



“That’s Capitalism, Not a Co-op”: Countercultural Idealism and Business Realism in 1970s U.S. Food Co-ops

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In the 1970s, dissenting young Americans bolting from what was perceived to be the unhealthy, “toxic” content of 1950s and 1960s corporate-controlled commercial foods, found refuge and like-minded community in food co-ops, or “food conspiracies.” As experiments in participatory democracy, anti-capitalist countercultural business, and centers for alternative foods consumption, co-ops acted as protean clearinghouses for multiple political and cultural concerns. Members could join in hopes of creating a non-traditional business model, to support craft food production, to sustain organic farming, for the believed health benefits of unprocessed foods, or to take part in a communal project. This ideological inclusiveness attended to members’ multifarious countercultural agendas, but eventually led to internal conflict as the everyday exigencies of running a business butted up against the turmoil fostered by anti-hierarchical, volunteer structures. In this paper, I examine two issues that presented the greatest challenge for food cooperatives: the implementation of co-op governance and management systems, and the politics of food. Despite these struggles, from the 1970s forward U.S. food co-ops have remained a flexible forum within which the progressive middle-class can practice conscientious consumption, alternative business, and purposeful communalism.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were an especially fertile period for the creation in the United States of what cultural radicals called “free organizations.” Young college-educated activists formed collectives to provide America’s forgotten and poor with medical, childcare, housing, and legal services, funneling their skills into more meaningful work and more egalitarian institutions than the corporate mainstream offered. Food co-ops were one widespread manifestation of this cooperative experimentalism.

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The Cooperative League of the United States of America estimated that from 1969 to 1979, between 5,000-10,000 food cooperatives were established in the United States.¹ Most of what came to be known as “new wave” co-ops (in contrast to “old wave” co-ops of the Depression and the New Deal in the 1930s) shared a member-ownership structure and some allegiance to the Rochdale principles of cooperative business organization: democratic control, open and voluntary membership, limited interest on shares, return of surplus to members. This sub-set of grocery stores also contained a range of progressive and practical aspirations.²

For dissident young Americans, food co-ops created a cell of neighborly connection and commitment in the face of what many co-op members saw as modern anomie. Co-ops supplied young people with a politically and philosophically satisfying workplace that supported their desire to make a meaningful living. With their bulletin boards, newsletters, and membership meetings overflowing with political commentary and calls to action, they were clearinghouses for their activist members’ national and local leftist causes. They stood as model experimental businesses with their successes and failures relentlessly discussed in trade magazines, like the *Co-operative Grocer*, and pondered by cooperators eager to encourage a more compassionate economic system than for-profit capitalism. They were an outlet for a burgeoning consumer movement spearheaded by Ralph Nader. They were a significant purveyor and popularizer of whole foods and health food products. Finally, they classified themselves and their movement as dissimilar not only to free-market “Supermarket America,” but also to “old wave” co-ops, and thus contributed to the post-World War II redefinition of the American cultural and political Left.

William Ronco listed the differences between new and old wave co-ops in his 1974 user’s guide and advocacy monograph *Food Co-op: An Alternative to Shopping*. According to Ronco, it was difficult to

¹ Daniel Zwerdling, “The Uncertain Revival of Food Cooperatives,” in *Co-ops, Communes, and Collectives: Experiments in Social Change in the 1960s and 1970s*, ed. John Case and Rosemary C. R. Taylor (New York, 1979), 90. This figure includes small groups, known as buying clubs, that gathered together to buy health or natural foods not easily found in the 1970s or because they wanted to save money.

