*; Adams, *Tony Benn*, 277–392.

61. Tuckman, "Workers' Control," Tuckman, "Factory Occupation"; Guinan, "Bring Back the Institute for Workers Control." Indeed, the First ICOM Newsletter had made these connections, with pieces on the recent worker occupation of the Clydeside shipyards. See ICOM Newsletter (Summer 1971), 8.

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Bill proposed to designate £250,000 to be paid into ICOF to boost the number of new worker co-ops and encourage their success.

Private Member's Bills often fail simply because they do not have the backing of government. Here, however, the lobbying by Sykes and Edwards in particular paid off as they were able to secure such backing. Support, however, was not limited to the Labour benches. There remained some Conservatives who regarded worker co-ops, and therefore ICOM, as a salutary way of encouraging entrepreneurship and respect for market discipline. Indeed, Sykes herself recalled the key role played by Norman Tebbit. In committee stages prior to the vote, a Bill can be thrown out simply by a shout of "objection," but Tebbit, ever the sharp operator, kept "the opponents on his side at bay."[62] Members of co-ops affiliated to ICOM also kept up the pressure on their local MPs via a letter-writing campaign orchestrated by Sykes and other ICOM staff. The Bill was carried, and in 1976 the Industrial Common Act became law.[63] Following its passage, ICOM would cement its place as the center of expertise for the legal establishment of new worker co-ops, which would almost exclusively register through them until the late 1980s. ICOM also hoped to work in partnership with a national Cooperative Development Agency, established in 1978, though this relationship was ultimately to prove somewhat fraught.[64]

New and Old Lefts

Despite the leadership's decision to align with the Labour Party, the New Left members of ICOM were not entirely at home within the broader labor movement in which the traditional mainstream left held sway. Jenny Thornley notes that many of the ICOM contingent were regarded with suspicion within that more traditional working-class culture. They were, it was felt, exponents of "alternative lifestyles" not always welcomed within most constituency Labor parties or Trade Union halls of the time. Indeed, they were often regarded as dilettantes who, unlike their historical predecessors in the co-op movement, had become co-operators "more out of choice than necessity." They were it was felt attracted to co-operation merely because it suited their "philosophy of life." Furthermore, it was noted that "a great many are from middle class, educated backgrounds" and, perhaps even worse, many "are under 35."[65]

While ICOM's leadership had made the decision to align with the Labour Party, many individual co-operators were, by contrast, "disillusioned with party politics or Trade Unionism, and have few links to these organisations or the consumer cooperative movement."[66] The marginality of ICOM "types" within the Labour Party would fade over the 1980s, as the Party itself took on a more radical, even counter-cultural, character over the course of the late 1970s and early 80s.[67] Yet the distance between ICOM and the mainstream co-op movement was one that would never be effectively bridged until an institutional fix was found with its effective absorption into that movement in 2001.

62. ICOM: The New Co-operator (Special ICOM Anniversary Edition 1986), 5.
63. Industrial Common Ownership Act (1976).
64. Cornforth, "Local Co-Operative Development Agencies"; Thornley, *Workers Cooperatives*, 55–56; Ridley-Duff, "Cooperative Social Enterprises," 4–5.
65. Thornley, *Workers Cooperatives*, 41–49.
66. Thornley, *Workers Cooperatives*, 49.
67. Davis and McWilliam, *Labour and The Left in the 1980s.*

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The divergences within the broader labor movement were more than cultural, however. While ICOM and the new worker co-operators now spoke the language of "socialism" from within the labor movement, they understood socialism differently than many already well-established in the movement. This was evident in a line of division with the Trade Unions, and remained even after ICOM's leftward turn. On numerous occasions, in print and in person, ICOM representatives implored Trade Unions to back the common ownership movement. Yet not all Trade Unionists shared Bob Edwards's enthusiasm for the new movement.

An ICOM booklet on the relationship between the Trade Unions and common ownership traced the skepticism of Trade Unions toward co-operation back into the Labour Party's deep intellectual history, citing foundational texts such as *The New Social Order* (1918), *Labour and the Nation* (1928), and *For Socialism and Peace* (1934). The booklet noted that "'Trade Unionists in Britain have tended to think of industrial democracy in terms of the growth of Trade Union power and collective bargaining."[68] The reason for this was probably less intellectual than the booklet suggested and can be ascribed more prosaically to self-interest: if the division of labor and capital were to be overcome by shared ownership, then there would be little call for unions at all.

