

Franz Oppenheimer's Contribution to the Theory of Co-operation

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IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE dealing with the subject of co-operative societies, one rarely encounters a reference to the German scholar Franz Oppenheimer. Particularly in the English speaking world, the attempt to introduce his theoretical and practical contributions to the subject is an exploration in the realms of terra incognita. In the following, my object will be not only an exposition of his writings on co-operatives but also the claim that it remains worthwhile to consider his approach, even though his studies date from the turn of the century. Oppenheimer is deserving of interest particularly because in his writings two skills are combined which do not often coincide in co-operative literature: on one hand he was a devout believer in economic and social co-operation; he was a committed member of the co-operative community, a co-operative fundamentalist, one might say. On the other hand, as an economist and sociological scholar, Oppenheimer was a trenchant critic of co-operative theory and practice. He was no respecter of the will to believe, which has long inspired, and continues to inform, so much discussion of co-operation.¹

Oppenheimer was thus the most radical critic of co-operatives; yet he mounted his arguments from within the ranks of the movement. A serious consideration of Oppenheimer will thus serve to bridge the gaps which characterize the debates between co-operative idealists who construe co-operation as something of a civil religion engaged in the effort of founding a non-capitalist, but still liberal, way to run an economy, and those co-operative pragmatists who view these enterprises as a limited but useful device to constitute economic develop-

1. Earlier versions of this paper have been presented at conferences of the Canadian Association for Studies in Co-operation in Ottawa, and the International Communal Studies Association in Tel Aviv.

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ment, consumer organization, or wholesale co-operation within the capitalist economy.

In saying that Oppenheimer has not been recognized in the English speaking world, one must make a singular exception. His book *The State*, published in Germany as early as 1908, and regarded as an early sociological classic, enjoyed wide attention when it was translated into English in the early 1920s.² The book is an exposition of the author's aim to interpret world history within a systematically sociological argument. The text did spur some discussion and substantial research in the field of anthropology (MacLeod 1924; Lowie 1927; Becker/Barnes 1978: 721-30; Sorokin 1928: 483-87). Since the twenties, Oppenheimer's text has been republished several times, but it has never been the best-selling dream of publishers. Oppenheimer was accorded some recognition in anarchist³ and libertarian discourses,⁴ but was generally ignored within the mainstream of sociological debate.⁵ And no reference to *The State* is to be found within co-operativist discussions.

Within the German debates on co-operatives, Oppenheimer is an outsider as well. In the comprehensive German language publications on the theory and practice of co-operation, Oppenheimer has been recognized, if at all, only as a peripheral figure. Werner Wilhelm Engelhard's *Allgemeine Ideengeschichte des Genossenschaftswesens* (roughly: 'The Evolution of Co-operative Ideas,' 1985) does not refer to Oppenheimer at all. In Hermann Faust's well known *Geschichte der Genossenschaftsbewegung* ('History of the Co-operative Movement') Oppenheimer was accorded only an occasional, and brief, mention (1977: 57-58). The German mainstream has mistakenly regarded his theory as the criticism of an outsider expressing little but a Lassallean skepticism about co-operatives. Oppenheimer's practical attempts, unsuccessful as they were, have gone unrecognized. The billet d'entree into co-operative debate was, and is, a certain co-operative idealism, a devotion to the

2. *The Selected Writings of Franz Oppenheimer* (Gordon Press Publishers, 1973) is listed in Books in Print, April 1993, but is unavailable from institutional sources in Canada. After his emigration to the U.S., Oppenheimer published several articles in English in 1943 and 1944-45.

3. Cf. the 1975 edition (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1975) with an introduction by Chuck Hamilton.

4. In 1972 a publication of *The State* was included in the series: "Right Wing Individualistic Tradition in America."

5. In the literature treating the history of sociology outside of Germany, Oppenheimer has not been given much notice. Harry Elmer Barnes in his *Introduction to the History of Sociology* (1948) has ranked Oppenheimer among the "Leading Sociologists in Germanic Countries." Paul Honigheim's article, "The Sociological Theories of Franz Oppenheimer: An Agrarian Philosophy of History and Social Reform," included in the above text, strikes a more sceptical note.

form. As seen from the establishment perspective of the German co-operative movement, Oppenheimer was viewed as someone who failed to pay the appropriate lip service.

Only among a younger generation, during the revival of co-operatives in the seventies and eighties within the new social movements, did Oppenheimer enjoy a renewed attention. The emergence of a new literature partly considers him in the role of one of the lesser-known founding fathers of sociology in Germany (Haselbach 1985) with a strong affiliation to middle class social movements. In other works (Novy 1980, Schwendter 1975), Oppenheimer was used to warn the admirers and practitioners of the newly emergent urban and rural communes and of the "alternative' enterprises" (Schwendter, ed. 1986; Haselbach 1985a, Schwendter 1989)⁶ against an excess of enthusiasm. With his strict theoretical stance on the contradictions of a co-operative reconstruction within a capitalist economy, his writings, within a marxist atmosphere of economic critique, proved useful during these years as a source of reflective critique. When this new co-operative movement began to die out in the 1980s, interest in Oppenheimer again came to an end.

