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Ian Adderley, Co-Operatives: Linking Practice and Theory, Co-Op Press Publishing, 2025, 584 P.

Abstract

In May 2025, with the support of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies, Ian Adderley published a remarkable book on cooperatives. It is valuable for a wide range of readers not only because of its breadth but also because of its ambition to broaden the scope of cooperative thinking. Instead of organizing his work around the features of the cooperative (democracy, inter-cooperation, cooperative transactions, etc.), Adderley frames it explicitly in terms of academic disciplines: history, law, economics, finance, management, and so on. The book offers an "overview of co-operatives." Formally, each chapter is subdivided into subheadings, which enables (and perhaps encourages) selective reading. Although I read the book cover to cover, I am certain I will be returning to individual sections many times in search of information or references.

Keywords: co-operatives, practice, theory

In May 2025, with the support of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies, Ian Adderley published a remarkable book on cooperatives. It is valuable for a wide range of readers not only because of its breadth but also because of its ambition to broaden the scope of cooperative thinking.

The volume runs to around 450 pages, excluding forewords and appendices. In other words, it is substantial – far more than a popular outreach book for beginners. It is organized into three parts: an introductory overview,

technical content, and cooperative thinking. From an academic perspective, this division raises several questions:

- » Can a section that takes up nearly one-third of the book still be called an “introduction”?
- » Is it appropriate to set “technical features” against “co-operative thinking” as if they were opposed?
- » Can co-operative law or co-operative economics really be excluded from “co-operative thinking”?

These and other questions might be raised, and indeed the tripartite division is not fully convincing. It feels more like a formal framework than a coherent guiding logic. Yet this does not detract from the book’s value, since the three parts are not intended as a linear pathway through which the author guides the reader. This is not the demonstration of a personal theory or a polemical analysis, although Adderley occasionally voices his opinions.

Each part is further divided into chapters, and this is in fact the more meaningful structure, since it reflects the specific issues the author seeks to present. There are 12 substantive chapters (apart from the introduction and conclusion), generally running 10–20 pages each, which cover the central themes of co-operative studies: identity, history, contemporary practice, governance, law, finance, economics, ideology, politics and religion, education, and social responsibility. Some chapters are much longer than others: for instance, the section on cooperative law extends to 50 pages.

Instead of organizing his work around the features of the cooperative (democracy, inter-cooperation, co-operative transactions, etc.), Adderley frames it explicitly in terms of academic disciplines: history, law, economics, finance, management, and so on. This orientation is not always consistent – for instance, the chapter on “co-operative identity” does not correspond neatly to a discipline – but overall the aim is clear: to provide as objective a picture of cooperatives as possible. The book does not seek to advance a personal conception of cooperation but rather, as the preface states (p. 5), to offer an “overview of co-operatives.” Crucially, however, this overview is not a short pamphlet with a few figures: it is a comprehensive *summa* of knowledge, ambitious in scope and – importantly – successful.

That said, some apparent limits must be acknowledged. First, the book is primarily UK-focused. But this focus is not a restriction, and any reader will find many jewels. The book frequently ventures beyond Britain – for statistics and history in particular – even if its discussions are most substantial with regard to England and its surroundings. This is not a criticism: no

single author could realistically provide a universal survey of cooperatives. Moreover, in many respects the national focus recedes behind a broader perspective: for instance, the chapter on co-operative identity draws on authors from many countries and continents. As a result, while a British reader may find certain sharp details that will not be caught by foreigners, international readers will also find the content rich and relevant. More broadly, one must always recognize that any author is culturally situated: a treatment of co-operative identity written by an Indigenous scholar, or a Chinese woman, for example, would inevitably differ. This observation does not undermine Adderley's work, but it highlights the cultural framing of knowledge and the debates yet to come as Europe's intellectual dominance wanes.

Second, the book is not exhaustive. Again, this is not a weakness, but a strength. Exhaustiveness is both impossible and undesirable: multi-volume compendia may include everything, but they overwhelm the reader, and make it difficult to extract key references, or timelines. By contrast, Adderley's selection forces concision, and when the choices are well made – as they are here – this serves the reader far better.

Formally, each chapter is subdivided into subheadings, which enables (and perhaps encourages) selective reading. Although I read the book cover to cover, I am certain I will be returning to individual sections many times in search of information or references. My only regret is that all subheadings appear in the same format, without a visible hierarchy, which makes navigation less convenient.

To conclude on this point: anyone interested in cooperatives, and wishing to gain an overview of the related debates, should read this book. It is bound to appear in all the major bibliographies. To borrow the author's own words, the aim is not to advance radically new ideas, but rather to synthesize the theoretical and practical discussions surrounding cooperatives. It serves as a gateway for readers whose knowledge is limited to what they might have seen on television, or read in newspapers. Yet, at the same time, it is also (I take myself as an example) immensely valuable for specialists in the field: since each expert approaches cooperatives through a particular discipline, this book presents the major questions, together with references that allow one to explore them across other disciplines.