This union approach, which looked not to extend worker ownership but to use union power to pressure employers into providing better pay and conditions, was first and most persuasively articulated by Beatrice and Sidney Webb.[69] For the new left ICOM co-operators, however, it had two major drawbacks. The first was that in many industries and enterprises, it left the private capitalist model of ownership unchallenged. Second, even in nationalized industries where unions had the greatest strength, it resulted in an acceptance of top-down managerialism of the type ICOM so abhorred, anathema as it was to real worker "control." "Nationalisation so far has not resulted in the kind of society for which many socialists had hoped," an ICOM publication bemoaned. Trade Unionists were reminded that Clause Four of the Labour Party made no mention of "nationalization" but "refers instead to common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange." They were thus implored to reject orthodox union practices and energetically support ICOM.[70]

The same pamphlet also looked to other, legislative means of delivering "control," "democracy," and "social transformation." Written during the era of the Labour government's social contract and calls for wage restraint, it insisted that it was shareholder dividends rather than wages that should be the target of restraints. Targeting dividends would have the added benefit that the measure could be extended to encourage the common ownership cause: "the permanent limitation of dividends might be applied first to companies employing more than 2000 workers and later to companies employing more than 200," it stated. Outlining further details, it continued:

> As maximum dividends came to be paid and ordinary shares became non-voting shares, companies would become responsible to their workers instead of to their shareholders. With

68. ICOM: *Trade Unions and Common Ownership* (1972), 12–13.

69. Beatrice and Sidney Webb, *Industrial Democracy*; Morgan, "Fabians, Guild Socialists and 'Democracies of Producers.'"

70. ICOM: *Trade Unions and Common Ownership* (1972), 9–13.

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> small companies employing less than 200 people, changes might be made in estate duty and corporation tax to encourage conversion to common ownership on the retirement or death of the founder.[71]

True to ICOM's New Left proclivities, the pamphlet insisted that,

> But to say that social ownership should be extended by the application of co-operative principles is not to say that companies should be organised in exactly the same way as co-operatives. On the contrary, the law should allow for a variety of forms of social ownership and experimentation should be encouraged.[72]

The pamphlet concluded with a dose of realism to temper the enthusiasm of this first period of ICOM's existence, noting that "it will of course be a formidable task to transform society in this way and will take a long time to achieve."[73] Nevertheless, the movement remained confident that "a clear interest by the Labour Party in forms of common ownership other than state ownership could have an immediate relevance to the country's economic problems and do much to improve the Labour Party's electoral prospects."[74] Thus, by a combination of the establishment of new co-ops and by lobbying the broader labor movement to lend its support to ICOM, the federation looked forward to a new future. Throughout this period, the concepts, arranged around control, and which best characterize ICOM's ideological morphology, are Democracy, Social Justice, and Transformation, and there was an understanding that worker control would be established and extended "in and against" the market.

Phase Two, Early 1980–Early 1990s: Community, Development, Education

1979 saw the election of a Conservative government under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher. This did not assist the federation. A less favorable political context, combined with the effects of deindustrialization, a process that had been in motion since the movement's founding but which accelerated in the early 1980s as a result of government policy, radically altered the scale of ICOM's ambitions and led to a shift in the nature of the enterprises affiliated with it.[75] The new conservative government was quick to discontinue financial support to ICOF. This, combined with ICOM's 1977 move to a new headquarters at Beechwood House, establishing Beechwood College, put severe financial strain on the federation.[76] Nevertheless, the College would become a center for reimagining the nature of the worker co-op movement across the 1980s.

71. ICOM: *Trade Unions and Common Ownership* (1972), 16.
72. ICOM: *Trade Unions and Common Ownership* (1972), 22–23.
73. ICOM: *Trade Unions and Common Ownership* (1972), 23.
74. ICOM: *Trade Unions and Common Ownership* (1972), 23.
75. Tomlinson, "Deindustrialisation," 620–642, "Embedded Liberalism," 503–588.
76. ICOM offices had previously been housed in offices provided by the Royal Arsenal Co-operative. Recalling the financial implications of the move to Beechwood Sykes recalled, "many hearts will sink at the mention of Beechwood College because that part of our grand design went badly adrift." ICOM: The New Co-operator (Special ICO Anniversary Edition 1986), 6.

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Most striking for our purposes is the change in the ideology of the movement and the composition of its conceptual morphology. Its former "heroic" configuration was replaced by a more restrained set of ideas. Control remains, as ever, the core concern: workers must be in charge of their own enterprises. However, there was a growing recognition of the limits to that control and a realization that the changed political and economic environment of the 1980s required a recalibration. Rather than seeking to transform society, the new co-operators increasingly had to content themselves with tending to the wounds they perceived being inflicted on communities by Thatcherite deindustrialization.[77]

It was also during this period, with the ambitious domestic hopes of the 1970s at an end, that ICOM began to deepen links with nonprofit businesses across Europe and the developing world, to stake a clear space for itself in the "solidarity economy."[78] This can be seen in the archives, and ICOM staff met with the famous Spanish Mondragon worker co-operative movement, and with East German and Yugoslav co-ops, and established a network to link with African co-ops.[79]

One of the key figures involved in Beechwood College was Freer Spreckly, who, in 1974, had returned from involvement with Bengali freedom fighters and established a still extant commune called Lifespan in the South York Moors.[80] In 1981, Spreckley produced "Social Audit: A Management Tool for Cooperative Working," which stressed the potential for moving away from industrial co-operatives into community work, education, and development.[81] New Community Benefit Groups, or "BenComs" as they became known, gained prominence within the federation over the 1980s in a manner that would have significant ideological implications. While "control" remained central, Democracy, Social Justice and Transformation, are pushed to the periphery of the conceptual morphology by "community" and "development." This much is evident in a pamphlet produced by the movement titled *Cooperative Working and Community Development Projects* and a new emphasis in ICOM's now regular periodical *The New Co-operator*, on education and training for unemployed workers.[82] For example, the aim of groups such as The Employment Research Group, associated with ICOM was to enable the unemployed to rejoin the workforce via the promotion of "business skills."[83]