In the following pages, I will begin with a brief biographical sketch of Oppenheimer. The following section will outline Oppenheimer's general economic and sociological approach and contextualize it within German theoretical debates at the turn of the century. Part three will entail a more specific discussion of Oppenheimer's ideas on co-operatives. Particular attention will be given to his two primary findings: his modeling of the rural *settlement co-operative* (*Siedlungsgenossenschaft*), and his *Law of Transformation*. I will argue that these findings are still worthy of theoretical consideration. Prior to the conclusion, I will consider some of Oppenheimer's practical initiatives in the perspective of political developments and lines of influence.

I.

Franz Oppenheimer was born in 1864 into a Jewish family in Berlin; his father was a philosopher and orientalist by training, and worked as a rabbi for the *Berliner Jüdische Reformgemeinde*, the Jewish reform community.⁷ After a study of medicine and some years of practice in a proletarian neighborhood of Berlin, where Oppenheimer, as he claimed, learned what the "social question" was about, he became more and

6. Having to come to terms with German welfare state capitalism as early as 1959 when it issued its famous Godesberg papers, the Social Democratic Party launched a new program of co-operative reform in the 1980's; see SPD, ed., 1985.

7. For this and the following, cf. Oppenheimer's autobiography (1964).

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more involved in the new social movements of his time. In the last decade of the 19th century Oppenheimer made his living as a journalist and as an activist in a number of groups discussing and practising non-marxist ways of overcoming capitalism. Of particular importance to these groups was Henry George's new physiocratic theories, the idea of a *co-operative economy*, and the question of *ethical reform*.

The groups involved in these activities were, in political and economic terms, on the defensive. Small scale businesses, and economically dependent academic professions (such as teachers), tended to view themselves as losers in relation to the build-up of corporate capitalism. The political mood of these groups in Germany at the turn of the century was an odd mixture of anti-capitalism, nationalism, and radical libertarianism. They were, in a word, liberals. Liberals, that is, not in the way the term is used in today's US politics, as pro welfare state and as a pleading for the state to take a greater role in both social and economic policies; but in the British and European sense of individualism, anti-statist sentiments, a political world view that was both market-minded and concerned about civil liberties and did not see any contradiction or conflict between those goals.

Oppenheimer, as a part of this world of middle-class beliefs, considered co-operatives to be the key to social reform and a principal solution to the social question. For him, co-operation was aligned with the goals of anti-capitalism, nationalism and radical libertarianism. In these beliefs, he found himself in sympathy with a wide range of German middle-class activists, including early Zionism, on which he exercised some influence. Oppenheimer was the principal economic advisor to Theodor Herzl during the first two decades of the Zionist movement. Theodor Herzl shared with Oppenheimer certain ideas about agrarian colonization, and it was for that reason that he had made him his chief advisor in these matters (Herzl/Oppenheimer 1964). During the second decade of the 20th century, Oppenheimer saw himself in the role of the "leading economist of the Zionist movement" (Oppenheimer 1964: 212). But subsequent to the First World War, his influence declined as more socialist and collectivist ideas came to dominate Zionist politics. The settlement *Merchavia*, founded in Palestine by Oppenheimer in the second decade of the century, escaped his influence and was changed into a settlement resembling what would later come to be known as a *kibbutz* (Bein 1964). Nevertheless, as a kind of elder statesman, Oppenheimer remained in a close relation to the German Zionist movement, and on occasions filled numerous official positions within the organization, well into the 1930's.

Although Oppenheimer was deeply involved into Zionist politics for an extended period of time, his relation to Zionist organisations was

increasingly characterized by political tensions, after the movement got more radical after World War I. Culturally, Oppenheimer was much more a Jewish German patriot than a Jewish nationalist.⁸ His Zionism was more of a benevolent, altruistic kind.⁹ Oppenheimer himself viewed his engagement with Zionism as support for others of an integrated citizen of Germany, rather than as a perspective he would accept for himself. As he pointed out in an article for the Zionist journal *Die Welt* (Oppenheimer 1910), he saw more prevalent among Eastern European Jews a need for a Jewish home land. Furthermore, he saw a Jewish identity (*judisches Volksbewußtsein*) much more prevalent among Eastern European Jews, whereas for himself he claimed to have a German identity, a belonging and commitment to the German nation, while sharing with Jews only the same ethnicity, or ethnic consciousness (*Stammesbewußtsein*). Accordingly, Oppenheimer never accepted a personal commitment to moving to Palestine, which became the Zionist policy of a younger generation of activists and politicians in the interwar period. Consequently, when he later had to leave Germany, he decided against Palestine, and migrated, via Japan, to the United States. Back in the 1890's, increasingly involved in both political activities, and in scholarly work needed to substantiate his beliefs with systematic and scholarly arguments, Oppenheimer gave up his medical practice and lived the life of a journalist and political activist. In 1909 Oppenheimer became a *Privatdozent*; his habilitation (second doctorate) was supervised by Germany's most reputable social economists, Gustav Schmoller and Adolf Wagner. He was a very successful lecturer and attracted crowds sizable enough to fill the largest lecture hall at Berlin's Humboldt University. Despite this success, and despite the numerous books he wrote prior to World War I,¹⁰ he was blocked from becoming an *Ordinarius* (a university professor), on account of his being a Jew. Only after the war was this veto on Jewish scholars overcome.¹¹ This point, Oppenheimer was appointed as the first

8. Oppenheimer's autobiography is full of references to his strong positive sentiments toward Germanness and Germanic culture. Just look at his behavior as a university student in the 1880's: Oppenheimer was a member of a fraternity (*Burschenschaft*), and he was feared for his skills in fighting student duels. His face was witness to this for the rest of his life.

