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Social and Solidarity Economy

Between Emancipation and Reproduction

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Abstract

Social and solidarity economy is increasingly attracting the attention of policy makers, practitioners and social scientists worldwide. For some it contributes to social cohesion, while addressing state and market failures; for others it provides an alternative model to current neoliberal development patterns; for its critics it is just another facet of contemporary capitalism.

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine social and solidarity economy, in light of these different trends, while also addressing the issue of market and state relations. The paper presents a theoretical reflection and an empirical comparative analysis from the cases of Brazil and Portugal, which illustrate the different trends and challenges that social and solidarity economy faces.

The main goal is to question whether social and solidarity economy is an emancipatory alternative or a product and instrument of the capitalist system, contributing to its reproduction.

Introduction

Social and solidarity economy is not something new. Even if the label is recent and embodies a new framework, the idea of autonomy and self-management is present at least since the nineteenth century. Defourny and Develtere (1997) find its roots in the most ancient forms of human association, such as the primitive artisans' guilds in Africa and pre-colonial America.

However, in the last decades, the context of growing contradictions and failures in the dominant capitalist system opens up the space for different theories and experiences worldwide that proclaim social and solidarity economy as a form of resistance and an emancipation from neoliberal globalization, a pathway for a more equal and sustainable society. Numerous meetings, forums and networks of social and solidarity economy partisans and activists claim the integration of solidarity as a core principle for an alternative globalization. This can be seen, for instance, in the World Social Forums or within Rio+20 side events.

Long-standing mainstream debates confront the assets of a self-regulating market to the role of the state in the foundation of social organization and the delivery of social welfare. Social and solidarity economy proponents, instead, introduce another component of social life, which is neither the business sector nor the public one.

Our research is focused on the positioning of social and solidarity economy initiatives within a global restructuring context. The paper presents a theoretical reflection on social and solidarity economy and draws on preliminary empirical evidence from the cases of Brazil and Portugal.

The goal is to analyze the dynamics that characterize this "sector" in articulation with wider changes in the world-system, while questioning its role in the social transformation or reproduction. Is social and solidarity economy a counter-hegemonic and emancipatory alternative or is it a product and an instrument of the capitalist system, contributing to its reproduction? In this paper we provide some clues of analysis.

Background

Historically, solidarity economy draws back to the social economy that emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century, as an attempt to face the individualism and competition of the political economy born in industrial societies. It is connected to the "social issue" and the emergence of new situations of poverty and social exclusion. Charles Gide (1905) defines it as the economy of the poor, those who remain outside the political economy.

According to this perspective, the aim was to fight poverty through a collective approach, in opposition to the dominant individualism. On the other hand, it also intended to address social needs through economy, thus the term *social economy*.

In its origin, the social economy involves both practical initiatives such as workers cooperatives, and philosophic and ideological debates and experiences, such as utopic socialism, anarchism, among others.

The concept of solidarity economy (from the french *économie solidaire*) only arises in the seventies of the twentieth century in a francophone European context, to designate new forms of social economy related to a new social issue, the worsening of poverty and social exclusion situations, as well as to new form of solidarity related to the environment, culture, citizenship, education, among others.

Hence, the term *social and solidarity economy* intends to refer both to the most traditional forms of social economy, among which the cooperative is considered the most representative one, and to the new experiences of solidarity economy developed worldwide in the last decades.

Therefore, the concept of social and solidarity economy can be defined as a set of organizations and initiatives where a collective patrimony is privileged against the individual return, based in democratic decision-making processes, and where the realization of economic activities aims not the distribution of profits (as in the business sector), but the satisfaction of collective purposes, namely related to employment, citizenship, environment, education, or culture.

This definition differs from that of strict *non-profit sector*, since there may be profit (as in the case of cooperatives), but it should be reinvested for collective purposes, so that the logic of the market should be subordinated to that of solidarity.

However, it is worth noting there is no consensual terminology and its acceptance varies according to national specificities. The boundaries are vague, which denotes the lack of theoretical foundations and empirical structuration.

