

Food For Change

The Story of Cooperation in America

Discussion & Study Guide



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Introduction

This Discussion & Study Guide is for those who wish to delve deeper into the issues presented in the feature film [Food For Change](#). It can be used to facilitate informal discussions following a screening or to assist in further research into specific topics presented in the 82-minute film.

Accompanying this guide is an [annotated script](#) with factual sources that can lead to further inquiries. For scholars interested in the origins, history, and present manifestations of cooperatives in the United States and throughout the world, we invite you to get in touch with us. Having done voluminous research on the many issues explored in the film, we are a source of information beyond the limitations of this publication. Should our reservoir of knowledge hold, in our memories and hard drives, we would be pleased to share this with you. If you have something to add to the story of cooperatives, we welcome that too.

History is often a selective force in shaping national identity and policies. The history of cooperatives is of particular interest because it reveals another side of the American character in contrast to the dominant narrative of individualism. Success in cooperatives is measured by equanimity among its members and by social, environmental, and community standards.

In an era where ideologies restrict meaningful, productive dialogue, co-ops provide insights into the challenges of maintaining universal membership and democratic control in an alternative economic system that operates within the capitalist system. Cooperators' notions of "practical idealism," and participation in "a quiet revolution" have much to offer for both their aspirations and restraint. The Principles of Cooperation, with their 180-year history, aspired to a peaceful transition to a "cooperative commonwealth." Having fallen short of that goal thus far, they nonetheless deserve our attention for what they can teach us.

Steve Alves
Producer/Writer/Director
Food For Change

Backstory

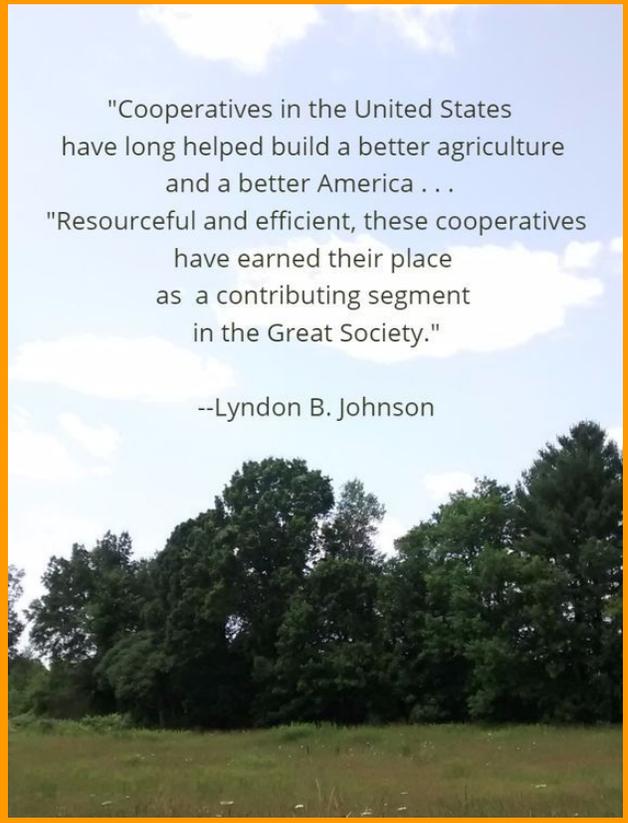
Food For Change is an 82-minute documentary film focusing on food co-ops as a force for dynamic social and economic change in American culture. This is the first film to examine the important historical role played by food co-ops, their pioneering quest for organic foods, and their current efforts to create regional food systems. The film also shows cooperatives' focus on local economies and issues of food security.

The project began when award-winning filmmaker and co-op member Steve Alves was asked to make a film for the Franklin Community Co-op, located in Greenfield, Massachusetts. Alves uncovered archival films and past stories about the increase in cooperatives during the Great Depression — achievements that were later thwarted when consumerism and the cold war became dominant economic and social forces.

Further research revealed how food co-ops re-emerged during the tumultuous events of the 1960s as an alternative to factory farms and corporate-owned grocery chains. What began as an obscure stance from a counterculture would, within a few decades, result in a

What is a Cooperative?

A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.



"Cooperatives in the United States have long helped build a better agriculture and a better America . . .
"Resourceful and efficient, these cooperatives have earned their place as a contributing segment in the Great Society."

--Lyndon B. Johnson

market for natural and organic foods valued at \$100 billion annually. With corporations like Wal-Mart--now the largest seller of organic food in the natural foods business--co-ops face fierce competition. They are losing market share, threatened in the very market they created, and are turning to a new cause and niche market: locally sourced food.