9. Oppenheimer's engagement for the *Komitee für den Osten*, a Jewish organization to lobby for the interest of Eastern Europe's Jewish population with the government of Germany and her allies during World War I, is another example of his benevolent Jewish activities. Cf. Adler-Rudel 1959.

10. Abibliography of Oppenheimer's works has been published by Felicia Fuss (1946/47).

11. Oppenheimer's academic fate parallels that of the famous sociologist Georg Simmel; Simmel got his first appointment in 1914 at the age of 56 at the University of Strasbourg. Many examples of institutionalized ethnic discrimination occurred in Wilhelminian Germany.

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recognized professor for sociology in a German university, at the newly founded Goethe University of Frankfurt.

As an *Ordinarius* for theoretical economics and sociology in Frankfurt, Oppenheimer's scholarly productivity was enormous. Most impressive is his encyclopaedic work of more than 4,000 pages, *Das System der Soziologie*, in which he attempted not only to cover the whole of the discipline, but also to give a final justification for his political beliefs and his project of a co-operative social reform. In settlement policies, he succeeded in founding no less than three co-operative settlements that were to prove the economic feasibility of his reform ideas.

As a professor emeritus after 1929, Oppenheimer moved to one of these settlements. After the Nazis took power, Oppenheimer tried to stay in the country. In 1938, after the state-initiated pogroms had peaked in the so called *Kristallnacht*, the situation became unbearable and Oppenheimer was forced into emigration.¹² After a short stay in Japan he became a resident of Los Angeles, where he co-founded the interdisciplinary periodical *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, now being published for more than 50 years. Oppenheimer died in 1943.¹³

In the literature of his contemporaries, the accounts of Oppenheimer are controversial. Some see him as one of the classic writers¹⁴ and as a founding father of sociology in Germany: Oppenheimer's contribution to sociology since the 1890s and his role as one of the key persons in the institutional foundation of the discipline justify this view. But one could as well regard Oppenheimer as little more than a sectarian politician with intellectual ambitions, without much of a standing in the academic community. In this respect he could be characterized as one of those reformist fools whose activities inevitably seem to accompany the development of modern societies. In fact, Oppenheimer never attracted successful followers¹⁵ and his theoretical approach did

12. Hamilton (1975: vii) is mistaken when he dates Oppenheimer's emigration to 1933 along with a claim that he first moved to Palestine. While Oppenheimer did visit Palestine on several occasions, for reasons mentioned earlier, he never settled there.

13. Eduard Heiman (1943) wrote the obituary in the *American Journal of Sociology*.

14. Karl Mannheim, Oppenheimer's successor in the chair for sociology at Frankfurt, included his writings in the "standard works" of the discipline. The label *Frankfurt School*, now applied to the association of critical theorists led by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, until the 1950's was a term used to indicate Franz Oppenheimer and his school (Eisermann 1959).

15. If the criteria of success for an academic figure is measured in terms of an established doctrine and disciples to preach it, then Oppenheimer must be accounted a failure. Many leading critical sociologists and reformist economists were students in his Frankfurt seminars. A list of names include the sociologist Karl August Wittfogel and the economists Adolph Lowe and Eduard Heimann. As well, many of the emigrants who

not even come close to the mainstream of sociological theory. Finally, a consideration of his career as a political activist does indeed support the interpretation of Oppenheimer as a political outsider with an almost sectarian doctrine, the doctrine being "liberal socialism."

II.

Oppenheimer can best be characterized by referring to three 19th century writers, each of them sharing with Oppenheimer the fate of an intellectual outsider. In the political and conceptual discussions in the Berlin of the 1890's, many of the theories being discussed belonged more to a type of free floating conventional wisdom than to the systematic and disciplined forms of the academic community. This was even more the case, where these ideas were designed to initiate political change. Thus to specify a series of important names would necessarily become a questionable exercise in theoretical construction rather than an explanation for the actual development of Oppenheimer's thought.¹⁶ Given the limitations of space for an essay such as this, I will content myself with an ideal typical construct of Oppenheimer's theory.

The first in the line of influences important to Oppenheimer was Eugen Dühring (Dowe/Tennfelde 1980, Haselbach 1987), a Berlin social democrat who is nowadays better known as the target of Friedrich Engels' *Anti-Dühring* (Engels, no year) than as a scholar with a substantial contribution to the theory and strategy of the labor movement. The question posed by Dühring was why contemporary capitalism was not developing along the lines of the common good as predicated in liberal theory. Why did the 'invisible hand' not do its job? In his attempt to answer this question, Dühring conceived a phenomenon which he called the "previous violence" (*ursprüngliche Gewalt*) embedded in the social structure. The shortcomings of the actual distribution of wealth in society were blamed on this "previous violence."

The aim of Dühring's theory was to identify elements of natural law in relation to the market and to construct a theory of violence and exploitation. This perspective yielded up a rather reformist political plan. Dühring valued trade unions as an institution able to counterbalance previous violence, and so able to contribute to the building of a just society, a society, as he put it, of "mutual reciprocity" (*gleiche*

formed the first board of teachers at the New School of Social Research in New York were students of Oppenheimer. But of all these, scarcely any would have accepted the core ideas of Oppenheimer's theory. Oppenheimer was a catalyst for oppositional academic work. His openness and toleration for oppositional ideas was proverbial. 16. Oppenheimer began to study the writings of Ludwig Gumplowicz much later than those of his contemporaries Theodor Hertzka and Eugen Dühring.