A key factor facilitating the shift toward a new set of concerns was the prominence of those nonindustrial BenComs within the federation. Such prominence is illustrated by the fact that deindustrialization did not lead to a decline in membership. Rather, ICOM numbers continued to increase over the 1980s, buoyed by the BenComs. Indeed, it was during this second

77. "Between 1979 and 1983 over two million jobs in industry, and 1.7 million in manufacturing were lost in her first period of power," Tomlinson, "Deindustrialisation," 620.

78. Sasson, *Solidarity*.

79. ICOM: *Mondragon 1980*; ICOM: The New Co-operator (Autumn 1992).

80. Spreckley, *Essential Social Enterprise*.

81. He would later recall that "we started talking about social enterprise as opposed to workers' co-ops," Huckfield, *Blair*, 67.

82. ICOM: *Community Working*.

83. ICOM: New Co-operator (Spring 1986), 10.

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period that affiliations to ICOM reached a high point of 250 affiliate enterprises in 1984.[84] Significant also, in the first half of the decade, were the "phoenix co-ops" established as workers, much as in the 1970s, but now without any government support, attempted to take over failing firms. ICOM made sure to support this trend. A 1983 newsletter described high interest in such "phoenix co-ops" and provided examples of successful cases while also highlighting the many challenges such as a reliance on the hire purchase of assets, legal complexities around redundancy and transition to a new business model, and the need for specialist finance and other support.[85]

It was, nevertheless, the new BenComs that set the ideological tone of the movement over the 1980s. Some insight might be gained into this development via a 1987 issue of *The New Co-operator*, which outlined how:

> ICOM also processed registrations for four voluntary sector bodies: an unemployment project, two arts/media projects, and a Credit Union Development Agency Work is also underway on registering two new local CDAs, two women's centres, a sheltered workshop for the mentally ill, a lesbian and gay centre, and other community, employment and arts projects[86]

The 1980s also saw the federation place a new emphasis on the "Women's Link Up" and networks of black co-operators, mirroring developments within the broader left.[87]

In the face of the proliferation of these BenComs, the Conservative government instructed the CDA to encourage co-operatives to view themselves as capitalist enterprises, competing on open markets. As Roger Sawtell recalled, "the CDA was deflected away from co-operative ownership towards employee shareholding schemes and the playing field was tilted towards minimally-regulated capital ownership."[88] Yet somewhat ironically, given these attempts, the 1980s BenComs were far more reliant on public funds than the industrial co-ops that had dominated in the first decade. It is for this reason that we can describe the attempt to extend and defend worker ownership as occurring "in and alongside" the market over this period.

The support offered by metropolitan councils via their local and co-operative development agencies was key to the growth of the movement over this period.[89] It was toward the new BenComs that support was primarily directed. Throughout the 1980s, on issues ranging from gay rights to the anti-apartheid movement, Labour-led local authorities staked out policy platforms in opposition to Thatcher's national government.[90] In this instance, cities like

84. Virtually all worker co-ops were affiliated with ICOM as they relied on its legal and technical expertise for their incorporation and governance. Various rules on how common ownership was to be established and how such enterprises were to be governed were: ICOM 1982 White Rules for registrations under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act, 1982 Blue Rules for registration under the Companies Act, "Leicester" 1984 Yellow Rules for a for registration under the Companies Act and ICOM 1984 Green Rules for updated guidance for registration under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act.

85. Research conducted in the NCA finds that there were 137 such "phoenix" recuperations over the period 1976 to 1986 out of a total number of 911 worker co-ops created.

86. ICOM: The New Co-operator (January 1985), 4.

87. Women's Link Up and new Black Sections within ICOM. See ICOM: The New Co-operator (January 1985), 1–5.

88. It was also increasingly deprived of funding to even do this, eventually being abolished in 1990.

89. Cornforth, "Cooperative Development Agencies," 260.

90. Payling, "Socialist Republic"; Joubert, "Bridging Bureaucracy."

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London, Sheffield, Manchester, and Liverpool continued to provide financial and other material support as the national government increasingly withdrew it. As a co-operator of the period recalled, "what we saw in the eighties" was "support that the Co-operative Movement had been given by the GLC (Greater London Council) and this is talking about London, but also there's a national side to this."[91] Such was the close relationship between BenComs and local authorities that by 1986, some were even decrying an excess of bureaucrats given a remit for co-operatives within local government.[92] As the 1980s progressed, local councils found themselves less able to commit the same level of resources to the promotion of community development and training. As a result, BenComs increasingly turned to European funding, especially the money provided by the European Social Fund or ESF, and survival became dependent on learning the language of the funding application rather than any particular market adroitness.[93] Many in the movement also felt this turn diluted the federation's focus on more traditional worker co-ops.[94]

Local government funding for training schemes, or even just voluntary programs such as gardening and renovations, drew increasing numbers of new co-operators into what might be called the realm of quasi-public service.[95] An unsympathetic assessment might be that the movement became complicit in the processes of deindustrialization with the support they provided offsetting the potential for greater social unrest. However, groups such as Sheffield Community Enterprises which supported the formation of community businesses and provided training, seed funding, and workspace to help unemployed people create their own jobs, or the Community Works Programme in Liverpool which established community-managed enterprises that provided both employment opportunities and essential services, understood their work as offering desperately needed first aid to their local communities of the type it would have been inhumane to withhold.

