

Left to die – The fate of the Catalan Consumer Cooperative Movement during the Primer Franquismo (1939-1959)

Introduction

During the Second Republic (1931 to 1939), the Catalan cooperative movement had enjoyed its “golden era”, experiencing a spectacular surge during the Spanish Civil War (1936 to 1939), with 559 cooperatives representing 388,000 members by the end of 1938.¹ This rapid growth came to a sudden end with Franco’s victory and the implementation of the national Catholic military dictatorship. The movement’s working-class base and economic policies, which encroached on areas of the economy dominated by private businesses or the newly created corporatist structure, the Organización Sindical Española (OSE), which dominated Labour and economic relations, meant that consumer cooperativism had few allies in Franco’s ‘New Spain’. Furthermore, for the new government, the movement’s past political and ideological sympathies had “converted” cooperativism into a socialist and communist “weapon” which needed to be returned to its true “Christian environment ... within our logical social trajectory, national-syndicalism.”² In Catalonia, the Federation of Catalan Cooperatives (the Federation), despite an official policy of political neutrality, had supported the Republic in the war and leading members had been closely associated with the Republic and Leftist Catalanist political parties. This only intensified the new administration’s mistrust of the movement which prompted Bartolome Aragon, the first Head of the Cooperative Service in the new government’s Labour Ministry, allegedly to argue that consumer cooperation had no reason to exist in the New Spain, but that he would not kill it but rather let it die.³

The struggles of a movement that had reached its zenith in 1938, to survive the inhospitable political, cultural and economic environment of the Franco regime’s early decades has scarcely attracted historians’ interest. This article aims to begin to fill this void, looking at the tribulations of the Governing Board of the Barcelona Province Union Territorial de Cooperativas de Consumo (UTEKO), created by the Franco regime. The article focuses solely on the consumer cooperative movement, the predominant section of the previous Federation. This article is largely based on information taken from the minutes of Governing Board meetings

and associated correspondence available at the Ventosa i Roig Library of the Fundació Roca i Gales, not simply because these contain clearly relevant information but also due to the complete dearth of studies on the subject.⁴ Unfortunately, the information in these files is often vague and/or avoids delving too deeply into areas of disagreement or controversy - for example, the reasons for replacing the Governing Board or its members are often only touched on in a general or purely informative manner. However, some of the individual cooperatives' archives have survived - for example, those of La Rubinenca - that do provide some relevant detail. In short, the historian is faced with a patchwork with most of its patches missing.

Finding secondary material is scarcely more promising - in fact, Medina-Albaladejo has recently claimed that Spanish consumer cooperatives have not previously "been studied in depth from the historical point of view."⁵ This is not strictly true as studies covering the pre-Franco period are available although they were often written by cooperativists themselves as a means to spread information about the movement and/or are rather general, focusing on cooperatives rather than on the overall cooperative movement.⁶ Also, for Catalonia, more recent studies have concentrated on the local level of focus on the pre-Franco.⁷ Nonetheless, as Garau Rolandi has recently pointed out, although much research is being conducted on contemporary cooperativism, the historiography of the movement in Spain is "fragmented" and continues to be "very scarce".⁸ Scarcity becomes almost invisibility when focusing on the Francoist period with only Perez Baro, as well as a short subjective piece by Joaniquet, erstwhile head of the provincial Obra Social Cooperación (OSC) the section of the OSE responsible for cooperation under the Franco regime, which gives a very general idea of events during this period.⁹ As Bernal Garcia laments, for the OSC itself, no investigation has been carried out.¹⁰ This article focuses solely on the Consumer cooperative UTECO, Territorial Unions were also created for Production and Agrarian cooperatives, but there is no evidence of any relationship at institutional level between these and the consumer cooperative UTECO.¹¹

In the mid-nineteenth century, cooperativism had been the most influential ideology among organised workers in Catalonia, mainly production cooperatives in line with the mutualist ideas of Proudhon. However, with the First International's arrival in Spain in the late 1860s, another group influenced by Proudhon, the

anarchists, became dominant. Spanish anarchism was built around the labour movement and unions and rejected the idea that cooperativism could help the emancipation of the working class. Cooperatives continued but were generally small and isolated from the major trends of the labour movement. However, despite not reaching the levels of other European cooperative movements, the movement survived with consumer cooperation representing the dominant form of cooperation from 1865 until Franco's rule began. It was cooperatives of this type that were behind the formation of the Chamber, from 1899 to 1918, and its successor, the Federation, from 1920 to 1939. These two regional organisations represented the Catalan consumer cooperative movement and were formed by the cooperatives themselves with the aim of advancing, and defending, cooperatives through organised action. Under the Franco regime the Federation was replaced by the UTECO, a subordinate organism of the OSC itself under the control of the OSE.

