

The De/Repoliticization of Cooperation and the Discourse of Conversion¹

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Abstract

Abstract In recent years, several agricultural cooperatives have undergone significant restructuring. Some have been taken through a conversion process and have been reorganized as “investor-oriented firms” (IOFs). This phenomenon has attracted the interest of agricultural economists, but it has not been analyzed by sociologists. This article examines the discourse with which agricultural economists have approached the conversion issue. Drawing upon Fraser's discussion of “needs talk,” and inspired by Kloppenburg's analysis of the agricultural scientific complex, an argument is made that a reprivatization discourse of neoclassical economics has effectively depoliticized discussion about the future of cooperative enterprise. It is further argued that a repoliticization of cooperation is necessary in order to assure the protection of extra-economic values and oppositional discourse that is embedded in the historical development of cooperative practices and institutions. We focus here on the role of expert discourse as it relates to the reinvention of cooperative institutions in the agricultural economy. It is argued that this discourse would be improved by greater attention to historical and sociological forces, rather than remaining narrowly focused on economism.

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