What remained attractive for many of those setting up or joining the new BenComs was that they still provided a level of control to the workers involved. While the work may not be industrial, becoming instead service work requiring a whole different set of skills and training, it was a form of employment that still safeguarded a higher level of autonomy than would be experienced in a standard capitalist, hierarchically structured firm. There was an insistence within ICOM that "our future" must be in "our own hands."[96] Indeed, many within the movement viewed the move to more service-based community work as an opportunity to consider afresh issues of collective self-management by the paid workers in the context of broader social obligations and where a "recognizable workers" co-operative structure is not appropriate because "these workers do not have absolute control over their work, and are ultimately accountable in some measure to other people who do not earn their livelihood from this work." We should understand this to mean external stakeholders. This included funders and service users in the communities, to whom BenCom co-operators also felt responsible, given "the desirability for it to be accountable in some form to wider society."[97] Consequently,

91. Huckfield, *Blair*, 70. The GL:C and other metropolitan councils were abolished partly due to sponsoring such "anti-Thatcher" agendas in 1986.
92. ICOM: The New Co-operator (Special ICO Anniversary Edition 1986), 9.
93. ICO: The New Cooperator (Autumn 1992), 8.
94. Anonymous Interviewee A.
95. Kelly, "Enterprise Culture"; Henderson et al., "Charity to Social Enterprise."
96. ICOM: The New Co-operator (June 1985), 9.
97. ICOM: *Development Projects*, 1–3.

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control was now understood to function in a more complex environment, with additional considerations beyond simply the views and interests of members.

Recent work by Thomas Da Costa Vieira and Emma Foster has examined "the co-option and depoliticisation of co-operatives" over the 1980s.[98] They observed how figures like Norman Tebbitt and Keith Joseph, figures we have already encountered offering support to ICOM in its first phase, sought to reshape the worker co-ops movement. While it had emerged out of the New Left, these figures sought to integrate it into a New Right vision of the economy by reshaping the co-operative model through the rhetoric and policies of "popular capitalism."[99] Various methods were employed to achieve these ends, not least encouraging the CDA to take a pro-capitalist position, instructing it to shepherd worker co-ops toward employee ownership and to conceive of themselves as market actors rather than bodies bent on transformational social change. Joseph, in particular, was in a prime position to push this agenda on his appointment as Secretary of State for Industry in the first Thatcher government. Da Costa Viera and Foster note how:

> Keith Joseph, in a reference to Victorian bourgeois values, added that the co-operative model was a product characteristic of the 'flair' and 'inspiration' of the mid-19th century, which were much needed now. Co-operatives were thus a welcome addition to the agenda of popular capitalism, a supplementary tool to embed the bourgeois order.[100]

As this failed to produce the desired results, the CDA was abolished.

When, however, we consider the innovative way in which ICOM and its affiliates responded to the changed political and economic context of the 1980s, we can see how an analysis focusing solely on the disciplinary role of government reveals only part of the history. Certainly, over the 1980s, ICOM became less focused on social transformation, but neither was it corralled into a reconceiving of the worker co-op movement as just another form of private enterprise. Critically, its members retained a large degree of agency over the changes in the movement. The evolution engineered within the movement produced a concomitant shift in the concepts adjacent to control with Community, Development, and Education, to displacing those of Democracy, Social Justice, and Transformation. Furthermore, given the growing importance of public grants, whether at local, central, or European level, worker control was to be maintained and expanded not only "in" the market but also alongside it, making use of such money. This was not then simply a disciplinary process, with government shaping the movement, pushing it to embrace the market. Instead, ICOM's path toward neoliberalization was more complex and, in many ways, a more collaborative one than that.

Phase Three, Early 1990s–2001: Leadership, the Market, Social Enterprise

The third phase of ICOM's history, from the early 1990s until its dissolution in 2001, sees a final evolution in its conceptual morphology. During this period, many of the BenComs

98. Da Costa Vieira and Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands," 294.
99. Da Costa Vieira and Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands," 296.
100. Da Costa Vieira and Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands," 297.