² The Rochdale principles are derived from the rules followed by the first successful consumer cooperative, Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society in 1843 of Rochdale, England. The society was created when a group of striking British weavers decided to organize their consumer power and begin a cooperative store that opened on Toad Lane in 1844. Their co-op lasted over 60 years. Most twentieth century American co-ops have followed these principles. The International Cooperative Alliance (est. 1895) had meetings to revise the formal co-op principles in 1936, 1966, and most recently in 1995. For more on Rochdale, see Joseph G. Knapp, *The Rise of American Cooperative Enterprise, 1620-1920* (Danville, Ill., 1969).

distinguish old wave co-ops (many of which were still around in the 1970s) from supermarkets. This confusion was not possible, he argued, with new wave co-ops, which had prices noticeably lower than supermarkets’, whose members participated in running self-financed stores, independent of federal funds start-up. They were housed in unconventional buildings and did not follow strict bookkeeping practices. They were generally small scale and for Ronco, “the tone of business [was] friendlier, warmer, looser.”³ Most significant, for many 1970s cooperators, the creation of a haven and community for unorthodox folks (including revolutionary dissenters) was just as important as selling food. As a member of Washington D.C.’s Field of Plenty Co-op explained in the late 1970s, “Selling food isn’t our goal. It’s just a pretext for building, living, and breathing models of revolutionary change.”⁴

The new wave’s sense of discontinuity with cooperative efforts in America’s past would come under scrutiny in the 1980s, 1990s, and in the new millennium as these originally countercultural co-ops found more similarities than difference between themselves and their old-wave predecessors. Yet, in the 1970s this demarcation was imperative for many organizers who believed they were the seers of American capitalism’s dying days (a market system within which they believed the old wave was inextricably enmeshed), and the founders of a liberating and righteous cultural and economic substitute. In a 1974 letter, Washington D.C.’s Field of Plenty advised other southeastern cooperatives to gird themselves for the coming revolution: “The possibility of the collapse of the present capitalist economic system in the near future points out the need for anti-profit systems to be strong enough to survive such a collapse.”⁵

Not all 1970s co-ops agreed with this sweeping assessment of the market economy or with the role that Field of Plenty assigned them. Yet, they would concede that there was something original, potentially society-altering to 1970s co-ops, and that they could not simply be described as member-owned and operated enterprises; they were not just about “selling cheap cheese,” as longtime member Vince Pieri was known to say about his Philadelphia co-op, Weavers Way (WW).⁶

To maintain their radical alternative status, co-ops had to encompass the sundry political, cultural, and dietary standards within their membership. At the same time, to remain viable, co-ops had to balance members’ ethical requirements with the everyday exigencies of running a business. Many sustained both agendas (those that did not succumb to revolutionary and physical burn-out), but not without

³ William Ronco, *Food Co-ops: An Alternative to Shopping in Supermarkets* (Boston, 1974), 23.

⁴ Zwerdling, “Uncertain Revival,” 109.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Interview with Sarah James, Weavers Way Board Administrator, and Education and Outreach Director, 17 July 2003, Mt. Airy, Pennsylvania.

continued conflict and contemplation of the goals, direction, and significance of food cooperatives.

Implementing systems of co-op governance and management and choosing co-op food products presented the greatest challenges to the new wave. The cooperative mettle of WW, established in 1972 in Mt. Airy, Pennsylvania (in greater Philadelphia) by Jules Timerman’s labor and creativity, and its members’ financial and emotional backing, was tested by its very first hurdle, the installation of a predictable managerial and governance structure.

After a year in business under Jules Timerman’s leadership, many WW cooperators recognized the need to disperse responsibility and work amongst all members and elect a board of directors. Yet, not everyone felt the necessity to move to a more standardized governance structure. In an editorial for the newly named co-op newspaper, *The Shuttle*, Greg Moore urged fellow members to seriously ponder the repercussions of initiating a board-led co-op.⁷ “After all,” he wrote, “we have operated successfully for a year behind the sweat, dedication and foresight of one man, Jules Timerman.” Why rock the boat he wondered, especially since the current leadership “evolved naturally (to those willing to do the work) in the co-op.”⁸ Many within the larger new wave community, like the collective authors of *The Food Co-op Handbook* shared Moore’s mistrust of what they considered to be artificially imposed systems of governance.⁹ They rejected the supposed benefits of such arrangements for the intimacy of spontaneously-occurring and situationally-flexible leadership.