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Gegenseitigkeit). Thus he brought economic liberalism to terms with the union movement. There were, no doubt, numerous flaws in Diihring's theory, which offered quite a few opportunities for Engels to mock him. In particular, his inability to concretize what previous violence in historic terms means is obvious. Nevertheless Duhring had a substantial following in the German social democratic movement.¹⁷ It is this fact which explains why Engels and other marxist social democrats were inclined to attack Duhring so rigorously.

It was the Polish Jew Ludwig Gumplowicz (Barnes 1948, Szacki 1979: 280-86; Mozetic 1985), who was the first scholar in the German language to publish a book on sociology. A teacher of law in Graz, Austria, he developed a theory which gave the concept of previous violence some historical foundation. Gumplowicz was a conflict theorist of the state (Becker/Smelo 1931): he viewed any statehood as the result of a foregoing conquest of outside invaders; thus any given state was from the very beginning poisoned by previous violence. So for Gumplowicz, the stratification within states attended by class struggles issued from this previous violence, a violence rooted in the foundation of the state. Implicitly, Gumplowicz's theory operated on the assumption that during the pre-statehood stage, social integration realized the common good. The crucial problem for a reform movement blending Diihring's and Gumplowicz's perspectives became a question of how to overcome the lasting effects of previous violence, and how to regain the advantages of the common good, in a society organized along the lines of a market governed by natural law. This came to be Oppenheimer's principal question. But a major theoretical problem remained: Gumplowicz reinterpreted Diihring's previous violence in terms of a sociological theory of universal history,¹⁸ but he paid no attention either to the economics of oppression and stratification, or to the economics of the pre-violent societal organizations.

It was the even more obscure Theodor Hertzka who dealt with the economics of previous violence, thus filling the theoretical gap left by Gumplowicz. Hertzka's idea was that the blame for an uneven distribution of wealth and an uneven power structure in capitalist societies was to be given to the institution of private property of land, in other words: rent. His prediction was that if all lands were publicly

17. The revisionist movement in German social democracy, and particularly Eduard Bernstein, was strongly influenced by Eugen Duhring (Gustafsson 1972). Eugen Duhring was a vigorous antisemite. In his memoirs, Oppenheimer regrets this, but nonetheless claims for himself the distinction of being "the only acadmic expert" who "in principle accepted and further developed his theory" (Oppenheimer 1964:155).

18. Again, this is an ideal type construction. To my knowledge, in the real world Duhring and Gumplowicz never recognized each other.

owned, and if there was no rent, then the invisible hand would work and would transform capitalist society into a good society. Obviously Hertzka was a neo-physiocrat and he was part of a physiocratic movement having disciples in the middle classes all over the capitalist world at the turn of the century.¹⁹

Hertzka was a Utopian writer (1890). Moreover, he attempted to bring his Utopia into immediate reality. His plan was to occupy "a no-man's land" in Africa and to actually build a colony with no rent. Starting from this settlement, he hoped to gradually turn the world into a liberal paradise. In particular, he attempted to found a violence-free co-operative settlement in the interior of Uganda. In collecting money for this, he stripped quite a few German middle-class families of their savings. He actually managed to equip an expedition to the site. However, English colonial officials refused its entry into Uganda, sent the ship back, and probably saved the German settlers from starvation, or whatever terrible ends they might have met in the wilderness of inner Uganda.

From these theoretical sources Oppenheimer took his bearings. If one begins with the positivistic mood of the epoch, and adds to this a crude philosophy of history as expounded in Auguste Comte's "social physics" and Herbert Spencer's evolutionism, the main influences on Oppenheimer's approach are complete. Oppenheimer shared Dühring's belief that the social question was not to be blamed on the market but rather on previous violence. He shared Gumplowicz's belief that private land ownership had arisen with the conquests precipitating the emergence of states. He shared Hertzka's belief that rent was the main obstacle preventing capitalism from living up to its Utopian possibilities. He did not, however, share Hertzka's unrealistic colonial ideas envisaged for distant lands in Africa's interior. It was Oppenheimer's contribution to conceive the idea of breaking the political blockade of land and its attendant class monopoly originating from the first conquest, right where it had its impact, in Europe. Oppenheimer first laid out his ideas in a polemical booklet against Hertzka and his utopianism, in an attempt to reassemble Hertzka's disciples after the disastrous outcome of the expedition to Uganda and to focus them on free land in Germany.²⁰

Oppenheimer believed that once land was open to free agrarian

19. The best known representative of this approach in North America was Henry George. An unpublished Oppenheimer manuscript covers the intellectual history of the neo-physiocrat land reform movement: "Land Reform," an undated typescript translated by W. R. Roberts, 1944. The University of California at Berkeley possesses one copy.