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affiliated to ICOM began to view themselves primarily as social enterprises rather than co-operatives. What is more, the federation, largely for financial reasons, took on increasing numbers of associate members drawn from the voluntary sector, many of which were not in fact co-operatives at all.[101] Vigorous debate over the involvement of employee owned but not run businesses also reemerged during this period, with Robert Oakeshott attending workshops arguing for closer collaboration.[102] Much of this was to contribute to changing ICOM's conceptual morphology yet again.[103]

Over this final period, co-operatives were increasingly being established as Limited Liability Companies, rather than under the Industrial Provident Society legislation historically used to create co-ops. This was largely due to the flexibility limited liability offered, as explained by the regular ICOM periodical, *The New Cooperator*: "The rules are in the form of a Memorandum & Articles of Association for a Company Limited by Guarantee, which allow for a minimum of two members, as opposed to the seven required by the Industrial & Provident Societies Acts."[104] In particular, this allowed entrepreneurial figures to set up enterprises without having to seek six other co-operators with whom to establish a co-operative.[105] This trend ultimately resulted in a new valorization of Social Enterprise, the Market, and Leadership. There was a new sense that if worker control were to be maintained, it must be "in and through" the market. Yet the embrace of market rationality did much to undermine that control.

There are various strands to the history of the concept of "social enterprise" in the UK. Some have described it as an American importation, offering a means of harnessing the power of the market to achieve desirable social ends.[106] Others also note the influence of European ideas of the "social economy."[107] Scholars have recently been keen to recover the "indigenous" heritage of social enterprise in Britain. Rory Ridley Duff and Michael Frederick Bull have argued that what he calls the "solidarity co-operatives" of the 1980s associated with ICOM provide the "hidden origins of the UK Social Enterprise Movement." They regard this as providing the underpinnings of a "pluralistic communitarianism" within the social enterprise movement of the twenty-first century. Leslie Huckfield also emphasizes that much of the aims and ethos of social enterprise can be traced back to ICOM and Beechwood College.

He, however, regards the vision of social enterprise as developed by New Labour as marginalizing the work done by ICOM affiliates and excluding the co-operative movement from the social enterprise agenda it developed over the late 1990s and 2000s. He thus rejects Nicholls's account of the origins of social enterprise stemming from the New Labour period

101. ICOM also charged voluntary bodies for legal advice and other Services. Oral Interviewees a and b.

102. Central to his argument for worker ownership rather than worker co-ops was that the latter consistently faced challenges to capitalization. Anonymous Interviewee A.

103. An alternative perspective might portray this process as one of modernization rather than neoliberalization. Certainly, ICOM established links with "modernizers" in the broader labour movement. John Smith, leader of the Labour Party, was its President until his death.

104. ICOM: The New Co-operator (Summer 1986). 6.

105. Huckfield, *Blair*, 68.

106. Nicholls and Teasdale, "Neoliberalism by Stealth?," 323–341.

107. Yunus, *Creating a World Without Poverty*; Dees, "Enterprising Nonprofits," 55–67; Nicholls, "The Legitimacy of Social Entrepreneurship," 611–633. Huckfield, *Blair*, 4.

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rather than from antecedents of the 1970s and 1980s.[108] Likewise, he dismisses Grenier's history as offering a similar contribution describing social entrepreneurship as "emergent in the few organisations working explicitly on social entrepreneurship" which "tend to be relatively young, established mainly in the late 1990s and early 2000s."[109]

This article takes issue with both of these positions. It rejects Ridley Duff's and Bull's argument that solidarity characterized social enterprise in the UK. Instead, control remained the core concern, and this informed the ideology of the movement. Yet, neither can it accept that the absence of a more solidaristic ideology within ICOM and, subsequently, social enterprise was simply the imposition of New Labour. Rather, those associated with ICOM were quite willing not only to accept but themselves develop the neoliberal discourses and practices surrounding social enterprise. What is more, they were willing to do so in a manner that relegated the movement's initial belief that worker control should be maintained in and against the market. Now, for it to survive, it must be practiced "in and through" the market.

There has been significant debate over the neoliberal nature, or otherwise, of social enterprise.[110] There is, however, general agreement that social enterprise can be defined in broad terms as the adoption of market-based strategies to meet social need and solve social problems.[111] Its champions view it as a humanistic response to a market society, one that looks to place social benefit at the heart of business activity.[112] If we were to interpret neoliberalism as simply the single-minded pursuit of profit to the exclusion of all other considerations, as the words of canonical neoliberal theorist Milton Friedman might suggest, we could not, therefore, characterize social entrepreneurship as "neoliberal," given its broader social commitments.[113]

Nevertheless, many working in business and management studies have portrayed social enterprise as a neoliberal phenomenon. In particular, it has been associated with the privatization of public services and welfare, and with an effort to apply the logics of the market to ever-increasing areas of social life.[114] When we consider the manner in which ICOM affiliates took on quasi-public sector work while competing for funding and seeking to show "value for money" to funders, this critique has some resonance. Whatever the motivations of social entrepreneurs, or indeed their advocates in the worlds of policy and politics, the definition of neoliberalism adopted here is based around "disenchantment" of a politics of solidarity by market economics.[115] Their impacts can thus be understood as neoliberalizing.