The authors, while not entirely opposed to boards of directors, argued that when leaders rose up by dint of their performance, participatory democracy (a guiding principle of the cooperative movement) was more likely to thrive: “If things become so over structured that people don’t feel free to be innovative and contribute more than is expected of them, the co-op can become cold, formal.”¹⁰ Setting themselves against both hierarchical capitalist businesses and old wave co-ops grown so large they needed top-heavy systems of management, many new wave cooperators wanted to sustain their collectives through what they believed to be the cohesive vigor of “personalism.” As the authors of the *Co-op Handbook* surmised, “The closeness of the collective means that members can deal with interpersonal problems and conflicts.” Conversely, “unnecessary structures can block the natural flow of people’s energies and thwart their free participation.”¹¹

⁷ The namesake of the newsletter was the weaver’s shuttle, harkening back to the originators of cooperation the flannel weavers of Rochdale, England.

⁸ Greg Moore, “Feast or Famine,” *The Shuttle*, no date.

⁹ Food Co-op Handbook Collective, *The Food Co-op Handbook* (Boston, 1975).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

WW member Greg Moore seemed to endorse the outlook expressed in the *Handbook* when he attempted to rouse Weavers’ membership against the inauguration of a board of directors. His editorial also announced a discomfort with future thinking and planning that reverberated throughout the present-oriented counterculture. As illustrated by the popularity of spiritual guru Baba Ram Dass’ treatise *Be Here Now*, and 1970s “be-ins,” 1960s and 1970s cultural rebels and political anti-establishmentarians perceived engaged attentiveness to daily existence a more honest and fulfilling approach to life than wasting energy on long-term preparation for an unknowable future.¹² Planning, structure, and predictability were the anxious “headtrips” of mainstream authoritarian businesses.

Some within the ranks of Weavers’ membership were not as enamored with this “go-with-the-flow” counter-strategy. In a response to Greg Moore’s editorial, member and first board vice-president, Lyn Davis, voiced her objections to leaving the co-op undisturbed and charging Mr. Timerman with “the mammoth burden of operating an entire co-op structure himself and having our existence as a viable business depend on his physical and emotional energy.” The new board, in Davis’ opinion, would ultimately enlarge rather than contract democracy and “achieve a working, member involved food coop.”¹³

Although WW’s members gave serious consideration to Moore’s countercultural aversion to structure and formalization, Davis’ more moderate ambitions must have represented the majority. Despite much back and forth about the efficacy of a volunteer versus board directed structure, the first WW board of directors was elected in January 1974. In the end, this Philadelphia food cooperative decided that conventional business methods would prevent shop floor disorder that many believed would destroy their collective.

A similar management debate arose within the People’s Food Co-op (PFC, an Ann Arbor, Michigan food collective), soon after its establishment. When the PFC incorporated in the summer of 1971, the main responsibility for the stability of its first grocery store at Packard Avenue (one of four stores under its aegis) fell on the shoulders of paid coordinators and member-volunteers. In theory, any determination made about anything from the politics of product choices to new storefront locations was to be decided collectively at membership meetings convened by a group of elected corporate officers. In reality, without a general manager or approved by-laws, the workers’ collective on duty resolved many issues “on the fly.”

Like WW, the PFC began seriously considering a more systematic style of management and governance after watching its Packard Avenue

¹² Baba Ram Dass, *Be Here Now* (San Cristobal, New Mexico, 1971).

¹³ Lyn Davis, “Responding to Greg Moore’s Editorial, ‘Feast or Famine,’” *The Shuttle*, 7 Feb. 1974, 1.

store hemorrhage revenues year after year. Yet, PFC members and paid coordinators attempted to solve their fiscal problems at Packard Avenue with a series of non-traditional schemes before the resigning themselves to the necessity of an elected board of directors and general manager.