20. In contrast to the vicissitudes of settlement life in Uganda, Oppenheimer gave his booklet the title *Freiland in Deutschland* (1895).

settlement, an economic situation would emerge comparable to that in frontier societies, and surplus labor would dry up. Everybody would have the choice of either becoming a settler on his own land or working as a wage earner. The mere opportunity to choose would much improve the bargaining power of the working class and would eventually change their living conditions dramatically. Here, North America in the second half of the 19th century, with its affluent workers, served as a seemingly convincing example of the effects of an open frontier. The high estimation enjoyed by the frontier thesis was by no means specific to Oppenheimer; this was shared by many of his contemporaries.²¹ To quote just one writer, Karl Marx offered the description in the 33rd chapter of *Capital* (Marx 1959) that surplus-labor was unlikely to build up as long as there was an open frontier, quoting evidence from North America. The classical German text on this matter was Werner Sombart's *Why Is There no Socialism in the United States?* (1976; first German edition 1906). Sombart's answer to the question raised in the title of his book can be summarized in one sentence: no socialism was to be found in North America because of the open frontier. Sombart's prediction was that because the frontier had been closed by the end of the nineteenth century, class struggles would become much sharper, and thus, a socialist movement would very likely emerge.²² But as for the United States, Sombart was proven wrong.²³

21. The American economic historian Fred A. Shannon in his article "A Post-Mortem on the Labor-Safety-Valve Theory," stresses the widespread belief in the economic effects of the frontier: "Long before Frederick Jackson Turner tacitly admitted the validity of the theory, even the name 'safety-valve' had become a middle class aphorism. The idea was so old, and so generally held, that it was commonly repeated without question. It... had become an axiom of American thought" (1945: 31). Shannon then demonstrates that the widespread belief in the frontier as an escape route for surplus labor does not withstand demographic evidence. Ellen von Nardroff (1962) argued that Shannon's analysis is staked on a narrow approach which deals only with the demographics of farm labor and not with the general effects of a physically expanding agrarian sector, itself a stimulus to further industrial growth, and with the socio-psychological impact of the frontier.

22. "However, my present opinion is as follows: *All the factors that till now have prevented the development of Socialism in the United States are about to disappear or to be converted into their opposite, with the result that in the next generation Socialism in American will very probably experience the greatest possible expansion of its appeal*" (Sombart 1976, emphasis added by Sombart).

23. In Sombaart's view, America was spared the effects of a class struggle not because of the economic effects of the frontier but rather because of its socio-psychological consequences. Besides the possibility of a petit-bourgeois lifestyle, "another goal beckoned to the great majority of dissatisfied wage laborers. In the course of the past century, hundreds of thousands, and millions, have actually sought and attained this goal, and it brought them emancipation from the oppression of capitalism, emancipation

As a contemporary of the late open frontier, Oppenheimer was much impressed by the colonial example in America. Yet, he was convinced that land was in oversupply even in the crowded industrialized countries of Western Europe. It was available but access to it was blocked by political power (*Bodensperre*). Thus Oppenheimer's goal was to take advantage of this oversupply and to establish a co-operative economy designed to open a frontier within the developed capitalist societies. His aim was to colonize the "no-man's land," so to speak, of Germany, and make it freely available to settlers. The institution to meet this goal was the agrarian settlement co-operative (*Siedlungsgenossenschaft*).

III.

The Settlement Co-operative was the book by Oppenheimer that dealt explicitly with co-operatives as a theoretical and practical problem; it was published in 1896 with the characteristic subtitle: *Attempt to Positively Overcome Communism with a Solution of the Problem of Co-operation and the Agrarian Question*.²⁴ This title clearly indicates that Oppenheimer was part of the heroic stage of co-operation theory. He sought a third way beyond capitalism and communism. Before proceeding to Oppenheimer's positive conception of the settlement co-operative, I want to look at what he views as the "problem of co-operation," and outline his distinctive criticisms of co-operatives in respect to their ability to contribute to such a third way.

in the fullest sense of the word: their goal was a free homestead in the West" (Sombart 1986: 116). And: ". . . it has to be borne in mind that the mere knowledge that he *could* become a free farmer at any time could not but make the American worker feel secure and content, a state of mind that is unknown to his European counterpart. One tolerates any oppressive situation more easily if one lives under the illusion of being able to withdraw from it if really forced to" (Ibid. 118; Sombart's emphasis). C. T. Husbards' introduction to the 1976 English edition strongly opposes this reading of Sombart. For him the frontier only serves as the weakest of six points outlined by Sombart. Husbards claims that Sombart is drawing a multi-faceted "picture of a bourgeois-oriented working class" (xxiii), and characterizes Sombart's borrowing of Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis as a contradiction to his findings. But Husbards fails to acknowledge that Sombart very obviously views this embourgeoisement of the American working class as a principal function of the frontier.

24. *Die Siedlungsgenossenschaft. Versuch einer positiven Überwindung des Kommunismus durch Lösung des Genossenschaftsproblems und der Agrarfrage* Oppenheimer 1896). To my knowledge, the book was never translated into English; all quotations from this book are translated by the author.

The "Law of Transformation"

Since his goal was to find a co-operative reform that would serve the society as a whole, Oppenheimer restricted his research to co-operatives that did not limit their membership access to specific groups of people, such as particular trades. By definition, these limited co-operatives could not develop that which, for Oppenheimer, served as the yardstick of co-operative value: the "social effectiveness," the possibility of improving the situation of the working classes, in principle, and as a whole. What remained were consumer and producers co-ops, on the industrial, agrarian, or service level.