The model for the Catalan cooperative movement was provided by the Rochdale Pioneers' Equitable Society, founded in 1844, which had seven principles that would soon be adopted by cooperative movements in other countries and by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) created in 1895 (which the Regional Chamber joined in 1900): free membership and free withdrawal of members, democratic control, political, radical and religious neutrality, cash sales, return of surpluses, limited interest on capital and continuing education. The immediate objectives of consumer cooperatives were to supply their members with higher quality products at a fair price and, if the business prospered, to use a percentage of the profits to provide mutual aid for sickness, unemployment and retirement. The early Catalan movement was also heavily influenced by the French cooperativist, Charles Gide, and his program for the creation of a Cooperative Republic in which consumer cooperatives had a central role. They would use their profits to create second grade cooperatives (in which the members/shareholders are not individuals but cooperatives) in other areas such as production, credit, housing etc., which would slowly and gradually replace the capitalist economy. Following these ideals, by the end of the Second Republic, the movement had grown to include a regional union of second grade production cooperatives, owned and controlled by Federation member cooperatives, Productos Coop (1936), a regional wholesale society, the Cooperativa Central de Compras de Cataluña (1935), as well as a

number of locally-based unions for the production of basic foodstuffs. The Federation included an education cooperative, a credit cooperative together with a number of health, housing and even electricity provider cooperatives and because so many production or worker cooperatives had been established in the 1930s, thanks to the introduction of beneficial cooperative laws both nationally and regionally, a sub-Federation within the Federation to represent them had been created in 1932 (subsequently in 1935 a Catalan Federation of Production and Workers' cooperatives was formed). The Civil War had resulted in a merger of cooperatives in many towns and cities, the most important of which was the Barcelona Cooperative Union (UCB) created in September, 1936, from the merger of 52 cooperatives. Many cooperatives had branches, social centres and cultural organisations - it was a vibrant and expanding movement.

Consumer cooperatives were predominantly comprised of workers, and were mainly located in Barcelona's working-class neighbourhoods and in towns of its industrial belt as well as Tarragona, Girona and Vich. Its Rochdalean principles included political neutrality, although this did not mean that members were not allowed to be politically active outside cooperatives - indeed many leading members of the Federation were members of socialist and leftist Catalanist parties, in particular the Esquerra Republicana Catalunya (ERC) and even more were members of the socialist democratic party, the Unió Socialista de Catalunya (USC) which during the Civil War merged with other socialist and communist parties to create the Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya.¹² The Federation made clear its support for the Republic during the war, which, together with the political roles of leading figures, was a key factor why the movement fell victim to repression and reprisals during the first years of the Franco dictatorship. However, the policies of political neutrality and the open-door policy (membership was open to all) meant that cooperatives could, and indeed did, include members sympathetic to the new regime, some of whom played an active role in trying to save the Federation and the creation of the UTECO.

The Franco regime, "the most violent political regime in Spanish history", divided the country into the victorious and the vanquished, "España and anti-España", the latter being seen as "internal enemies" and a source of constant mistrust that required continual vigilance from the state.¹³ This militarised state sustained a

policy of repression throughout the decade of the 1940s, only lifting the official state of war in 1948, almost ten years after the fighting stopped.¹⁴ The victorious ‘New Spain’ repressed, prohibited, imprisoned and pursued supporters of the Republic and those who had remained neutral in the war. It also decried and illegalised their ideas throughout the 36 years of the regime although the oppression eventually abated but did not fully disappear. Victimisation and purification were legalised through laws such as the 1939 Law of Political Responsibilities (*Ley de Responsabilidades Políticas*) whose tribunals were staffed almost exclusively by members of the military and the Falange, the political party of the Franco regime, and which legalised the seizure of the property of democratic or leftist organisations including cooperatives. Meanwhile, in March 1940 the Law to repress Freemasonry and Communism (*Ley de Repression de la Masoneria y el Comunismo*) was passed making it illegal for anyone to put forward “corrosive ideas” against the state, religion or the nation, which was used against many cooperative movement leaders as well as cooperatives themselves.¹⁵

In addition to the difficult political situation, the cooperative movement faced an almost greater challenge: to survive the economic policies of the ‘primer franquismo’. The government tried to enforce a policy of autarky which resulted in “sustained economic stagnation” for an entire decade.¹⁶ Per capita GDP only reached the 1935 level in 1952, the same year that rationing was finally stopped. Price fixing, the establishment of coupon systems and rationing, had a “devastating effect” on the economy and led to a reduction in the supply of products available on the official market and a growing black market in expensive and poor-quality goods.¹⁷ Moreover, the bureaucracy in charge of the coupon system “unqualified” and “inefficient”, only helping to reinforce the importance of the black market and opening up the system to corruption which “became another of the characteristic traits” of the economy.¹⁸ All of this clearly had a negative impact on supply and consumption and hence affected the cooperatives’ ability to survive.

Finally in 1959 the IMF and World Bank sponsored Stabilisation Plan, radically changing the Spanish economy, opening it up to foreign capital and abandoning the “disastrous”, failed policies of the Primer Franquismo which together with confused and incoherent political policies towards cooperatives, had left little trace of the original cooperative movement that the regime inherited twenty years earlier.¹⁹ 1959 therefore

provides a logical time in which to end this research. Both the Spanish economy and gradually the consumer cooperative movement would be able to advance as department stores slowly replaced the small-scale shops that dominated the movement.²⁰

Consumer Cooperation under Franco: attempts to restructure and the effects of the new regime's legislation

In 1939, the new political regime was installed in Catalonia following the abolition of the Generalitat and the firing of the vast majority of regional and local government employees. What ensued was an initial “provisional period in which repression took priority over institutional consolidation.”²¹ Catalonia was essentially an occupied state. The Falange had enjoyed minimal popularity in Catalonia before the war. It was only with the consolidation of the regime from 1946 onwards, that this violent interim period gradually began to end, and a limited level of tolerance was introduced. This explains the delays and confusion suffered by the consumer cooperatives during these years.

