



THE FRENCH COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT AND THE ICA

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The first ICA Congress held in London from 19-23 August 1895 marked the beginning of an era of international unification of national cooperative movements. It punctuated a long series of English and French attempts which began as early as 1835. The London congress is thus not only a birth but also a culmination. The heart of the debate lies in the articulation between two major cooperative conceptions, the one initiated by workers and the one initiated by consumers. The 1895 Congress marked the victory of the latter, echoing the economic success of the Wholesale Societies. The defenders of the 'participationist' thesis, i.e. that which claims a decisive place for workers, nevertheless continued their quest. In particular, they draw on the experience of Godin's family in Guise (France) to demonstrate the possibility of a large-scale cooperative development based on cooperation in the workplace. For these reasons, this debate has often been presented as one of two conceptions, one English, the other French.

In reality, in England and France, as in most countries, the two currents are developing jointly. But their reciprocal relations differ from one country to another. In France they are very intertwined and are often seen as complementary rather than antagonistic.

At the founding congress of the Union Coopérative, the first French federation of consumer cooperatives, held in Nîmes in 1885, Jean-Baptiste André Godin presented a plan to conquer the economy based on production cooperation, a plan that included, in addition to agricultural and industrial production, mutuality, education, consumption and housing. During the same congress, the great English cooperator Edward Vansittart Neale invited to "form associations in the style of the Familistère de Guise". The Familistère was a community housing complex for workers in Guise, a town of the Picardie region, in France. Among the many cooperative leaders staying at the Familistère at the end of the 19th century, Neale and Holyoake point out that England lacks a Familistère as much as France lacks Wholesale Societies. After Godin's death in 1889, Neale and Holyoake returned to the Familistère, notably in 1896, on the occasion of the second ICA Congress in Paris. The importance of the Familistère de Guise and Godin's thinking was reflected in the opposition between the cooperative path of consumer cooperatives and the participatory path of worker cooperatives. The founders and leaders of the French consumer cooperative movement were in fact marked by Godin's conception. Some of the most illustrious stayed at the Familistère for a long time before embarking on consumer cooperation, and Auguste Fabre, founder of one of the first French consumer cooperatives and co-founder of what was to become the École de Nîmes, spent two years in Guise and considers himself a disciple of the founder of the Familistère.

At the second congress of the Cooperative Union (1889), Charles Gide presented his three-step "prophecy" based on the power of consumers alone. This position is similar to that of the English founders of the ICA. This 1889 congress had an international resonance and founded what Gide himself called "l'École de Nîmes", to designate a consumer cooperation aiming to establish a "Cooperative Republic", which meant

in particular that the cooperation was not only for the cooperators but for society as a whole. Ernest Poisson signed a book with this title in 1920, on the eve of the foundation by Charles Gide and Bernard Lavergne of the *Revue des Études coopératives* (REC, which became RECMA or *Revue internationale de l'économie sociale* in 1984, namely the *International Review of the Social Economy*, a Journal with articles in both English and French), a partner journal of the ICA since its foundation. Ernest Poisson's book, then first president of the *Fédération nationale des coopératives de consommateurs* (FNCC), and the *Revue des Études coopératives* had a wide international impact, particularly in Latin America where independent British Guyana took on the official name of "Cooperative Republic of Guyana" in 1970, a name it still bears today.

After the deep crisis of the consumer cooperative movement in the 1970s and 1980s, the beginning of the 21st century is marked by a revival that affects both worker and user cooperation. Remarkably, the opposition that marked the founding of the ICA is no longer in evidence: the complementarity between cooperative forms and multi-society is permeating contemporary cooperative creativity. They update the thesis of inter-cooperation dear to Albert Thomas.

As early as the 1920s, the latter had in fact campaigned for complementarity between cooperative forms and particularly between consumer and agricultural cooperatives, an inter-cooperation whose major interest he had underlined in a report noted at the ICA Congress in Ghent (1924). From the 1970s to the 1990s, Henri Desroche (1914-1994) and the cooperative leader Jacques Moreau (1927-2004) were among the most innovative and active continuers of this tradition, which considers that cooperation has a societal purpose and can provide the basis for original economic and social development.

The French cooperative tradition has thus often sought to combine cooperative forms and has sought to extend cooperation to the entire economy and society.

This tradition found an international echo at the end of the 19th century with the *Familistère de Godin*, then during the period of the accessions to independence with the project of a *Cooperative Republic*, and then at the time of the birth of the social economy in the 70s and 80s. The REC, which became RECMA, has continued and deepened the paths opened by Charles Gide, Albert Thomas, Georges Fauquet, Claude Vienney and Henri Desroche, seeking to understand both the cooperative creativity on all continents and the challenges facing the largest cooperative organisations. This international openness is confirmed by its readership, which extends to fifty countries. RECMA will celebrate, in partnership with the ICA, its centenary in 2021, one year after the 125th anniversary of the ICA.