108. Huckfield, *Blair*, 12–13.
109. Huckfield, *Blair*, 102.
110. Mazzei, Montgomery, and Dey, "Utopia Failed?," 1625–1643.
111. Nicholls and Teasdale, "Neoliberalism by Stealth?."
112. Pearce, *Heart of the Community Economy*.
113. Friedman, "Social Responsibility," 17.
114. Eikenberry and Kluver, "The Marketization of the Nonprofit Sector"; Dey and Teasdale, "Tactical Mimicry"; Nicholls and Teasdale, "Neoliberalism by Stealth?."
115. In many respects, social enterprise has come to replace state-based responses in confronting social problems. We might go further in saying that social enterprises are regarded as essential to meeting social needs on an ongoing basis. This has replaced ambitions to eradicate need. For an example of that older ambition, see, for example, the 1964 Labour Party manifesto, which insisted that "the abolition of poverty in the midst of plenty" was an "immediate target of political action" and proposed "the mobilization of its resources within a national plan" to achieve just this.

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For the origins of the new ideas within ICOM, we need to look back to the earlier period in which community and development had been stressed. The movement's pioneering adoption of the language of social enterprise is evident from June 1985, with The New Co-operator already insisting on the need for "social entrepreneurship … to develop the economy of the future."[116] It is now "enterprise" rather than "development" that "will bring communities together." A pamphlet of the same year also noted the "broadening of the intrinsically important common ownership concept beyond worker coops to include a range of 'social' enterprises" or "community business ventures."[117] What is more, an early indication of ICOM's receptiveness to social enterprise can be found in its willingness to engage in the outsourcing efforts of the Thatcher governments.

If the ideas of social enterprise had been adopted within ICOM, they were also being developed externally to it in left-leaning think tanks. In 1994 and 1995, the "social entrepreneur" featured in reports by two such bodies.[118] Charles Leadbetter's work, *The Rise of the Social Entrepreneur*, further popularized the discourse.[119] In ICOM's 1980s iteration of the concept, social enterprise remained firmly focused on community, exhibiting an almost quasi-public service ethos. Yet this external rendering of social enterprise placed the emphasis more firmly on markets and the entrepreneurial capacities of individual social entrepreneurs.

Leadbetter was to become a key advisor to Tony Blair and a New Labour stalwart, and was thus a key point of transmission of the ideas around social enterprise into government. Indeed, the social enterprise agenda was explicitly championed within New Labour came to power in 1997. As a set of ideas, it embodied an approach to social policy that fitted Blair's Third Way mantra and its insistence on finding new, hybrid ways of combining the methods of state and market within governance.[120] So central had social enterprise become within "the Third Way approach adopted by New Labour during Tony Blair's tenure" that it is little exaggeration to state that it "was promoted … as a utopian program of modernisation of public services" and it became the service delivery method of choice espoused within Labour's prominent Neighbourhood Renewal Programme.[121]

While, over the 1990s, the discourse of social enterprise had been developed in a decidedly more market-facing manner, this did not dissuade those associated with ICOM from endorsing this new direction. Indeed, they played a key role in the development. The federation was eager to meet with government ministers such as Patricia Hewitt, the Minister for Small Business, who spoke to representatives of ICOM on numerous occasions with a view to establishing how its work could support and encourage small and medium-sized enterprises.[122] The receptiveness of ICOM to this discursive shift should not surprise us, given

116. ICOM: The New Co-operator (Summer 1985), 12.
117. ICOM: The New Co-operator (Summer 1985), 13.
118. Atkinson and Moon, *Social Policy*; Thake, "Staying the Course." Both are cited in Huckfield, *Blair*, 101.
119. Leadbeater, *The Rise of the Social Entrepreneur*.
120. There were, however, divisions in government, with marketization being contested by those aligned with the Chancellor Gordon Brown. Furthermore, there were other policies that could be characterized as statist or welfarist, such as the introduction of tax credits. Again, this was a policy that emanated largely from the Treasury. See Clegg, "Demise," 493–499.
121. Mazzei, Montgomery, and Dey, "Utopia Failed?," 1630.
122. Teasdale, "What's in a Name?," sever108: Huckfield, *Blair*, 104.

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its latent, often unarticulated endorsement of market mechanisms. In particular, social enterprise accorded with ICOM's long-standing New Left insistence that neither "Whitehall nor Town hall knows best."[123]

These developments were, inevitably, to have a significant impact on its ideology. Huckfield notes that "ten years after Beechwood's Social Audit, in 1991, 'Community Business News' was also describing 'organisations in the social economy' as 'social enterprises.'"[124] A more general shift to market concepts and language was also evident. It was London ICOM that proved the most energetic in changing the tone. In 1990, *London Coop News* was stressing the importance of "marketing-led business planning," and noting the importance of leaders with "an eye for gaps in social provision."[125]

Further evidence of the privileging of concepts of Leadership, the Market, and Social Enterprise within the federation is given by the formation of Social Enterprise London (SEL) in January 1998. This body was formed from "The Merger of all London Cooperative Support Organisations," a process set in train by London ICOM.[126] Jonathan Bland, its director, was a key figure in shifting the organization away from co-operative principles toward those of social enterprise. Bland even sought to integrate charities and nonco-operative business into SEL's governing structure, and Huckfield notes that at the final steering group meeting on Tuesday 15th September, before the first full AGM in 1998, in his recommendations for the future board's composition, Bland suggested external businesses for possible co-option, including The Big Issue, Body Shop, and the trading arms of charities.[127] Bland's hope was that the ICOM, given its history and experiences, would be able to take a lead in shaping the social enterprise agenda into the twenty-first century.[128]

Perhaps nothing reveals the extent to which the movement had come to accept market rationality and integrate its associated concepts within its conceptual morphology than the response to New Labour's proposed public sector reforms. Rather than resist the marketization of social services, Bland welcomed it for the opportunities the move could offer to social enterprises stating in 1999 that "successful mixed economies need to offer choice … most importantly the government needs to incorporate value for money and accountability to the customer in its definition of entrepreneurship."[129] The earlier commitments to democracy and transformation were by this stage a dim memory.