Until 1942, the Central Nacional Sindicalista (CNS), a Department of the Ministry of Trade Union Organisation and Action which included the Head of Cooperative Services (Precursor to the OSC) was responsible for cooperation.²² Immediately after the defeat of the Republic, some cooperators who had been active in the movement during the Republic but were also sympathetic to the new regime, tried to reorganise the Federation. In March, 1939, a Management Commission was created within the Federation to organise the movement in line with the new state regulations. The resurgence of the Federation clearly did not fit into the plans of the CNS and no more was heard of the Commission. In April 1940, the Catalan Provincial Governor General appointed an investigative judge to look into all those "who have held, have been exercising or are proposed for the exercise of positions of management, direction and administration" of cooperatives affiliated to the CNS - in effect, all those looking to become legally accepted by the new regime.²³ The cooperatives and the individuals involved were obliged to provide all the data requested by the judge, failure to do so was tantamount to an acceptance of guilt. In July, 1939, cooperatives were granted a period of three months to comply with the Franco regime's Cooperatives Law of 27 October, 1938. The law had been passed while Catalonia was still part

of the Republic and it appears that many cooperatives were completely unaware of its existence. The economic and political chaos of the immediate post-war period plus the repression and the legal persecution only exacerbated the situation.

The cooperatives' confusion regarding the legislation was undoubtedly one of the reasons for the 1942 Cooperative Law and the restructuring of the cooperative movement at both the national and provincial levels. This legislation defined the hierarchical structure of the Francoist cooperative movement with decisions being passed down from the State, to the OSE, then to the OSC, the UTECO and finally at the bottom the cooperatives who were legally bound to join their local UTECO.²⁴ The OSE was responsible for cooperation at a national level but was not a "protagonist in the definition nor the implementation" of economic policy, this was left in the hands of the Government.²⁵ As part of its social responsibilities the OSE created nine Obras Sindicales to carry out "support services" which included the Obra Sindical de Cooperacion (OSC).²⁶ The OSC and its regional branches were merely "collaborators and the material executors" of decisions taken at government level and then passed down to the OSE. The OSC was in turn responsible for the National Union of Consumer Cooperatives (UNCC) and territorial unions (UTECS) across the country, which were also created under the new law. Of the nine Obras Sindicales the OSC received the least financial assistance from the OSE, just 0.73% of the overall budget for the support work programmes, while most went to agrarian cooperation which was of far greater interest to the regime than consumer cooperation.²⁷ It is clear that there were severe economic restraints on the OSC and hence the UTECO's activities, an important factor given its constant financial difficulties.²⁸ Presiding over the OSC was the Civil Governor and OSE Provincial Delegate who had the right, which was implemented in certain cases, to request reports relating to members of the cooperatives' Governing Boards and, on one occasion, the UTECO Board itself.

According to the 1942 Cooperative Law, consumer cooperatives were "non-profit associations" which meant that cooperatives could not "have reserves or common funds which allowed them to face future challenges", especially in relation to modernisation or new investments.²⁹ As shall be seen, this hugely limited the movement's ability to progress. The main aim of consumer cooperatives under the regime, according to the

Head of the UNCC, Fernandez Crehuet, was simply to help regulate prices, while for Giménez Torres, Head of the Catalan OSC, cooperation provided the poor in society with “an adequate supply” of basic goods “at accessible prices.”³⁰ Following the 1942 Law, consumer cooperation effectively became a government-controlled social service for the distribution of affordable goods to the working class. The centralist and antidemocratic form of cooperation outlined by the 1942 Law violated the basic Rochdalean principles, which were at the core of the International Cooperative movement, to such an extent that Spain was expelled from the International Cooperative Alliance.

The creation of the UTECO and the impact of the 1942 Cooperative Law

With many leading Federation members from the Republic era imprisoned, having fled abroad or keeping a low profile, elements more acceptable to the new regime came to the fore, although this did not necessarily mean they rejected all aspects of the Federation, especially the basic Rochdale principles. The UTECO in Barcelona was not a completely new organisation but rather one that emerged from the remnants of the Federation and, in particular, the Barcelona Cooperative Union (UCB). In April, 1939, a Barcelona Cooperative Union (UCB) Governing Board was appointed, which included Miguel Gavin, an active member of the Requete, a catholic paramilitary organisation loyal to Franco. Three months later, in July, a circular from the CNS required all the 52 individual cooperatives that had come together to form the UCB in 1936, to tell them whether they wished to remain as part of the UCB or not. The UCB cooperatives decided to dissolve the UCB. In April, 1940, a UCB Liquidation Commission was formed to carry out the legal requirements for cooperatives in Barcelona to become independent once again. In the same month, a Provincial Liaison Delegation for Cooperative Consumer Services was also created, which appears simply to have been a continuation of the UCB Liquidation Commission and whose main role was to administer the quotas of items assigned to cooperatives which were subject to official rationing - in effect, it controlled the entire distribution of rationing to cooperatives. Two months later, in June, a Regional Cooperatives Assembly was held which officially founded the UTECO. However, given the nature of the attempts to organise the movement over the previous

three years, there were delays in the system of approving the UTECO statutes, which in turn delayed the drawing up of its final constitution until its first general meeting in November, 1946.

