

ANSER_CASC TALK ANNUAL BANQUET... JUNE 2, -2011

Note: Unedited

When invited to give a talk at the annual banquet of ANSER AND CASC, I made a review of my involvements in cooperative and social development over the last fifty years or so. At times I was an activist –at other times an observer- I have been involved in many kinds of different social economic projects. As I look back, the most constant impression I have is of contradictions and divisions concerning social economic reform: “Theory versus Practice” — “Idealism versus Pragmatism” “Profit making business versus non profit business” and so on. As a child in Sydney Mines, we were members of the British Canadian Co-op, the most successful business in the area with its own bakery, dairy, grocery, hardware and clothing departments with at least four branches. In the 1950s it was the most successful retail coop in North America as noted by Ian MacPherson.

As a university student I was close to the famous Antigonish movement. The Antigonish brand of cooperatives never did achieve much business success.

Now why did one work well and the other not.

Well, for one thing, the Antigonish brand was Roman Catholic and the Sydney Mines brand was Presbyterian. The religious connection should not be surprising...a lot of the cooperatives in Western Canada were inspired by what was called the Social Gospel.

At any rate, in the East, the Catholic brand was greatly infused with idealism and rhetoric but with little commercial success

In contrast. in Sydney Mines, the British Canadian was governed by tough Presbyterian managers who were cost conscious. The leaders were taciturn and did not like speeches. They were highly organized and efficient. As a child I was given a savings book and written on it was: TEACH YOUR DOLLARS TO HAVE CENTS.

Grocery orders were delivered by horse and wagon...even the horses were disciplined.. One time, a neighbor applied and got a job delivering milk. He turned up for work the next day and the foreman told him to start right away. But, he said, I don't know who the customers are... The foreman said.. you don't have to, the horse knows.. deliver milk to each house where the horse stops.

The Antigonish brand set out to change the world, while the Sydney Mines brand set out to improve the lives of the local coal miners in our area.

Anyway, I think I have a bit of both approaches in me...the idealistic and the pragmatic. My grandmother was Presbyterian. She was very strict.. "Stand up straight and don't slouch when you sit." She believed in discipline. I remember visiting one day. She had a stove with a shiny black top. Suddenly she heard a noise in her pantry. A mouse had gotten caught in her mousetrap. Most ladies would scream at the sight. My grandmother picked up the mousetrap and the mouse was still kicking. She held the trap over the hot stove and released the spring. The mouse scrambled across the shiny hot stovetop and jumped on the floor, scrambling away. My grandmother looked down at the mouse and said.. "There ...go tell your friends" She was not bothered by mice after that.

On the other side my mother was French. She always said that money was not very important...the most important things were to have friends and to enjoy life. So I have been

somewhat of a torn person between these conflicting tendencies...the idealism of changing the world..and the pragmatism needed to generate revenue at the local level.

I found the same problem on a larger scale. In 1968 I was in Prague during what was called the "Prague Spring" President Dubcek attempted to devise a socialist system that used free market tools to influence state production.

The Russians believed that Marxist theory meant state planning of everything that goes on. A consequence of this theory was that Moscow would make five year plans for the production of shoes all over the USSR. This is not an easy thing to do. A percentage of people will take size 7 and another percentage will take size 12... so the planners must know this and produce accordingly. But the problem was that Czech feet are bigger than Russian feet. So the Czechs ended up with millions of size 7 shoes that nobody wanted.

The Czechs concluded that shoe planning was not working so they wanted to allow the free market to decide what size shoes should be produced. For the Russians this was a betrayal of Marxist theory and so they invaded Prague and installed an orthodox government that agreed with control of the means of production by the state. I trace the eventual overthrow of the Marxist government to ill- fitting shoes. Theory can never compensate for shoes that pinch your feet.

Beginning in 1970 as a professor at Cape Breton university I found it difficult to stick to academia when the local community was falling apart, so I became an activist and not simply an observer.

But I was a professor! Here again, the contradictions arose. The academic vice president nagged me continually about wasting my time in housing construction. For him the academic life is a life of reflection and analysis of theory .leading to publications...

Anyway. Throughout all of this I found a constant theme...It is the theme of contradiction which permeated most of what I observed and what I did. I was often torn between the need for THEORY which normally required withdrawal and ACTION which usually required hectic activity. It is hard to do both well as every academic knows. Of course Karl Marx saw this action-theory contradiction as generating a creative synthesis.

The IDEALISTIC Antigonish co-ops were set out to change the world but most of their co-ops died out. They did not have the kind of people who could institutionalize AND MANAGE successfully. The British Canadian Co-op became over institutionalized but could not adapt to change. In their view, their horses could be just as well programmed as a modern computer. They could not change so the British Canadian went bankrupt around 1978.

The new movements of the 70's and 80's were called community economic development. Again I found contradiction between community advocacy where it is important to recruit large numbers of people and community business where it is better to recruit a small number of people with the kind of skills and competence needed to understand the nuts and bolts of business. The result is the tension between populism and elitism...the social imperative and the business imperative. New Dawn is one of those pragmatic projects of which Doug Lionais is now the chairperson. Later, I tried finance and experimented with encouraging people to invest locally instead of on the stock market. We had quite a bit of success in rescuing bankrupt companies in teaching our dollars to have cents.

After all this, I conclude that contradiction is normal for those involved in the real world of social economic reform. However, for contradictions to be creative, we must keep one foot in theory and the other in world of action. (Imagine..one foot in the university which is like a stable wharf and the other foot in a boat floating in an ocean of community problems.) You become torn. If we have only the empirical, we become rudderless, reacting to events. If we have only

theory , we don't have great impact on the social economic reality around us. That is why I favour the methods of action research where we work in the empirical order by seeing what works and what doesn't.

The more I think about these things the more I realize that the role of the university is critical for social economic change. It is a platform that allows for the combination of theory and practice. But sadly, we have a contradiction again,,,,, most of the dedicated activists, who want to bring about social economic change are in the social sciences. Yet most of the people with the skills to manage economic organizations are in the schools of business and science and engineering. They are still two very different cultures as C.P.Snow pointed out.

The most successful social economic experiments that I have seen combine these two cultures. There is usually a university involved. University of Bologna in Emilia Romagna -- University of Mondragon in the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation, In the Mondragon case, the founders were engineers who wanted to create person based businesses. The Cape Breton case does not compare with the aforementioned, but where we did have some small successes the platform was Cape Breton University.

My conclusion is that social economic reform should be regarded as an experiment, For university people it makes sense that...when we don't know the answer, we experiment. Ideologues don't have to experiment they already know the answers and that is dangerous.

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