ABSTRACT. Consumer cooperatives were born together with industrial capitalism and its social classes, being a reaction against miserable economic conditions and disgracefully low positions of farmers and workers. Nowadays, the traditional, class-based motives have lost their importance, but still many consumers are attracted by consumer cooperatives and each year numerous consumers stand for election to the committees of consumer cooperatives. A recent survey amongst newly elected and newly retired committee members in Denmark reveals three major motivating factors: cooperative ideology, survival of local shops, and nutrition. Therefore it seems wise for consumer cooperatives to emphasize activities related to these motives, and by doing so they may eventually succeed in their search for a new identity.

THE CLASS-BASED ORIGIN

Marketing cooperatives were born together with industrial capitalism. Consumers, workers, and farmers reacted against the challenge of industrial capitalism by forming cooperatives. Workers wanted to improve their miserable economic conditions and disgracefully low position with the help of consumer cooperatives and worker cooperatives, and farmers wished to control the increasingly important processing and marketing enterprises by forming farmer cooperatives, thereby attempting to limit the dominance of industrial and commercial capital in the towns.

Naturally, this class-based approach to cooperative development linked cooperatives closely to other class-based organizations such as the political parties, trade unions, and farmers’ unions. Cooperatives claimed to be non-political organizations, but historically, cooperatives have nevertheless been highly influenced by political divisions, both divisions within cooperative organizations (e.g., the E-movement in Finland, see Ilmonen, 1986) and divisions between cooperatives (e.g., cooperatives in Italy).

Cooperatives may, however, be seen as something more, namely as a means of realizing the visions of a better society: a society characterized by high principles of democracy, liberty, equality, and justice. In all classes and strata of society, certain people shared such
dreams of a better world and saw cooperatives as means of fulfilling them, lessening the conflicts and contradictions inherent in industrial capitalism.

Later on, when socialism in a more pronounced way was put on the agenda of capitalist societies, cooperatives were looked upon as a middle road between capitalism and socialism, moving towards a society which avoided both excessive state dominance and excessive dominance of market forces. This vision particularly attracted political parties close to the centre.

The identity of cooperatives was highly determined by their class-based origin and visions. In fact, the close ties between cooperatives and certain political and social groups were probably of greater importance for the identity of cooperatives than were the formulated cooperative principles. Members did not join the cooperatives primarily because of the cooperative principles, although they looked upon these principles with sympathy, but rather because of the class-based visions related to cooperatives as well, of course, as the direct economic benefits of membership.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DANISH CONSUMER COOPERATIVES

These general conclusions concerning cooperatives may be illustrated by the origin and development of Danish consumer cooperatives. Unlike the situation in some other countries, Danish consumer cooperatives were from the start deeply rooted in two social groups, farmers and industrial workers. Farmers were inspired to form consumer cooperatives because of their successful agricultural cooperatives, which developed rapidly in the closing decades of the 19th century. Workers started to form consumer cooperatives at a brisk pace just after the turn of the century.

Differences between these two class-based branches of the consumer cooperative movement were in many ways significant. They were geographically separated, tied to different social groups, and influenced by liberal and socialist doctrines respectively. Nevertheless, both branches became members of a national federation formed in 1896, which developed into an increasingly important organization, both as producer of certain goods and as a large-scale wholesaler. The wholesale activity in particular seems to have been important for the progress of consumer cooperatives, as their private competitors