According to the 1942 Cooperative Law, the UTECO had the tasks of “promoting, directing and, where appropriate, carrying out cooperative activity: ... promoting and facilitating the operation of statistical services; and interacting with the other unions.”³¹ In reality, over the following years “promoting” would take a very distant second place behind “defending”. Beyond this, any other activity that related to studies, publications as well as the collection of statistical data, was very limited. Interaction with other provincial unions was also limited and Governing Boards’ meetings’ minutes and correspondence focused almost entirely on events in the Barcelona Province or directives from above. The cooperatives had to request permission from the OSC to hold general meetings, present the minutes of these meetings to the OSC, and provide it with the names of their Governing Board members for approval, as well as its balance sheets.³² The UTECO was administered by a five-member Governing Board whose members had to be proposed by provincial cooperatives and then approved by the OSC, although it did not always work that way. In fact, until 1957, they were appointed by the Provincial Delegate and then approved at an assembly by the cooperatives. According to the Regulations that accompanied the Law (published in February, 1944), members of the Governing Board had to be members of the Falange, the official party of the Francoist state, although it seems, at least at first, that this was not enforced in Catalonia, perhaps a reflection of the party’s initial weakness in the region and in the consumer cooperative movement in particular.³³ The Governing Board also had to have a religious advisor although none was appointed until 1949 demonstrating the lack of urgency with which the law was followed.

Despite its many limitations, the Barcelona UTECO represented the only body made up of cooperative members that presided over cooperatives and represented them vis-a-vis the Francoist authorities. To those above them in the hierarchy, it was responsible for keeping the OSC, both provincial and national, up-to-date on the problems faced by cooperatives. It also provided reports on cooperatives that had been seized for alleged political irregularities, or who were experiencing hardship, or having difficulties following having been recently created, etc. For cooperatives, the UTECO’s responsibilities included giving them financial aid if they were experiencing economic problems and, when it could not help financially, it offered support, help and advice.

As will be seen, during the 1940s, the UTECO was kept busy with these issues, but it also had the responsibility, given to it by the CNS, for the rationing system put in place by the government following the Civil War which would continue until 1952.

Given the scarcity of information on the subject, and perhaps due to the UTECO's very limited financial resources, there is little precise information on membership of the UTECO. A list of consumer cooperatives provided by the UNCC in 1944 claims that there were 131 in the Barcelona province.³⁴ A report from 1957 states 110 of the 185 cooperatives that had enrolled in the UTECO were active: 63 had closed down, 13 were in the process of doing so and one was awaiting government approval. Total membership was 22,642 and the report makes clear that since 1947 there had been no significant increase of members.³⁵ In comparison, in 1938, the year before Franco seized power, membership of the UCB was 98,000 which, of course, only includes cooperatives within the city of Barcelona.³⁶

The First UTECO Governing Board, March, 1942 to March, 1953

The new UTECO, founded at the Regional Assembly in 1942, initially covered the whole of Catalonia although from 1946, it was divided into four representing the four provinces. This article focuses on the Barcelona Province. The first Governing Board of the Barcelona province UTECO claimed to be "the logical successor and continuation of the Catalan Federation of Cooperatives and, therefore, a continuation of the organisms created by the Catalan cooperative movement since 1899", albeit a depoliticised version that had been 'purified' along regime lines.³⁷ Its members sought to save the movement which they had helped to build and maintain the progress made by the Federation, especially in relation to production, wholesale purchasing and inter-cooperative collaboration. This would rapidly become impossible and the majority of their efforts concentrated on saving the cooperatives themselves from extinction due to the complicated economic situation, the state's political and legal intrusion and unfriendly elements in the OSE.

Many cooperators active in the Federation and the UCB before the regime change, found positions in the UTECO. In the first Governing Board, chaired by Miguel Gavin, were Ramón Batlle (President of the UCB

during the Civil War) and Adolfo Tobías, while the secretariat was run by Alfonso Cortinas, who had been a UCB official during the Civil War. In addition, the Cooperative Inspection, Press and Propaganda services, established later, were entrusted to Miquel Mestres and Julí Blanquer (erstwhile director of *Accion Cooperatista*, the Federation's newspaper).

From its inception, the UTECO had to face a series of obstacles, both political and economic, resulting from the policies of the Francoist regime. The Law of Political Responsibilities passed on 3 February, 1939, declared that all those who had supported the Republican Popular Front Government and all those who did not support the military uprising of July, 1936, (including those who were noncommittal about it), were guilty of military rebellion and this was used to justify the seizure of cooperatives assets.³⁸ In February, 1943, the number of cooperatives subject to seizure proceedings for alleged political responsibilities offences was more than 40.³⁹ The UTECO's attempts to help the cooperatives often made the OSE authorities suspicious. As early as 1942, the Governing Board complained about the "unfavourable treatment" it received from local authorities.⁴⁰ Two years later, the UTECO regretted "the usual misunderstanding" shown by the authorities for the work it was carrying out after the Provincial Delegation of the OSE complained that the UTECO Governing Board was not being sufficiently diligent in its investigations into the ideology of some members of the cooperative governing boards in the region.⁴¹ In 1951, following the UTECO's defence of the governing board of a cooperative in Prats del Rey, an "information agent" from the Falange visited the UTECO offices inquiring about the background of each and every one of the governing board members before visiting all of them personally.⁴² The UTECO Governing Board complained about the inappropriateness of the action, especially when the cooperative managers had already been the subject of multiple inquiries previously. It added that this constant suspicion created an atmosphere in which many leading cooperativists avoided accepting managerial positions – something that the movement, having already lost many prominent figures during and after the Civil War, could ill afford.