Moreover, among the generally accessible co-operatives, Oppenheimer discerned two kinds distinguished by their strategic location in the market: there were co-operatives of buyers and co-operatives of vendors, consumers and producers.²⁵ Oppenheimer claimed that this distinction was of crucial importance to the theory of co-operatives. In his judgment, the world views of buyers and vendors were very different.

Oppenheimer's economic reasoning was as follows. The buyer appears in the marketplace with a multiplicity of demands. Most of these demands are not entirely specific; very often a desire for one article can be met with the substitution of another. Thus the buyer may be in a weak position as far as his means are concerned, but the very ability to substitute commodities enables him to withstand the pressure of monopolies and maintain a good bargaining position. Buyers are not usually competing against each other, unless there is a general shortage in the supply of commodities. To organize buyers improves their bargaining power in accordance with an economics of scale. Thus the co-operative organization of buyers into consumers co-operatives does not, in principle, encounter internal contradictions.

For the vendor, market transactions appear in a different aspect. He trades in the marketplace with only a single commodity, and continued livelihood is dependent on this. Consonant with the laws of supply and demand, whoever supplies the same commodity within the same

25. Oppenheimer's distinction is indicative of the emergence of the co-operative movement in Germany. Leaving aside the issue of the later *Raiffeisen* co-operatives, there had initially been two forms of co-operation. Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch was the founding force behind the productive or vendors co-operative; he attempted to help economically backward craftsmen against the rising tide of industrialized competition by organizing their supply, work, and marketing by means of co-operation. Regarding consumers, Victor Aime Huber directed his co-operative energies in an effort to help the pauperized urban population meet their habitation needs by means of housing co-operatives, organizing their power as purchasers and consumers. Attempts to unify the two different movements did not succeed during the 19th century.

market is a potential competitor. For the buyer of commodities, the oscillation of prices can be a source of comfort and well being. But for the vendor, price fluctuations can pose drastic existential questions (Oppenheimer 1896: 128). Competition appears as something grim when ones livelihood is potentially at stake. Thus, according to Oppenheimer, the co-operative organization of vendors is a contradiction in terms inasmuch as it attempts to tie together business ventures which are potentially hostile to each other.²⁶ This tendency to mutual hostility, rather than co-operation, is predictable in the face of downswings in market demand for the commodities in question.

Oppenheimer applied this finding of the fundamental differences between buyers and vendors to existing co-operatives. It was obvious that *consumer* co-ops were sustainable since they combined the purchasing and bargaining power of buyers. However, Oppenheimer was critical of consumers co-operatives. He argued that while they were capable of improving the situation of large social groups, they were unable to ameliorate the condition of the poor. The problem comes down to the credit-worthiness of the group forming the co-op or business. The poor are never the recipients of good credit ratings (Oppenheimer 1896: 35). More seriously, it appeared to Oppenheimer that bettering the terms of trade did not address the more fundamental social question; this, in essence, was a matter of unequal distribution of wealth at the level of the workplace, as distinct from the supply outlets. So while Oppenheimer was by no means hostile to those co-ops, he nonetheless remained skeptical regarding their effective capacity to change the socio-economic patterns of capitalist society as a whole.

Other forms of buyers co-operatives were subject to the criticism of failing to meet the criteria of general accessibility and social effectiveness. Credit unions and co-operatives of farmers and craftspeople were socially limited in scope. In the case of self-help schemes in the area of housing, Oppenheimer's skepticism was aroused by the marked dependence of these co-operatives which were heavily reliant on the capital market. His findings have been strengthened by more recent research (Oppenheimer 1896: 40-41; Novy 1983: 62; Mersmann and Novy 1991: 53).

In view of the fact that buyers co-ops failed to address the social predicament of the proletariat, a focus on vendors co-ops takes on increased significance. Oppenheimer affirmed the potential efficiency of producers co-ops to improve the life conditions of their associates. But in practice, he valued "the history of the producers co-operative as a chain of failures" (Oppenheimer 1896: 45). Why was this? With an

26. "Because the interest of a single vendor strongly contradicts the interest of all other vendors, vendors co-operatives can never flourish" (Oppenheimer 1896:134).

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exceptional thoroughness, Oppenheimer investigated the economic dynamics of this type of co-operation in competitive markets, and came to the conclusion that co-operative firms are structurally inclined to undergo a transformation to a non co-operative form of organization. Oppenheimer's Law of Transformation made the point that co-operatives, as with other firms, had to engage in the common practice of employing, and laying off, wage labor, in order to stay in the market during the business cycle. Oppenheimer came to the conclusion that market dynamics exerted disciplinary effects sufficient to reform any agents operating within a competitive market from their co-operative idealism to a level of pragmatic self interest. By employing labor, productive co-operatives became transformed, in principle, into owners firms. For Oppenheimer, producers co-operatives were capable of offering some individuals an escape route out of proletarian poverty but they were unable to become the backbone of a general social and economic reform. In my opinion, the Law of Transformation, formulated in 1896, was Oppenheimer's lasting contribution to the theory of co-operation. It did not raise an entirely new point,²⁷ but with his economically and sociologically sound and systematic argument, he made his analysis convincing, and indeed, inescapable.

For both buyers and vendors co-operatives, Oppenheimer came to a very blunt conclusion regarding their social effectiveness: "... up to now, co-operatives have contributed *nothing* in respect to their first and essential task: to improve the working class as a whole and to replace the existing economy with a genuinely rational one" (1896: 16). On Oppenheimer's account, existing forms of co-operation were incapable of changing the patterns of capitalism as a whole.