The PFC’s radical alternativeness inspired Ann Arbor residents like Rueben Chapman to optimistically join the Packard Avenue Co-op in the early 1970s. He recalled, “There was certainly a feeling that this was a counter movement to the way our economy worked at the time. And there was the feeling that this was a way the whole economy could run if people found it practical.” Yet, Chapman perceived early on that the anti-system at Packard, and other new wave collectives, would eventually burn out this hopeful alternative and doom the national movement to obsolescence. As he reflected, “I was conservative in the sense that I thought we should be more business-like if we were going to be a successful business. But some members said, ‘that’s capitalism, not a co-op.’”¹⁴

Many Ann Arbor cooperators resisted Chapman’s pragmatic approach to collectivity. The members of the most radical enterprise associated with the PFC, Ann Arbor’s People’s Produce Co-op (which had a lounge set aside for political discussions and a reading room), believed so fervently in voluntary cooperation that they refused to hire paid labor. In its newsletter, the People’s Produce Co-op pondered the ethics of paid co-op labor: “What are the tradeoffs on the co-operative concept when you pay a person? Is it a co-op movement function to provide employment?”¹⁵ This produce cooperative did not become a formal PFC co-op until 1985, but the sentiments revealed in its musings on voluntarism were certainly spread among the young, highly-educated, and politically-ambitious cooperators in this Midwest college town. At the same time, within the core group of active PFC members there was considerable support for a transition toward stabilization via conventional business methodology. As Reuben Chapman reflected, if the PFC did not begin to run their grocery stores like businesses, “making more money than it spends” they would disappear, leaving consumers with no other option but to return to the supermarket monoliths.¹⁶

Member Diana Slaughter echoed Chapman when recollecting the dangers of Packard’s lackadaisical cash accounting: “I always weighed my stuff out as best I could on the old rolling butcher scale we had at Packard, but other people would sort of estimate.” As far as totaling one’s purchases, Slaughter remembered, “You would ring up your own order on this ancient cash register that would take entries only up to \$9.99”; but she

¹⁴ Reuben Chapman as quoted in Stephanie McKinnon, “It Began on a Cold Day on State Street,” *People’s Food Co-op Connection* (Sept./Oct. 1995), 7.

¹⁵ “A Brief History of People’s Food Co-op,” 3, *The People’s Food Co-op Papers*, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

¹⁶ Rueben Chapman as quoted in “It Began on a Cold Day on State Street,” 7.

noted, “Self-cashiering was scrapped after the cash box got ripped off.”¹⁷ For Slaughter, who had invested heart and soul in Ann Arbor’s cooperative, the Packard store’s knee-jerk denunciation of standard business custom resulted in countercultural anarchy. “I was one of the first members to push for the election of a board to give some stability and continuity to the PFC,” she recalled.¹⁸

By 1976, a group of members who sympathized with Slaughter’s critique protested that the PFC’s anti-organization design was dysfunctional. Presenting themselves to the general meeting as the “consensus committee,” they critiqued the existing arrangement as “a bit of a non-model,” with decisions being made in “a fairly loose quasi-consensus form.”¹⁹ Without clear procedural guidelines, on-the-ground volunteers and the paid labor collective made influential product and managerial decisions with little member input.

According to this member-created association, the most egalitarian and effective way “to maintain the co-op idea: maximum number of folks, with truly group decisions” would be to institute a more clearly delineated consensus plan.²⁰ From their perspective, the root of the PFC’s problems was not its unwillingness to adopt a more conventional administrative system, but rather, that in the absence of a formulated and enforced alternate, the PFC inadvertently fell back on anti-democratic decision-making patterns. To reverse this trend, they proposed consistent member input to facilitate more democracy.

Ever-reluctant to concretize a governing system that might result in a pecking order, and simultaneously plagued with the new wave cooperative paradox of participatory democratic idealism and declining member involvement, the PFC proceeded in a stop-gap manner throughout the 1970s, addressing problems through co-op coordinator initiative, ad hoc member-created committees, and open corporate and member issue-driven meetings. That was until 1977, when its Packard Avenue Co-op reached another financial crisis point. After close to 2 years of heated membership meeting, discussions, committees, and false starts towards formal governance, in 1980 the PFC relented and accepted a mainstream management model, hiring a manager for the Packard Avenue store and electing its first board of directors.