Given the repression of the 1940s, lack of expertise may be one of the reasons why the authorities appeared relatively tolerant to the first Governing Board which survived for over a decade despite conflict with the OSE, delays in appointing a religious advisor, and the fact that some of UTECO's employees, such as

Mestre and Blanquer had been members of leftist parties during the Republic. Perhaps this was because members had years of experience in the cooperative movement and were best suited to help organise the rationing policy that was the UTECO's main task during their tenure - the Governing Board was quickly replaced once rationing finished. A further reason could be the local Falangists' lack of interest: in the 1940s, relationships with the Falange were generally related to the confiscation of patrimony, suggesting that the party's interest may have been more in acquiring property from the cooperatives than in cooperation itself.

The UTECO was responsible for the rationing system introduced by the new regime which did not always work smoothly. In 1942, the UTECO complained that many consumer cooperatives had been deprived of rationed items, in some cases in their entirety.⁴³ The situation improved, but was not completely resolved as the UTECO continued to complain about delays in supplying products, their quality and quantity. During the rationing period, which continued until 1952, the UTECO both stocked, supplied and distributed the rationed goods. To do so, it ordered products each year but had to pay before receiving them, for which was necessary to negotiate bank loans. Cooperatives also had to pay the UTECO a week before receiving the items. Delays in payment often resulted in the UTECO intervening in the cooperatives to secure payment or in the worst cases, withholding the supply of goods. The rationing program provided a lifeline to the cooperatives, creating both a captive market and goods in a difficult economic situation, but dependence on this caused serious problems once it ended. The cooperatives that survived were unable to modernise and their goods were not always of the highest standards, they were therefore uncompetitive. This was one of the main reasons for the movement's stagnation in the 1950s at a time where elsewhere in Europe cooperatives were enjoying "a relatively privileged situation" thanks to their innovation in self-service.⁴⁴ Most cooperatives were in debt, as indeed was the UTECO, the only real source that any financial help could come from.

Debt was a constant and growing problem for the UTECO and cooperatives throughout the period of the first Governing Board and beyond. The UTECO dedicated a huge amount of money in a failed attempt to try and save Productos COOP, the union of the Federation's second grade production cooperatives (pasta for soups, chocolate, soap, coal, paper bags and carbonated waters). Due to rationing, the former Federation flagship was suffering from a shortage of the goods it needed to produce products. In debt up to the hilt, unable to invest to

update its archaic facilities and with its client base limited by the economic situation and legislation, it was testament to the importance that the first Governing Board gave it that it lasted so long, finally going into liquidation in 1954.

Productos Coop was just one of the cooperatives that the UTECO tried to help. The UTECO's main responsibility was to monitor the cooperatives' activity so that if a cooperative was in trouble, the UTECO would check its balance sheets to find out the cause. Initially, it would offer nothing but advice, but when some of the larger cooperatives began to experience difficulties due to alleged mismanagement, it created an Inspection Service for those most affected. The Inspection Service representative, Miquel Mestres, analysed the balance sheets trying to find out the cause of the problems and advised how they should proceed to solve them. The inspection lasted a few months and was normally requested voluntarily by the cooperative, although rejecting one that had been proposed by the UTECO could result in punishment. By the mid to late 1940s, numerous important cooperatives in Barcelona were under an inspection regime, including the cooperative, Flor de Mayo, its largest and most successful cooperative, whose property included a number of branches as well as a farm.⁴⁵ After spending an excessive amount trying to save the cooperative, the UTECO finally decided that it would provide no more and in late 1946 and in May, 1947, the Flor de Mayo went into liquidation.⁴⁶

Members of the Flor de Mayo created three new, small cooperatives: La Familiar, La Popular Sansense and La Forpiense. Significantly, only one other new cooperative was created during the years covered: La Puntual de Sans in 1945. After 1947, "there is nothing to highlight of interest regarding the merger or formation of new Barcelona consumer cooperatives."⁴⁷ Given the economic context and the limitations placed on the cooperatives by the 1942 Cooperative Law, "the initiatives that induced (people) to create cooperatives disappeared."⁴⁸

The final blow to the first Governing Board's tenure came in 1951 when the UTECO invested heavily in a project to create a mercantile-type factory, Indivisa, to make liquor. To a large extent, its involvement was an attempt to make money to help with its financial problems but soon the Governing Board was complaining of irregularities committed by the factory manager and decided to sell its shares.⁴⁹ However, this proved impossible and the UTECO ended up losing more than twice what it had initially invested.

The UTECO's catastrophic financial situation, caused by the problems at Indivisa, the aid provided to Productos Coop and cooperatives in general, was perhaps the principal reason for the resignation of its first Governing Board in March, 1953, after 11 years of activity. However, the timing of the decision suggests other factors were at play as well. For example, the First Governing Board's main objective had been to try to save many cooperative values that existed before 1939. This had been evident on a number of occasions, but no more so than with the creation of the Centre of Cooperative Studies by around 50 cooperativists in May, 1952. The Centre's founders, predominantly cooperativists whose trajectory went back to the Republic, aimed to educate new cooperative members in order to replace those that had left the movement but, in reality, to create a new generation of cooperators. According to Perez Baró, who was a member, the influence of the Rochdaleian principles were clearly evident and the Centre was closed down in the same month, the Governing Board resigned following complaints and at the request of the provincial leader of the OSC.⁵⁰ Another factor in the Governing Board's demise was the changing economic climate, the end of rationing and the partial opening up of the economy which led to the OSE having a greater interest in the movement's activities and a clear attempt to organise both the UTECO, and cooperatives generally, in a way that would benefit Franco's National Syndical supporters in the regional government.⁵¹

It would be easy to criticise the naive optimism apparent in many of the first Governing Board's actions, but it contained old-school cooperators who continued to believe in the emancipatory capacity of cooperation. Also, its perseverance in the face of insurmountable adversity must be admired: the Franco regime was never going to let them prosper. However, although the vast majority of its fundamental problems were not of its own creation, many of the solutions it adopted only made the situation worse.