It is important to note that of the new social enterprises that emerged from the early 1990s, only some were affiliated with ICOM. This was largely because of the obstacles to starting up a company associated with the co-operative model. Yet, problematically for those who had been involved with the movement for some time, even those affiliated with ICOM practiced the

123. ICOM: The New Co-operator (Spring) 2000, 6.

124. Huckfield, *Blair*, 69.

125. This conception of entrepreneurship as a form of market adroitness closely resembles that developed by Kirzner, *Competition*.

126. Developments leading up to this can be found in London ICOM, "London ICOM 14th Annual Report 1996" (June 1996); London ICOM, "Future of London ICOM Proceedings of Extraordinary General Meeting" (April 1997).

127. Huckfield, *Blair*, 112.

128. Anonymous Interviewee A.

129. ICOM: The New Co-operator (Spring, 2000), 6. This clearly resonates with critiques of social enterprise that ascribe its neoliberalism to a willingness to replace state provision of services.

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principles of co-operation loosely.[130] Democratic oversight was particularly lacking. The social entrepreneurs, the individuals who established bodies, often had salaries far in excess of others working within the organization, and remuneration in general was not subject to collective decision-making. The result was that the overall unity and coherence of the federation were severely weakened. The turn to maintain worker control "in and through" the market was thus to have grave consequences and not just for the coherence of ICOM's co-operative principles. Critically, it also undermined the control of enterprises by their own members, the core conceptual concern within ICOM ideology since its founding.

Observing the development of social enterprise in Britain, Teasdale has noted that "the label social enterprise was initially used in England to reposition co-operatives and mutuals as new models for public and private ownership. An early alliance of co-operative and community enterprise practitioners utilising the language of New Labour helped embed social enterprise on the policy landscape in 1999."[131] The social enterprise landscape thus became one characterized above all by variety. "Social enterprises are diverse," noted a Department of Trade and Industry Report, "they include local community enterprises, social firms, mutual organisations such as co-operatives, and large-scale organisations operating nationally or internationally. There is no single legal model for social enterprise. They include companies limited by guarantee, industrial and provident societies, and companies limited by shares; some organisations are unincorporated, and others are registered charities."[132] Clearly, by the late 1990s, social enterprises did not need to be co-ops. ICOM and its members had prepared this ground, but in doing so, they had altered the ideological character of their own movement and had rendered themselves just another player in the variegated landscape of social enterprise.

The adoption of the social enterprise discourse within ICOM was not without its benefits. It enabled the federation to present itself as current and relevant to the New Labour government. Yet its adoption, alongside the inclusion of more associate members from the voluntary sector, did introduce a "fuzziness" of purpose. Moreover, contrary to Bland's ambitions, ICOM did not become the leading player in social enterprise. Rather, the voluntary sector as a whole came to dominate that terrain. Indeed, such was the capaciousness of the new discourse, even companies that found it difficult to defend their not-for-profit status laid claim to being social enterprises.[133] All were swept up together in the neoliberal market rationality.

By 2001, ICOM had ceased to exist and was merged with the much larger consumer co-operative movement in the form of the Cooperative Union to form Co-operative UK. This was during a period of wider reorganization of the co-operative movement, the result of recommendations put forward by the Co-operative Commission of 2000, established by Tony Blair.[134] Pauline Green, Chief Executive of the Cooperative Union as well as President of ICOM since 1999, was in many respects the personal embodiment of the merger *avant la letter.*

130. Anonymous Interview A; Huckfield, *Blair*, 105.
131. Teasdale, "What's in a Name?," 100.
132. Department of Trade and Industry: *Social Enterprise*, 7.
133. Anonymous Interviewee A.
134. Co-operative Commission: *The Cooperative Advantage.*

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She served as one of twelve commissioners and would organize the institutional merger recommended by the commission.

In retrospect, it is clear that its end was the product of various factors. Chief among them was a continuing lack of finance. Despite the increase in associate members, the lack of registrations by new worker co-ops by this period was an existential challenge.[135] Indeed, by the time of its merger, there were only three full-time members of staff working in the federation.[136] Others regarded the establishment of a new and more effective "apex" organization as the best way to advocate for worker co-operation, especially given the well-established lobbying presence of the wider consumer co-op movement, with its offices in Westminster and links to Labour politicians. The merger also arguably brought new and innovative ways of working, developed partly out of necessity within ICOM, into the new body.[137]

Nevertheless, undeniable is that the merger terminated any distinct voice for worker co-ops in the UK.[138] ICOM's continued attachment to co-operative forms of governance within a landscape of social enterprise that favored more individualist forms of leadership, combined with its longer radical history and involvement with "old labor," relegated it to the margins of a sector it had done so much to bring about. Most of all, however, having abdicated its earlier ideological commitments to a transformation of the economy in favor of seeking to maintain worker control in and through the market, it was no longer clear what distinguished it from the various privately owned social enterprises that surrounded it.