Interestingly, like WW in Philadelphia, in order for PFC to achieve broader member participation (more cooperation amongst all member-owners), a more typical (but at the same time more inclusive) business framework had to supplant the vision of the most devoted collectivists and

¹⁷ Diane Slaughter as quoted in Kris Crawford, “People’s Food Co-op in the ‘Old Days’: Remembrances from Two Longtime Members,” *The People’s Food Co-op Connection* (May 1989), 4.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ A Brief History of People’s Food Co-op, ” 3.

²⁰ Ibid., 3.

hardest-working founding coordinators. With a board and a set of by-laws, the co-op could more easily address and accommodate its members’ myriad needs. Moreover, the membership was less beholden to the default influence of a zealously-committed but insular coterie of workers and super-volunteers, some of whom were more than willing to watch the co-op go under if it could not meet their absolutist interpretations of cooperation or their political and nutritional food agendas.

Once new wave cooperatives, like WW and the PFC, jumped this initial hurdle and transformed themselves from trials in utopian collectivity to communally-owned but professionally-operated businesses, they did not suddenly morph into free market profit-fixated corporations, as many collectivists feared. To buoy their grocery stores, members revamped their expectations of cooperation and assimilated some customary rules of mainstream business. However, this progressive constituency still believed that it was their generation’s mission to reinvent American politics and culture. In lieu of this grand metamorphosis, their grocery stores could at the very least remain a bona fide alternative to conventional “plastic foods” consumption. Thus, WW and other new wave co-ops, particularly those which opened as natural foods cooperatives, found themselves fussing over the content and quality of their cooperative stores and their meanings to individual members, the surrounding community, the nation, and the world.

Because they invested their consumer choices and communally-owned stores with such social significance, members did not look upon the heated member meetings, editorial interchange over food, the division between on the ground business realism and member’s principled idealism, as divisive or a nuisance but rather, as WW member and employee Norman Weiss described, “democracy follow[ing] its course.”²¹ As the bearer of the rebellious 1960s “movement” and the 1970s countercultural legacy, dissent and disputation became a defining obligation for the educated middle-class: dissent from the political and cultural mainstream but also vigilant monitoring of the “alternativeness” of one’s own consumption and lifestyle as well as of the progressive communities one constructed.

For some cooperators, the communal choice to embargo non-union produce or merchandise from companies engaging in questionable labor or production practices was a test both of their co-op’s progressive resolve, and by association, a member’s self-conception as an ethical consumer. What, finally, was the point of creating collective institutions if they sold items from companies that busted labor unions, wrecked the environment, robbed indigenous peoples of their lands, and supported dictators, some cooperators wondered.

With the potency of the New Left deflated by internecine clashes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and a cynicism towards both traditional

²¹ Author interview with Norman Weiss, Sept. 2003, Mt. Airy, Pennsylvania.

partisan politics and social activism settling in the U.S. citizenry, many cooperators came to believe consumer advocacy was the only venue left for legitimate and immediate political influence. With their food purchases weighted with such consequence, banning products that nourished corrupt food corporations from their grocery baskets was a powerful method of enacting their political morals every day.

Meat, because of the prevalence of vegetarians and animal-rights advocates within the new wave co-op cohort, was repeatedly a lightning rod for member debate. Most co-ops forbade animal flesh from sullyng their coolers; but some, especially when they planned expansion to larger facilities, entertained the possibility of adding meat products to their merchandise list. Ann Arbor’s PFC faced earthquake like rumblings in the early 1980s when their Packard Avenue grocery store’s second general manager redesigned the stock for greater efficiency and variety. Dumping old and slow-moving items, manager Peter Hiers added previously verboten items such as chocolate chips and canned tuna. By 1985, the Packard Avenue Food Co-op would expand their meat line to include fresh seafood and poultry. Yet, in those first years of transition, Hiers furtively sold the tinned tuna out of the back room to avoid “a battle with militant vegetarians.”²²