Subsequent UTECO Governing Boards and National Syndical cooperation, 1953 to 1959

Jorge Coma Casanova, head of the regional OSC, became the new UTECO Governing Board's president. His presidency, from April, 1953 to May, 1954, represents the end of the UTECO's attempts to maintain some form of limited continuation from pre-Francoist cooperation and the beginning of a Falangist

National Syndicalist approach being foisted on the movement. The main characteristic of National Syndicalist policy was the imposition of a clearly hierarchical order: decisions were made from the top and the cooperatives were expected to follow them. After the first Governing Board's first 11 years, the next six years was a period of constant changes in UTECO Governing Boards as the regional OSC leadership sought to impose its ideas and plans upon the movement. Indeed, the successive OSC regional presidents were also UTECO Governing Board presidents and paid little attention to the opinions of either the other Governing Board members or of the cooperatives themselves.

The second Governing Board inherited a disastrous economic situation which was made even worse by Coma Casanova's mismanagement. He immediately launched what would undoubtedly be the most ambitious, but also the most ill-thought-out project in the short history of the UTECO: the Central Sindical Cooperativa Barcelonesa (CSCB). Coma Casanova believed that the CSCB would act as a central cooperative that would form a network of distribution centres for all cooperatives in the capital. A building in the Ramblas was acquired as its headquarters, with a fortune being spent on renovations before its inauguration in January, 1954, but by March the work was abandoned due to lack of money.⁵² The CSCB constitution assembly was held in April and Coma Casanova almost immediately resigned complaining about lack of funds to continue his projects.⁵³ The CSCB collapsed within a year exacerbating the UTECO's financial situation. It had provoked "suspicions and animosities" and the opposition of many OSE leaders in the region, undoubtedly because it clashed with the interests of other private companies as well as sectors of the OSE. The CSCB was Coma Casanova's own project (although with the approval of the national Head of the OCS), so much so that the other members of the second Governing Board complained of having been kept "outside the decisions" he made.⁵⁴ The CSCB was Coma Casanova's mistake but the consequences fell on the UTECO and its second Governing Board was forced to resign.

The Barcelona province cooperatives were not impressed with the new direction the UTECO was taking and complained at a meeting held in early June, 1954, that they too had been effectively ignored by the leadership for the last year and a half. They threatened to withhold the election of a new, third, Governing Board until they had been informed of the UTECO's true financial situation and that the Head of the OSC

would take responsibility for the payment of the debts. After some “vague promises,” the cooperatives relented and agreed to nominate members to the third Governing Board except for its President, the Head of the provincial OSC, Narcisso Amer, who appears to have appointed himself.⁵⁵

The third UTECO Governing Board, (May, 1954, to November, 1956), accepted, in the short term at least, its failure to control the movement without effectively listening to it, and sought new methods of organising wholesale purchasing and cooperative leaders were asked for their opinions. This resulted in representatives of 23 provincial cooperatives signing a letter which set down how they felt the movement should progress. According to Perez Baró, the letter contained a clear affirmation of “Rochdalean principles”, requesting that cooperatives should have more independence and would be able to adopt collective projects rather than having ideas imposed from above.⁵⁶ The relative independence that this would give cooperatives was evidently not to the national leadership’s liking and the only solid result of the negotiations was the creation, some two years later, of a Purchasing Board that, as shall be seen, caused more problems than it resolved.

In the latter half of the 1950s the UTECO appeared less active in that the third Governing Board meetings were less frequent - sometimes months passed without a meeting. Having achieved little, the decision to replace the Governing Board members was made by Eduardo Riaza, the new Head of the Provincial OSC. He was acting alone and had to wait for new board members to be approved by the OSC in Madrid having been nominated by the cooperatives at an Assembly in November, 1955. OSC approval was not granted until March, 1956 and the UTECO therefore was without a Governing Board for three months. The President of this new, the fourth, Governing Board was Antonio Hernández, a member of a local cooperative - the first time since 1953 that the position was not held by the head of the provincial OSC. Yet this did not mean that the cooperatives held sway in policy decisions as the problems created by the newly constituted Purchasing Board demonstrated.

The reports of the fourth Governing Board’s meetings show clearly their anger at the behaviour of Juan Vila, Director of this new Purchasing Board, who was supposed to report and answer to them. It reached such a height that in February, 1958, the members resigned in protest.⁵⁷ Vila, did not keep the UTECO informed of his actions and criticised the Governing Board on several occasions to both the UNCC and the provincial

cooperatives.⁵⁸ It appears that Vila had the support of the UNCC and their support for his actions were another example of rule from above, with the National Union in Madrid bypassing the Barcelona one.

Yet another new Governing Board, the fifth, was elected in April, 1958, with Hernandez continuing as president. However, its first official meeting was not until October but this time the delay was caused by the OSC taking a long time to approve the new Governing Board's members. Hernandez was then forced to resign after being expelled from his cooperative, as well as from the Governing Board, apparently after Vila had criticised his actions to the UTECO.⁵⁹ In February, his replacement, Pablo Gelfin, and the whole Governing Board resigned again due to problems with the Purchasing Board.⁶⁰ The Purchasing Board finally was shut down in 1959. In short, during the six years following the resignation of the First Governing Board in March 1953, the provincial UTECO appeared to be in chaos. The minutes of Board meetings do not give details but the inability to deal with the financial problems of previous years, coupled with an apparent disinterest, mistrust or perhaps even hostility from the OSC and the UNCC, resulted in ineffective leadership.