Despite its limits – or perhaps thanks to them – the book is rich in substance. It would be neither possible nor useful to summarize all the chapters, so I will mention only a few of my personal favorites.

Co-operative Law (p. 183). As a lawyer, I was eager to discover the author's treatment of this topic. Unsurprisingly, the chapter focuses primarily on UK legislation, but not exclusively. The UK's legal evolution is clearly presented and provides the key elements necessary to understand current reform debates: <https://lawcom.gov.uk/news/reform-of-co-operative-and-community-benefit-societies-proposed/>

Yet cooperative law is addressed more broadly, as a central tool for grasping both the different forms of cooperative mechanisms and the balance of power achieved in a specific time and place. Hence the chapter extends well beyond the UK. It should be emphasized at once that this section is not intended only for lawyers. The author explains legal concepts with great clarity – for instance, the notion of *legal person* (p. 193) – making the material accessible to any reader.

Beyond its structure, the chapter provides two sets of complementary insights: first, the major debates regarding the relationship between cooperatives and cooperative law, and second, a thorough overview of the history of UK cooperative law. As a non-UK lawyer, I found the historical account particularly useful, as it not only provided context, but also lent depth to the many debates in which cooperative law is entangled. These debates are numerous, including: whether cooperatives should be registered, whether they should enjoy limited liability, whether they require general or special legislation, what degree of oversight is appropriate, and how a cooperative ought to be defined. This illustrates one of the limitations of the author's decision not to structure the book thematically: although these questions are all present, they are not clearly distinguished.

Depending on the reader's profile, different aspects will attract greater attention. But lawyers, and non-lawyers alike, will find the chapter highly rewarding. As is sometimes said of other matters, cooperative law is too important to be left to lawyers alone.

My favorite chapter, however, is the one on co-operative ideology (p. 337). I will mention only a few subsections.

Co-operative wealth (p. 359): economic versus social and cultural needs. The starting point is the ICA's Cooperative Identity Statement, which defines cooperatives in relation to the economic, social, and cultural needs of their members. The crucial question is whether economic aspirations outweigh social and cultural ones. This is both a subtle and fundamental issue, touching on whether the cooperative is intrinsically an economic entity. Behind it lies the legacy of the nineteenth century, when cooperative activity encompassed a broader range of goals.

If I may enter the discussion, I would argue that the question is somewhat misleading, as it presupposes an exaggerated opposition. Whatever the needs of members, what ultimately matters is the underlying conception of the human being. In contrast to capitalism, cooperative members are not *homo economicus*; this is precisely why their aspirations cannot be so neatly divided into economic and non-economic.

Enterprise versus association (p. 386). Closely related is the question of whether a cooperative is primarily an enterprise or an association. Again, the ICA definition is the starting point: a cooperative is an association of persons who unite to meet their aspirations through an enterprise. Is the enterprise merely a means? Is the association primary? A parallel may be drawn with the French debate on the definition of the social and solidarity economy: is it simply a *mode d'entreprendre* (a way of doing business), or something more?

General-interest co-operatives (p. 392). These are discussed in this chapter and throughout the book. The central question is whether such cooperatives are truly cooperatives, like the others. They have proliferated over the past 40 years, reviving an old tension between the “ancient” and the “modern.” The issue is complex, since the principle of self-help lies at the heart of co-operative identity, and general-interest cooperatives may appear to rest on other foundations. This, however, must be distinguished from multi-stakeholder membership.

Here, I would propose an alternative perspective: self-help remains the foundation, but the community in question is broader, allowing for different ways of participating, including through legal persons acting as proxies. This suggests useful bridges with the theory and practice of the commons.

The discussions could, of course, be multiplied, and the technical aspects should not be overlooked, as they may be of greater interest to other readers.

The UK Society for Co-operative Studies deserves thanks for its support. The book demonstrates that the UK cooperative movement remains strong and inspiring for all those interested in cooperatives. Grounded in UK experience, yet enriched by global practice and reflection, this book is indispensable for anyone who studies or works with cooperatives. It also provides an excellent introduction for those curious about contemporary debates on alternatives to capitalism.

The book is available in hard copy (paperback or hardback): <https://shop.ingramspark.com/b/o84?params=HJ9nfzqTzTLfD8Yqm5rq6y1Ve-CotHLGe1AQbO7nzULK>.

It may also be downloaded for free: <https://www.ukscs.coop/pages/co-operatives-linking-practice-and-theory>.



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