Brattleboro, Vermont’s food co-op confronted a more protracted struggle in 1985 when, in planning their relocation to a larger building, the management collective proposed making room for local lamb and pork products. The board approved this measure but critical members promptly contested with a referendum to halt the addition. The referendum found 51 percent in favor of meat, but due to what general manager Alex Gyori characterized as continued “rancorous debate,” the board withdrew their resolution.²³ After much dialogue on the issue over a 3-year period, the board called for a final membership meeting on the question. Appearing with a thoroughly researched plan for the incorporation of meat into their new establishment, the board surprisingly found no opposition in attendance and passed the motion. In respect to members who were uneasy with butchering, the approved plans for Brattleboro’s meat counter ensured that the cutting equipment would be out of sight and enclosed.

According to Gyori, despite these dispensations the “anti-meat lobby finally read their newsletters, and began a heated but short lived campaign to scuttle the new decision.”²⁴ With over half of the membership in favor of the change, the management and board bypassed this faction

²² “The People’s Food Co-op Stages a Comeback,” *Ann Arbor Observer* (Dec. 1985), 21.

²³ Mark Braskie, “Setting Up the New Meat Department,” *Cooperative Grocer Online* 37 (Nov./Dec. 1991), 4.

URL: <http://www.cooperativegrocer.com/cg/1991/meatdept.shtml>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

and opened the new store, meat and all. On the first day of business in the co-op’s new digs, the husband and wife who had led the anti-meat protest picketed the store then disgustedly handed in their membership.

Ruminating on the meat controversy at Brattleboro’s food co-op, general manager, Alex Gyori argued, “It has never been our intention to alienate anyone over any issue. But our experience over 17 years of the co-op existence is that every major decision that has been made carries with it the certainty that some people will not like it and a few will even quit the co-op as a result.” As the general manager, invested not only in the collective’s survival but its progression to greater effectiveness and community outreach, Alex Gyori saw change and expansion as healthy turns for his co-op which “has gone forward, gotten better and better, and serves more and more people.”²⁵ For others, like the couple who, in their eyes, were forced to forgo the nutritional, communal, and economic advantages of cooperation to uphold their animal rights principles, the decision to enlarge Brattleboro’s co-op and moreover to carry meat (which many 1960s and 1970s counter-culturalists abandoned to protest the gluttonous standard American diet and its vegetable protein wasteful meat production system) signified an irreversible weakening of the co-op’s counter-institutional standing.

With a deli counter and butcher from the early 1970s forward, Philadelphia’s WW has faced little member disharmony over meat. Yet, this has not freed the co-op from food controversy. Over its over 30 years of business, WW has attempted to actualize ethical consumerism by clearing its shelves of foods that did not uphold the (generally) shared pro-labor, humanitarian, ecological values of its members. At the same time, to remain a functioning business WW has not devoted too much time to purifying its storefront of controversial products, particularly because the membership never reached consensus on which aim should most preoccupy their communal enterprise: social activism or the business bottom line.

This philosophical divide, present from WW’s beginning in the 1970s, widened in the early 1980s when the co-op argued over the possibility of joining the Farm Labor Organizing Committee’s (FLOC) boycott of all Campbell’s/Libby products. A representative of FLOC had visited WW’s board of directors in spring of 1983 and informed the co-op of the poor wages, working conditions, housing, racial discrimination, and health dangers that forced the farm workers union to strike against Campbell’s/Libby. Taking items off the co-op’s shelves for health protection was controversial but at least upheld a widely favored politics of consumer protection. To support the FLOC boycott, WW members would have to agree that the rights and well-being of non-members should be placed above the collective. The sacrifice required would not be immense; a member might have to forgo their favorite Pepperidge Farm cookie (a

²⁵ Ibid., 5.