The Settlement Co-operative

Oppenheimer was distinctly pessimistic regarding the possible effectiveness of co-operatives to contribute to the solution of the social question. What then was the improvement he discerned in the settlement co-operative?

Again, Oppenheimer was drawing on the distinction of the social roles between buyers versus vendors. A form of co-operation had to be found which organizes not only consumption but production as well, and at the same time escapes the competition and hostility inherent in the vendors' role in the marketplace. All of these demands, along with certain other technical prerequisites were, felt Oppenheimer, met by the agrarian settlement -co-operative (Oppenheimer 1896:167). His central

27. Oppenheimer makes no claims to novelty for his Law of Transformation (Oppenheimer 1896:127).

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acquire land and expand whenever it wished to do so. But one could make the point that the opposite would be more likely.²⁹

Secondly, Oppenheimer's understanding of agrarian technology was limited. He tried to combine the advantages of large-scale farming in the social context of family-based enterprises. His understanding of farming was limited to family farming with not much more investment than the labor power of the family. But even at the turn of the century more capital intensive methods of farming were, under most circumstances, outperforming the productivity of the family farm. In a more and more affluent industrial society, the self sufficient frontier farming family was becoming a sustainable possibility only in remote areas. Oppenheimer's settlement co-operatives were most unlikely to meet the standards of competition set by capital intensive farming methods. Hence, his settlement co-operatives were themselves a suitable target for his law of transformation, luring co-operative enthusiasts into a poverty trap. The best that could be expected was a culture founded on the ignorance of the efficiencies of a division of labor, known to the rest of the world as the foundation of industrialized society's wealth.

IV.

Despite these shortcomings, over the years various attempts have been made to establish settlements of the kind that Oppenheimer had envisaged. His ideas were initially actualized in an effort to stabilize the troubled economy of the junker's estates in the eastern reaches of Germany. The problems of the agrarian crises preceded Oppenheimer's settlement proposals. Speculation on how to resolve the problems faced by the large Prussian estates had been raised as early as the 1880s and continued to attract comment into the interwar period. So Oppenheimer's first chance to realize a settlement co-operative was a result of the activities and debates around the issue of "internal colonization" (*innere Kolonisation*).³⁰

Internal colonization was regarded as an answer to multiple crises which were brewing in the eastern areas of Prussia. Changes in farming technology sharply increased the demand for seasonal labor while

29. This was the point of argument between Oppenheimer and Hertzka. The latter was concerned that successful settlement co-operatives would come to an impasse due to their inability to expand. This would result from their very success, which would tend to drive up the price of land in adjacent areas. This consideration led him to the bold decision to found his colonies in far away Uganda.

30. A comprehensive history of internal colonization is yet to be written. A rather narrowly focused account of the administrative aspects of this movement is found in Wilhelm Friedrich Boyens (1959 and 1960).

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decreasing the demand for year-round work on the large estates. Thus there was a shortage of labor during peak seasons, a gap which was filled by seasonal laborers coming from as far as Russia. In the meantime, the constant decrease in the number of permanent residents marked a trend of depopulation in the area. The revenue of the large estates decreased as competition from other grain producing regions in the world sharpened. In addition, Germany felt the threat of a growing "Polandization" of the region, as it was then put.³¹

Max Weber did substantial research on the eastern agrarian problem. In the *Verein für Socialpolitik* he worked on an analysis of life conditions of rural workers in the East Elbian regions of Germany (1892). In publicizing his findings he considered some of the political consequences inherent in the problem (Weber 1893, Weber and Gohre 1894). At his famous inaugural speech delivered at the University of Freiburg in 1895, Weber sharpened his political concerns to the question of internal colonization. He deliberately chose the value position of "Germanness" (*Standpunkt des Deutschtums*) to ground a policy of internal colonization. It is interesting to consider how his proposals, which took no notice of co-operative aspirations, were nevertheless congruent with considerations already raised by Oppenheimer. First, and like Oppenheimer, Weber was a supporter of small-scale farming as opposed to the maintenance of large estates. But Weber's rationale was rather more cynical. His supposition was that the stomachs of the families of these small subsistence farmers would be less vulnerable to market crises.³² He did not suggest that the settlement of East Elbian lands would provide opportunities to win a comfortable fortune, but the value position of Germanness was nonetheless a logic which urged a program of settlement, even one that would necessarily have to exist outside Germany's modern economy. Measured against this realistic account of the economic chances of rural settlement, Oppenheimer's optimism takes on the aspect of sheer utopianism.

Why, for Weber, was a policy of small scale farming demanded by a value position of Germanness? Weber's intent was to stabilize an ethnic

31. The term "internal colonization" is weighted with varied significances. It recalled the fact that Germany was a colonialist latecomer; colonization was something that needed to be performed within the country. The term also marked the nationalist fear of "Polandization;" internal colonization was a policy of securing territorial Germanness. Finally, colonization referred to the idea of a frontier within. The prospect of raising new agrarian and business opportunities within the country was conceived to stem the the "loss of German blood" in a flow of emigration to the Americas, mainly to the U.S.

32. "Derjenige Besitzer, welcher seine Produkte in erster Linie an denjenigen Ort bringt, wo die Preisgestaltung auf dem Weltmarkt am gleichgiltigsten ist, nämlich in seinen eigenen Magen, der ist zur Zeit am existenzfähigsten im Osten ..." (Weber 1893: 81).