The failure of almost 20 years of consumer cooperativism under the Franco regime was made evident in a UTECO report on 'The Development of the Cooperative Movement in Barcelona between 1942 and 1957', published by the provincial OSC in 1957 – indeed the brevity of a report that covers so many years almost speaks for itself. The report claimed that since 1942, consumer cooperatives had “followed a descending curve” and were by 1957 in “in a situation of stagnation”.⁶¹ Precise figures relating to the movement are scarce but Perez Baró calculated that in 1954 the cooperatives in Barcelona carried out business worth only one fifth of what they did in 1934.⁶² The OSC report concluded that the UTECO had failed as a governing and tutelary body, noting that the movement was characterised by antiquated procedures, an aging membership and a reduction in business activity. It also noted the continued “attachment to traditional cooperative spirit.”⁶³ Unsurprising given that under the influence of the Rochdalean principles the movement had begun to flourish yet, quite clearly under the Franco regime, it had almost collapsed in the 1940s and the surviving cooperatives were now simply treading water.

Conclusion

The cooperative movement that the cooperatives themselves had built up from 1899 to 1939, based on the Rochdale principles that had achieved international recognition in the ICA, had all but collapsed within the first 15 years of the Franco regime. The Federation was replaced and many of the cooperatives 'purified' of elements unacceptable to the new regime, but the first UTECO Governing Board not only claimed to be a continuation of the Federation, but also included members who had been active within it. The continuing influence of these ideals was evident throughout the period of the first Governing Board, which fought a desperate struggle to save what they felt could be saved of the earlier cooperative movement and even tried, with the creation of the Centre for Cooperative studies, to propagate its basic principles. Yet traditional Rochdalean cooperatives could not survive the economic collapse of Spain after the Civil War and the legal straitjacket created by the 1942 Cooperative Law. The limits placed on profits, severely restricted the effectiveness of the cooperative system resulting in, almost always, negative balances, debts that increased year after year and consequently the need to mortgage assets or rent branches or premises to earn money. To a large extent it was only their role in the rationing system that kept many cooperatives afloat and many faltered and collapsed. The UTECO invested heavily in trying to save key cooperatives, but it only succeeded in creating an ever-increasing debt problem, not helped by the disastrous Indivisa project although, perhaps, the UTECO would never have become involved if it had not been so desperate to solve its financial crisis. Mismanagement played a role, both at provincial level and in the decisions of many cooperatives although this often resulted from attempts to overcome the difficult economic situation which was exacerbated by the limitations placed on the movement by Francoist cooperative legislation. Despite their intentions, the result of the first Governing Board's eleven years was little short of disastrous: cooperatives had closed, including the flagship, Flor de Mayo, second-grade production had disappeared with Productos Coop, branches had been closed and property sold or mortgaged to pay ever-increasing debts.

The first Governing Board's less than glowing record, combined with the changing economic policies, resulted in an abrupt change of direction. From 1953, the OSC redefined cooperative policy along National Syndicalist lines, as evidenced, from 1953 to 1958, in the head of the OSC also being President of the UTECO.

This period was characterised by a hierarchical approach in which the UTECO Governing Board and the cooperatives were overlooked – to such an extent that new Board nominations were twice delayed for months for no apparent reason. The CSCB project and Juan Vila’s conduct when he was Director of the Purchasing Board, provide further examples of the high-handed and unrepresentative nature of decision making during this period. The result was that consumer cooperation in Catalonia was stagnant; a movement previously based on economic and social justice that had been looking to expand its influence in both sectors with the aim of replacing the competitive nature of capitalist society with one based on cooperation, had been gradually stripped of its ideology, had seen its channels for economic growth blocked, and was reduced to little more than a neighbourhood-based safety-net for the victims of the poverty caused by the failed economic policies of the Francoist regime. Individual cooperatives that survived were unable to expand and had insufficient means to modernise and adapt to the changing economic situation. Bartolome Aragon's desire had in large part been realised and by 1959 although rather than being allowed to die, the Franco regime had scarcely allowed the consumer cooperative movement in Catalonia to live.

¹ Garner, “Història del moviment cooperatiu”.

² Navarro Catalán, ‘Cooperativismo en el Nacional Sindicalismo’ and Miguel Gavin Sagardia, jefe de la UTECO quoted in *Cooperación*, June - July, 1944.

³ Perez Baró, *Història de les cooperatives*, 132.

⁴ Specific decisions or arguments in meetings are sourced in the text as UTECO GB with a specific date, however many situations and policies were developed in numerous different meetings making sourcing these problematic beyond clarifying that all information, unless otherwise stated, is based on the archives.

⁵ Medina-Albaladejo, “Consumer Co-operatives in Spain”, 326.

⁶ See Ventosa i Roig, “El moviment Cooperatiu”, Pérez Baró, *Història de les cooperatives*, Medina-Albadalejo, “Consumer Co-operatives in Spain” and Reventós, *El movimiento Cooperativo*.

⁷ See Duch i Plana, *La Cooperativa Obrera Tarraconense*; Casanovas i Prat *El Cooperativisme a Osona*; Dalmau and Miró, *Les cooperatives obreres de Sants and Plana i Gabernet, El Cooperativisme CATALA*.