Campbell’s product sold at WW), a sacrifice nevertheless. Reaching out to the membership, the board posted a survey about the controversial boycott in the store. The survey results favored rejecting the action with a 39 to 28 vote and 3 abstentions; comments submitted to the board suggest the range of member opinion on the co-op’s civic responsibilities.

Those who backed a boycott denounced members and board officials who seemed to place the fiscal benefits of carrying Campbell’s products over principles. As one member impatiently remarked, “When faced with the decision between what’s right and what’s profitable, we can’t see why there would be any debate. Board members who don’t support the boycott should resign.”²⁶ Another asked members to recognize their class privilege, to not become indolent and content with their comparable security but rather to use their cultural and economic capital to assist those less fortunate. “We are all workers,” wrote this member, “who must support each other to the extent we can.”²⁷ Board member Fred Zepernick echoed this standpoint, while recognizing the lure of consumerism that might intervene between a shopper and his/her conscience: “The packing of their products is so attractive and it makes our life so easy but it belies the pain and suffering that are the result of Campbell’s policy. If we are the brothers and sisters of those less fortunate the boycott offers us an effective non-violent means to share the pain and show our concern.”²⁸

The anti-boycott majority challenged the validity of sanctions for manifold reasons. Some believed that the facts on Campbell’s behavior were “fuzzy,” that the culpability for field workers’ living and work conditions might rest more fully on the owners of produce-supplying farms not the corporation who bought from them. Others felt that a boycott might have unintended consequences. In a store bulletin board broadsheet a board member took issue with the boycott stratagem itself arguing that in a “complex and interrelated [economy] boycotting Campbell’s and Libby’s would endanger many other jobs or workers who are also economically advantaged.”²⁹ A WW member endorsed this director’s reluctance suggesting that “legislative action” was a more effective route for protest.³⁰

²⁶ Author not identified, “Member’s Response to Boycott Survey 3/7/83 Flexible Flyer,” 31 March 1983. Weavers Way Papers, Mt. Airy, Pennsylvania.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Fred Zepernick, “Letter to Weavers Way President, Dorothy Orr,” 16 June 1983, 3. Weavers Way Papers, Mt. Airy, Pennsylvania.

²⁹ Pauline Sexton, ed., “One Board members point of view regarding the Boycott...” *Weavers Way Flexible Flyer*, 7 March 1983. Weavers Way Papers, Mt. Airy, Pennsylvania.

³⁰ Author not identified, “Member’s Response to Boycott Survey in the 3/7/83 Flexible Flyer- Ambivalent,” 31 March 1983. Weavers Way Papers, Mt. Airy, Pennsylvania.

Others expressing dissension from a Campbell’s embargo believed that there was never a justification for their cooperative’s involvement in such political skirmishes. “Weavers Way is a food co-op which exists for the purpose of providing food for purchase and should not, as an organization, take sides or advocate any position in controversial matters,” wrote one member in the comment portion of the boycott ballot. Instead, he or she protested, “the right to buy or not to buy can be exercised on an individual level.”³¹

In a lengthy letter to the board of directors, member Donald L. Clinton worried about the divisiveness of taking up boycotts. As he observed, WW membership while varied in opinion shared “one common denominator, probably 99% are social activists!” While he considered this a praiseworthy likeness, he also recognized that his cause might not be the same as the member standing in front of him in the checkout line. The danger of entertaining every political fancy was that others would be left out, thus creating disunity. If WW were to rally for all the interests of individual members, be they “special diets, Women’s Lib., abortion, ecology, unions, the bomb, welfare rights,” Clinton surmised they would become “a collective that agreed to go along on every issue that was placed before us by any given noisy crowd of the moment.”³² Although WW’s board of directors affirmed the validity of Clinton’s concerns, they decided to align their collective consumer power behind the farm laborers. Perhaps unconvinced that the membership fully understood or even cared about the fine details of the controversy (as the limited member response to the survey indicated), they passed a resolution in 1983 to boycott Campbell’s-related products.

