

Cooperation and Social Justice

P. E. WEERAMAN

COOPERATIVE SERIES...20



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Cooperation and Social Justice

Cooperation in its special sense of working together as a Cooperative Society spells social justice. The ideology of Cooperation, now increasingly being called Cooperativism to distinguish the ideology from the practice of Cooperation, is a statement of certain aspects of social justice. The implementation of the Cooperative Principles, which express this ideology in practical terms, necessarily results in social justice in respect of the matters that pertain to those principles. Cooperation is also the best way of satisfying several economic needs that arise from the implementation of various measures designed to meet the demands of social justice.

I shall endeavour to explain the aspects of social justice dealt with by the Cooperative Principles and then

the way in which Cooperation helps to satisfy many a need that arises from measures taken for social justice.

The Principle of Voluntary Association means that any person who joins a Cooperative Society should do so voluntarily and not under any compulsion and likewise that a Cooperative society has the right to allow or refuse the application of any person for membership. Similarly, every member has the right to leave a society at will and every society has the right to determine its association with a member likewise. Thus both the individual and the society have "the freedom to choose and the freedom to correct the choice" as said by Calvert. The freedom to associate as well as to terminate that association at will are aspects of social justice. The denial of this freedom is a denial of social justice and the implementation of this Principle necessarily results in social justice.

The corollary to the Principle of Voluntary Association is that persons who seek to join a Cooperative should be in enjoyment of individual autonomy. The principle conveys a tacit demand that all human beings should be free to do what they like, within the bounds of law and order. Otherwise they would be slaves. This right to individual autonomy is equally applicable to groups of people, each of whom is enjoying individual autonomy, so that together they enjoy collective autonomy. Individual and collective autonomy are fundamental to social justice.

The Principle of Open Membership seeks to satisfy another demand of social justice, viz that people should have equal rights of participation in social organisations

without any social, racial religious, or political discrimination or artificial restriction. It is not necessary to labour the point.

The Principle of Democratic Control is again an expression of the axiomatic right of all persons to participate in the management of their affairs. What is more, measures taken to bring about social justice cannot bring any lasting benefit if the beneficiaries are not allowed to participate in the management of the institutions that are created to serve them.

The practice of this Principle helps to develop self-reliance and the capacity to manage one's affairs without perpetual guidance and assistance from others. It also teaches people that every question pertaining to society can be decided democratically and it also trains them in the processes of democracy. No social order however just can last unless people learn how to maintain it and this they can do only if they learn to employ only democratic methods for solving their problems and to abide by democratic decisions. The practice of this Principle of Democratic Control in relation to their economic needs, which are the needs most affecting them, will result in the people learning how they should act in relation to government of their country. Hence it is that cooperative democracy will help to stabilise political democracy and without the latter there can be no social justice. Thus the practice of cooperative democracy is essential to the stability of an order established in accordance with social justice.

Then we come to a significant contribution which

Cooperation makes to the philosophy of social justice. This it does in its Principle of Limited Interest on Capital. This principle means that the owner of capital has neither a right to the profits made by using his capital nor a right to power over such user on the basis of owning such capital. Capital, in terms of this principle, is entitled only to a limited interest, a fair wage for its use. As Professor Charles Gide, a former President of the International Cooperative Alliance, has said, this reduction of capital to the position of a wage-earner is in itself a Social Revolution. This revolution purports that capital shall not exploit its user. And this results in social justice. Cooperativism does not reject capital in toto. Cooperativism sees capital as a necessary tool of economic enterprise but is prepared to pay capital only a suitable wage for its use. Cooperativism rejects the idea of working *for* capital or its possessor and accepts that of working *with* capital. It may, perhaps, be correct to say that this principle of denying profits and power to the owner of capital is Cooperativism's greatest contribution to the philosophy of social justice.

This principle naturally leads to the principle of Equitable Distribution of Profits (Trading Surplus). Cooperativism "substitutes the notion of rendering an organised service in the interest of the Whole community for that of struggle for profit and domination". It seeks to set up an economic order in which "I shall have my hand in no man's pocket and no man shall have his hand in mine"—where one does not exploit another's need nor allows himself to be exploited. Instead, those who have a common need work together on the basis of joint self-help to satisfy that need, eliminating the middlemen

who would otherwise exploit that need for making profit. Cooperativism, in short, seeks to eliminate middlemen by Cooperation. The trading surplus is the overcharge made from the clientele. Placing such surplus at their disposal is in accordance with social justice. This Principle provides that the trading surplus of a cooperative belongs to those who contributed to the surplus, and that each contributor to the surplus is entitled to rebate in proportion to his contribution to such surplus. The equitable distribution of the surplus results in social justice.

These principles define the operational methods of Cooperation. As shown above, action in accordance with these Principles necessarily results in social justice.

As said earlier, Cooperation serves the cause of social justice in another way as well. Various measures taken to bring about social justice results in the persons who benefit from such measures needing solutions to several economic problems that arise from the implementation of such measures. For instance, when land reforms are effected, the landless poor who receive land grants are straightaway faced with several problems such as the supply of credit and agricultural requisites and the sale of their produce. And if they do not form themselves into cooperatives to satisfy their common needs, they will have to obtain these services from traders. Needless to say, if this happens the benefit conferred on the landless by land reforms would slowly but surely be appropriated by the middlemen. Therefore, Cooperation is necessary to consolidate the gains of this measure of

social justice. It would be supererogatory for me to give any more examples of this type.

Thus Cooperation not only spells social justice but also helps consolidate it.

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