Conclusion

This article has made the case that ICOM's ambition to transform the economy along co-operative lines, replacing competition with co-operation, was disenchanted by a neoliberal rationality that prioritizes competitive market economics above all else. A study of ICOM's conceptual history has revealed an organization that was capable of evolution. Ultimately, however, it was this very evolution that undid its distinctive identity and undermined the key concern that had animated its members: their desire to have control over their own lives. As the importance of co-operative principles faded thanks to the embrace of social enterprise, so too did control.

The conceptual evolution of ICOM is complex, but it reveals much about the neoliberalization of the worker co-op movement and helps to explain the "indigenous" development of social enterprise in Britain. The concern for control we can associate with ICOM was an expression of a more widespread privileging of autonomy that characterized the late 1960s and 1970s. In this instance, it can be traced back to a Christian socialist concern for self-development. However, a more politicized, leftist iteration firmly centered on control itself quickly supplanted this. In the economic context of the time, characterized by industrial

135. I have been unable to find exact numbers, but this matter was expressed by both Anonymous Interviewees.

136. Anonymous Interviewee B.

137. Anonymous Interviewee A.

138. The worker co-op movement would continue to have members on the Co-operatives UK board, but not as many as those within it had hoped. Anonymous Interviewee A.

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unrest and inflation, Bader and those around him expanded their ambitions, believing common ownership as not only an economic route to self-development, but also as a strategy to transcend the standoff between labor and capital.

As ICOM acquired its own staff and the membership expanded, a new generation came to prominence. We can identify it with the political economic outlook of the New Left, both anti-statist and anti-capitalist, insistent that it must be "labor that employs capital" but still wedded to a market system, albeit one they hoped would be thoroughly transformed due to the co-operative nature of the enterprises that populated it. Eventually, despite the efforts of Bader, the movement aligned itself with the governing Labour Party and made links, albeit never sufficiently developed, with the broader labor movement in the form of Trade Unions and consumer co-operatives. This first phase of ICOM's conceptual history saw Democracy, Social Justice, and Transformation as the concepts adjacent to control in the movement's overall conceptual morphology. During this phase, ICOM held "heroic," if perhaps naïve, hopes of transforming British industry by practicing a co-operative activism while also attaining legislative influence, conducting its campaign "in and against" the market.

Such ambitions faded as the federation entered the 1980s, as deindustrialization and a new form of Thatcherite political economy took general hold. In this context, a new set of concepts formed around the core concept of control as a new type of work associated with the BenComs assumed prominence. With their post-industrial focus on the provision of services and support, Education, Development, and Community became the adjacent concepts, pushing the previous trio to the periphery. Given the centrality of public funds, the attempt to extend worker control can be understood as taking place "in and alongside" the market.

The 1980s witnessed an efflorescence of radical groups that could trace their ethical and conceptual origins back to the New Left. For many of these groups, public funds, whether secured locally or from Europe, became critical to the financial viability of ICOM affiliates. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, it is also among these groups that we find the first flourishing of a "social enterprise" discourse that would lead to the more general neoliberalization of the worker co-op movement.

This would not happen until the anti-statist predilections of such groups were fused with a fresh celebration of the market as a mechanism for identifying and meeting social need. Much of this came from external sources, such as Leadbetter and others, but it was quickly adopted and developed within ICOM itself. This process was greatly aided by a long-standing genial attitude toward markets as an antidote to statism. Such developments resulted in a distinguishable third phase of ICOM's conceptual history. In it, Social Enterprise, the Market, and Leadership assume the adjacent conceptual positions to the core concept of control. As has been argued, however, this morphology was unstable and resulted in much of the control co-operators had prized being lost as ICOM sought to maintain worker control "in and through" the market.

At the time of writing, members of a resurgent worker co-op movement have been reflecting on the causes and character of the decline of their predecessor.[139] To understand the demise of that earlier body, they must consider how co-operators came to prioritize control over solidarity, leaving themselves receptive to the very ideas that ultimately led to ICOM's collapse.

139. The website of the new movement is workers.co-op.

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What becomes clear is that this was not merely a disciplinary process in which the state imposed depoliticization from above. Rather, ICOM's members were themselves active participants in the neoliberalization of the movement.[140]

Sean Irving is a historian and theorist of economic democracy. He has held positions at the University of Manchester, Queen Mary University of London, and the University of Essex, Colchester, Essex, UK. Email: Sean.irving@essex.ac.uk

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140. This is not to claim all were committed to, or even conscious of, this process. Like so much historical work, a study of ICOM likely illustrates the unintended outcomes of best intentions.

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