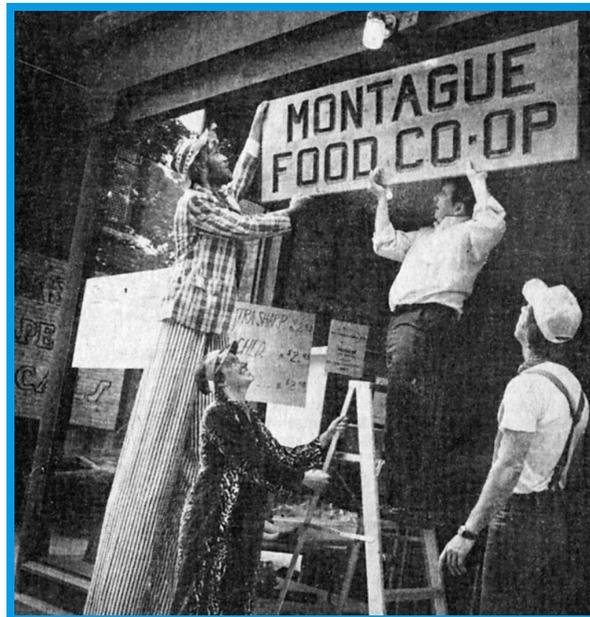
Synopsis: The Film

Part One describes the conditions that led to the Great Depression: fraudulent credit schemes; the control of industries by a few corporations; and increased wealth disparity. During the Great Depression national unemployment rose to 24 percent while employment within the co-op sector increased by 17 percent. As co-ops grew they restored hope to the millions of disenfranchised citizens who began to gain some control over their lives. WWII ended unemployment and brought the return of corporate monopolies which regained an influential role in government and laid the groundwork for a post-war culture based on consumerism and a permanent wartime economy, effectively halting co-op growth.



Part Two

portrays the re-emergence of food co-ops as a product of the 1960s Civil Rights, War on Poverty, and anti-war movements. Led by a new generation seeking healthier food and radical social change, food co-ops and buying clubs sprang up across the United States by the thousands. At the same time two million family farms were driven out of business by large agri-businesses. Industrial farms grew bigger in size and smaller in number, relying on synthetic chemicals and mechanization to grow cheap food and reap maximum profits. On the retail side supermarkets also consolidated. National chains emerged with enormous market share and economies of scale, driving smaller grocery stores out of business and out of urban neighborhoods. In this hyper-competitive environment, most co-ops did not survive. About two hundred managed to continue by pioneering the growing niche market of whole and organic foods and maintaining cooperative values.



Part Three explores the present efforts of farmers, co-ops, and consumers to gain control of their local food economies. Farmers and co-op workers show how they maintain their livelihoods in a system dominated by agri-businesses and large grocery chains. The film also shows the impacts of a growing local food system created by food co-ops in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region of Minnesota, and the new wave of food co-ops emerging in the U.S.. During the last ten years there has been a resurgence of food co-ops and their mission to work together to educate members and the general public about healthy food and cooperative economies. Co-ops continue to offer an alternative to corporate control of the nation's food supply and have become leaders in the local food movement.

A housing co-op is owned by its residents
A worker co-op is owned by its employees
A consumer co-op is owned by its customers



General Discussion Questions

Before the film:

- What is a cooperative business?
- When did food co-ops get started, who started them, why were they started?
- How does a co-op work? What are co-op values?

After the film:

- What were your impressions of the movie?
- Did anything surprise you about the history of cooperatives in America?
- What jumped out at you the most?
- Describe a food that you like. Do you know its source?

More In Depth Discussions

Food For Change is broken into ten chapters on the DVD. Following the opening two chapters, chapters 3 - 7 each deal with a different decade, starting in the 1930s.



Discussion questions:

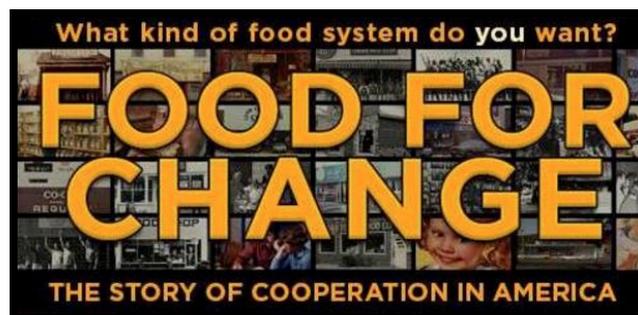
- Why does the film begin with an environmental perspective?
- How has the U.S. food system changed?
Pros & Cons.
- What are the issues with GMOs?
- Did you learn anything new about the Great Depression?
- What effect did WWII have on the nation? How was the country different after the war?
- How did the Cold War affect the internal politics of the U.S.?
- Why did the United States lose the War On Poverty?
- What effect did the counterculture have on food in America?
- Why did our economy nearly collapse in 2008-09?
- How has the concentration of food co-ops in the Twin Cities made a difference?
- What are the challenges of starting a food co-op?

Values

Cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, and solidarity.

Potential topics for discussion groups:

- W.E.B. DuBois advocated for cooperative economic models all his life. Why do you think this was so important to him?
- Based on what you saw in the film, is there a downside to cooperative business compared to profit-centered business? If so, how could it be overcome?
- African-Americans have practiced self-help and cooperation throughout the history of the U.S., yet much of their efforts were invisible. Likewise, Puerto Rican culture is strongly family-centered and mutually dependent. What are your experiences with informal community networks (family, church, neighborhood organizations)?



Obscure Co-op Facts:

- FDR commissioned study of European co-ops in the 1930s; he also suggested a plot for a Hollywood movie about a factory turned into a worker co-op, later entitled *The President's Mystery*.
- Grocery, dry goods, and other merchandise stores in U.S. Japanese Internment camps during WWII were run as cooperatives.
- Former president George W. Bush gets his electricity from a co-op.

Online Resources

- [Outreach & Distribution Plan](#) describes the audiences for *Food For Change* and the resources needed to reach them. Please read it and consider making a contribution to help educate more people about cooperatives.
- [Annotated Script](#)

Contributors to *Discussion & Study Guide*

- Steve Alves, Producer/Director/Writer
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