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German population subject to crises driven demographic movements. For Weber, the threat was the "Polandization" of the East, a point also raised by Oppenheimer. Security for producers on the land or long-term leases within a co-operative arrangement served to stabilize populations. As such, these coincided with state sponsored ethnic policies. These debates were of importance not only to problems of German nationalism but also had effects on those who founded the early Zionist settlements in Palestine.³³

As the result of the crises which were undermining the traditional conditions governing the estate farming of the junkers, Oppenheimer was offered several opportunities to initiate settlement experiments and even gained financial support from public sources. The first attempt was made in the state of Thuringia. At Wenigenlupnitz, Oppenheimer founded a settlement co-operative in the 1890's. The experiment turned into an economic disaster even before the co-op was properly established. A combination of untimely weather and bad advice from "experts" led the estate into bankruptcy, and left Oppenheimer virtually bankrupt (Oppenheimer 1924: 253). Another attempt was made following World War I, undertaken with the help of the Social Democratic government of Prussia in the 1920s. Co-ops were set up on two estates³⁴ in the vicinity of Berlin. This experiment was more successful as far as farming was concerned. But before the co-operative could develop the social effectiveness that Oppenheimer had hoped for, it was transformed into National Socialist model farms (*NS Erbhofe*).

The idea of co-operative rural settlements became popular (once again) during the world economic crisis of the early 1930's. But Weber, rather than Oppenheimer, proved wiser in his prognosis regarding the effects of small scale farming. Subsequent to the breakdown in the labor market and the welfare state, what had previously looked like a flaw in Oppenheimer's theory began to take on the aspect of an advantage. Rural settlement came to be viewed as a means of relieving unemployment, with very low capital costs. At the time, Oppenheimer enjoyed something of a revival in prestige; his "liberal socialism" received public support even from the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions (Haselbach 1985: 133). However, the rejuvenation of co-operatives and settlement experiments in Germany came to an abrupt halt in 1933.

Longer lasting effects emerged from Oppenheimer's participation in another experimental co-operative founded in the 1890's. In Oranien-

33. Oppenheimer addresses the issues of public and private real property regarding the Jewish settlements in Palestine in the essay *Public Property and Private Property on Land* (1924:192-217).

34. Barenklau and Liidersdorf (Haselbach 1985:132-33).

burg, on the outskirts of Berlin, the Vegetarian Fruit Growing Co-operative Eden, was established as the first co-operative health food producer. *Eden* became the best known brand name in the health food business in early 20th century Germany. Thus, Oppenheimer's idea of co-operation accompanied the new social movements in Germany from the very beginning. The Vegetarian Fruit Growing Co-operative weathered numerous historic changes: it survived the Weimar Republic and the world economic crises; the Nazi years; it survived complete destruction of its site at the end of World War II; it survived the decenniums of state socialism in the German Democratic Republic as the main supplier of vegetarian goods. As in the other cases, the settlement co-operative did not precipitate the social effects that Oppenheimer had hoped for; but it has demonstrated that co-operative initiatives could survive as an enterprise in competitive markets.

V.

Thus, for various reasons, all but one of Oppenheimer's attempts to make his settlement co-operatives a reality failed. There can be no doubt that co-operatives fashioned after Oppenheimer's plans are technically possible. But there is also no sign that Oppenheimer's hope for a third way beyond capitalism was ever anything but a misconceived exaggeration. So one might be skeptical about his contribution to a theory of co-operation.

But Oppenheimer's other contribution to this theory retains its plausibility. Decades of practical experience since the 1890's affirms the inherent theoretical soundness of his Law of Transformation in the context of competitive market based societies. Recent examples confirming this point are to be found in the renaissance of co-operative movements in the 1970's and 1980's in West Germany, the so called "alternative economy" of co-operative enterprises. While this movement generated a considerable enthusiasm among socialists and co-operative theorists in the hope that this solidaristic moral economy might serve to undermine capitalism,³⁵ it will nonetheless be recalled that the alternative economy disappeared as quickly as it had arisen. The less successful co-operative enterprises were weeded out by the market; some succeeded in transforming themselves into state subsi-

35. Among the vast literature in German, cf. the works of Schwendter in the list of references, and Haselbach 1985a and 1986. A number of empirical works on "alternative economy" in the 1980's share the problem of a rather loose definition of the matter considered (cf. for example Berger 1985 and 1986, Fehr 1985, Kreutz 1985, Teichert 1988, and as an early critical voice Jessen 1985). By the end of the 1980's, the impact of alternative enterprises on employment would be, at best, negligible.

dized job training or pedagogic institutions. The most successful alternative enterprises generally transformed themselves into more conventional entrepreneurial undertakings.³⁶ While the work atmosphere in many of these firms is still inspired by a co-operative ethos, the means of production have come to be tightly controlled by the former associates, but not owners, of the business.

To conclude, Oppenheimer's contribution to co-operative theory has its lasting value not in its dimension of co-operative optimism, but rather in the bleak outlook that any successful producer's co-operative is liable to undergo a process of transformation into an owner's operation. This sets a clear limit to economic reform guided by co-operative principles.

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36. This observation was explicitly made, in reference to Franz Oppenheimer, in Novy (1980)

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