⁸ Garau Rolandi “Cooperativismo en la historiografía española” and Medina-Albadalejo and Pujol-Andreu, “Cooperativas de consumo y niveles de vida”.

⁹ Perez Baró *Història de les cooperatives and Joaniquet*, “Movimiento Cooperativo en Catalunya”.

¹⁰ Bernal Garcia *El sindicalismo vertical*, 594.

¹¹ For Agrarian cooperatives see Piñana Edo, *Joan Mestre i Mestre*.

¹² For the ERC see Plana i Gabernet, *El Cooperativisme CATALA* and for the USC see Garner, “En defensa de la pura doctrina cooperative”.

¹³ Gómez Bravo “Venganza tras la victoria” and Di Febo and Santos, *El Franquismo*, 14.

¹⁴ Di Febo and Santos, *El Franquismo*, 26.

¹⁵ Di Febo and Santos, *El Franquismo*, 29.

¹⁶ García Delgado, “Estancamiento Industrial”, 173.

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- ¹⁷ Barciela, “El mercado negro” and “Autarquía y Mercado Negro”.
- ¹⁸ Barciela, “Autarquía y Mercado Negro”.
- ¹⁹ Viñas, “El Plan de Estabilización” and Garcia Delgado, “Estancamiento Industrial,” 189.
- ²⁰ Gabriel Plana, “La Guerra i la dictadura”.
- ²¹ Marín, *Història del franquisme*.
- ²² Letter from the Management Commission of the Federation of Cooperatives of Catalonia, Barcelona, March, 1939, Archive of the Cooperativa La Rubinenca.
- ²³ Circulars 28, 30 and 35 of the Cooperativa La Rubinenca, 1946.
- ²⁴ Delegación Provincial de Sindicatos de Barcelona, *Ley de Cooperación*, Article 3; Bengoechea, “The bourgeoisie and Francoist corporation”; Molinero and Ysas, “Workers under Franco” and Gimenez Martinez, “El sindicalismo vertical”.
- ²⁵ Gimenez Martinez, “El sindicalismo vertical”.
- ²⁶ Bernal Garcia, *El sindicalismo vertical*, 590-591.
- ²⁷ Perfecto García, “El Nacional-Sindicalismo”.
- ²⁸ Bernal García, *El sindicalismo vertical*, 591-4.
- ²⁹ Rousell y Albóniga, *Historia de las cooperativas*, 16.
- ³⁰ Fernández Crehuet, ‘Las Cooperativas de Consumo y la política de regularización de precios’, *Cooperación* April, 1954, and Giménez Torres (Head of the Catalan OSC), ‘Reunión del Consejo Superior de la OSC’, *Cooperación*, April-May, 1953.
- ³¹ Delegación Provincial de Sindicatos de Barcelona, *Ley de Cooperación*, Article 50 and *Reglamento*, Articles 51 and 54.
- ³² UTECO GB, 28 May, 1945.
- ³³ The initial Board members might have been required to join the Party, but there is no evidence to prove this.
- ³⁴ Relación de Cooperativas de Consumo constituidas hasta la fecha, *Cooperación*, April, 1944.
- ³⁵ Jefatura provincial de la OSC, *Estudio resumen*.
- ³⁶ La Unió de Cooperadors de Barcelona, en el seu segon aniversari, *Acció Cooperatista*, 23 September, 1938.
- ³⁷ UTECO GB, 23 March, 1942.
- ³⁸ Marín *Història del franquisme*, 96.
- ³⁹ The subject is dealt with by the UTECO GB throughout 1946.
- ⁴⁰ UTECO GB, 1 June, 1942
- ⁴¹ UTECO GB, 9 October, 1944.
- ⁴² UTECO GB, 17 September, 1951.
- ⁴³ *UTECO Circular*, 19 October, 1942.
- ⁴⁴ Jefatura provincial de la OSC, *Estudio resumen* and Brazda and Schedlwy, “Esbozo histórico”.
- ⁴⁵ Marín, De 1939 a 1975.
- ⁴⁶ UTECO GB, 27 November and 16 December, 1946.
- ⁴⁷ Ciurana Fernández, “La posibilidad de desarrollo de las cooperativas”.
- ⁴⁸ Rousell and Alboniga, *Historia de las cooperativas*, 16.
- ⁴⁹ UTECO GB, 11 August, 1952
- ⁵⁰ “Lo que fue el Centro de Estudios Cooperativos de Barcelona”, article written for the journal, *Arco Iris*, by Albert Perez Baró (who was a member of the Centre) available in the Manuel Serra i Moret Archives.
- ⁵¹ UTECO GB, 11 April 1953.
- ⁵² UTECO GB, 16 September, 1953 and 14 January, 1954
- ⁵³ UTECO GB, 6 May, 1954
- ⁵⁴ UTECO GB, 11 March, 1954.
- ⁵⁵ Perez Baró, “Cooperación de ayer y de hoy,” *Revista de Cooperacion* (Buenos Aires), May/June, 1956.
- ⁵⁶ Perez Baró, “Cooperación de ayer”.
- ⁵⁷ UTECO GB, 21 March 1958.
- ⁵⁸ UTECO GB, 4 and 25 November, 1958.
- ⁵⁹ UTECO GB, 22 and 29 December, 1958.
- ⁶⁰ UTECO GB, 5 February, 1959.

⁶¹ Jefatura provincial de la OSC, *Estudio resumen*.

⁶² Perez Baró, “Cooperación de ayer”.

⁶³ Jefatura provincial de la OSC, *Estudio resumen*.

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