The FLOC boycott was not the first time that WW had to determine its collective conclusion on food politics, or the last. As far back as 1974, members insisted that buyer Jules Timerman secure substitutes for non-union lettuce and grapes. In 1982, the board joined the international boycott of Nestlé products in response to infant mortality caused by Nestlé formula marketed to mothers in developing nations.³³ Additional boycott proposals, some adopted some discarded included canned tuna, Ugandan coffee, Chilean produce, California grapes, and Icelandic fish cakes. Even when a board policy on co-op politics was adopted in 1976, which allowed for the co-op to be active “on public issues of concern to consumers” but not on partisan issues, and with product selection guidelines set by 1978,

³¹ Ibid.

³² Donald Clinton, “Letter to the Board of Directors of Weavers Way Coop,” (no date), 2. Weavers Way Papers, Mt. Airy Pennsylvania.

³³ For more on the international boycott of Nestle products in the 1970s see Andrew Van Alstyne, “Breast vs. Bottle: The Nestlé Boycott,” URL: <http://it.stlaw.edu/~advertiz/andrew/Nestlé/htm>. For more on the politics of breastfeeding see Naomi Baumlag and Dia Michaels, *Milk, Money, and Madness: The Culture and Politics of Breastfeeding*, (Westport, 1995).

WW’s membership, like many within the new wave, would find itself drawn into the warring sides that surfaced in the FLOC dispute each time they contemplated their relationship to the national and international economy.³⁴

As the food deliberations and divisions at WW and other new wave co-ops indicate, new wave collectivists, with their roots in the revolutionary optimism of the 1960s and 1970s, expected their co-ops to do quite a lot: to be stores with enough political guts to lose money when ethically necessary (say in the case of a boycott of a profitable product); to be run with near-perfect egalitarianism; to serve not only their original members, but to convert surrounding neighbors to the cause of collectivity. They required them to be living, breathing examples of the alternative world in which they wanted to live. The built-in dilemma was that these grocery stores depended upon sales to remain viable; thus, some utopian aspiration had to be dropped or modified for co-ops to endure. Yet, for some 1970s cooperators, who most likely held dearly to Students for a Democratic Society activist Tom Hayden’s vision of “free institutions” (like food co-ops) as “building blocks of a new society from which we confront the system more intensely,” instituting mainstream business plans threatened co-ops’ radical alternative standing.³⁵

In the experimental utopian milieu of the early 1970s, many new wave cooperators could share Hayden’s strident idealism and imagine their co-ops as catalysts for the coming revolution and model alternative institutions. Yet, as the new wave and the rest of the nation moved out of the countercultural 1960s to 1970s, and the conspicuous consumption, neo-conservative 1980s and centrist New Liberal 1990s de-legitimated the anti-capitalist-radical-communitarian viewpoint that animated and gave political direction to the new wave movement, food co-ops faced serious identity crises.

Nevertheless, despite these challenges (which caused many food cooperatives to fail), from the 1970s forward the new wave’s busy members continued to volunteer their precious free time to discuss and implement food policies, membership rules, co-op by-laws, and run their communal grocery stores. Needless to say, in doing so, they have gained access to inexpensive and hard-to-find natural and organic merchandise. In addition, for new wave cooperators across the nation, co-ops have provided members with much more than cheap food. Although their collective righteousness has not crumbled the house of capitalism or untied the knot of racial and class separation, as many 1970s radicals supposed, co-ops have persisted as flexible forums for the progressive middle-class to practice conscientious consumption, alternative business,

³⁴ “Policy Statement on ‘Politics,’” *Weavers Way Board of Directors Handbook*, 8 Sept. 1976. Weavers Way Papers, Mt. Airy, Pennsylvania

³⁵ Tom Hayden as quoted in Alice Echols, “Nothing Distant About It” in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Faber (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994), 160.

and purposeful communalism. Constantly under threat from their own mismanagement and political bifurcation (and the general decline of food cooperatives since the 1970s), they remain, in the words of longtime WW member Ed McGann as a principled “culture within a culture.”³⁶

³⁶ Ed McGann, *The Shuttle*, 12 June 1991.