Social and solidarity economy has been highlighted, both by scholars and its protagonists, as an alternative to capitalist domination and reproduction. In this sense, it can be theorized as part of the movement of “counter-hegemonic globalization”¹ (Evans 2008). However, there is a lack of systematic analyses within the academic literature. A large body of works on social and solidarity economy is driven by idealism and normative claims, often downplaying its limits and contradictions. In addition, the term social and solidarity economy in itself is not at all neutral and carries a set of valuations that deserve critical examination.

Are we talking about an idealized return to the community world, as defined by Tönnies’ *gemeinschaft* (2002) – human associations that reflect a shared social consciousness, in opposition to the competitive, individualistic and unequal relationships that characterize market society?

We rather prefer to conceptualize social and solidarity economy as a field, defined as a structured space with its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force (Bourdieu 1993). Hence, social and solidarity economy is a field of internal and external struggles, which should be investigated.

From Bourdieu’s theorization on social reproduction, we know that even emancipatory movements contain within themselves elements of reproduction. The existence of stable

¹ Evans defines *counter-hegemonic globalization* as “a globally organized project of transformation aimed at replacing the dominant (hegemonic) global regime with one that maximizes democratic political control and makes the equitable development of human capabilities and environmental stewardship its priorities” (Evans 2008: 272).

social patterns over long periods demands examining the ways in which social patterns are re-created in social action (Bourdieu 1977).

Social and solidarity economy in Brazil and Portugal

Brazil and Portugal illustrate different dynamics in these processes.

Portugal is a Southern European country, in the semi-periphery of the world-system, with a fragile welfare state (Santos 1985). The emergence of social and solidarity economy is dated from the nineteenth century. Portugal was particularly influenced by the British ideas and experiences, so that the second cooperative law in the world is the Portuguese and the first Portuguese cooperative was created in 1858 (Leite 2011: 1), only fourteen years after the Rochdale Pioneers. However, the relatively low degree of industrialization and urbanization and the strong presence of the Catholic Church have prevented these movements from reaching a development as strong as in other European countries (Quintão 2011: 8).

After the Portuguese Revolution in 1974, it followed a period of intense democratic initiatives. The new forms of civil society organization that emerged in this period were related, on the one hand, to the recovery of the fundamental rights and freedoms that sustain the democratic state (such as political associations and unions) and, on the other hand, to initiatives addressing basic social needs (such as housing², education, community development), together with an explosion of new cooperatives (Quintão 2011: 12).

The dynamism of this period was followed by a period of restraint associated with the economic crisis in the end of the seventies. The entry of Portugal in the European Union in 1986 opens space for greater influence of the European context in the Portuguese social and solidarity economy, namely through different European programs and networks.

A study by Salamon et al on the Portuguese *non-profit sector* concludes that “the overall size of the sector is relatively small in comparison to other industries and other developed countries” (2012: 7). In addition, a distinctive Portuguese feature in comparison to other countries is “the unusually large share of organizations that provide social assistance” (Salomon et al 2012: 8).

The debates on social and solidarity economy in Portugal have been particularly encouraged by Amaro. This scholar has developed a holistic concept of solidarity economy based on the experiences developed in Macaronesia – region composed by a group of islands in the Atlantic Ocean (the Portuguese archipelagos of Azores and Madeira, the Spanish Canary Islands and the archipelago of Cape Verde):

The economy that re-finds Life in its various dimensions, promoting a logic of systemic solidarity with Life in all its expressions (human beings, other living

² An emblematic and radical experiment in participatory architecture from this period was SAAL (Mobile Service for Local Support). See, for instance, Santos, B.S. and Nunes, J. A. (eds.) 2004. Reinventing Democracy: Grassroots Movements in Portugal. *South European Society & Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 2; or, in Portuguese, Bandeirinha, J. A. 2007. *O Processo SAAL e a Arquitectura no 25 de Abril de 1974*. Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra.

beings and abiotic components) and considering, in a integrated manner, the economic, social, cultural, environmental, territorial, scientific and political perspectives in which it translates. (Amaro 2009: 22; my translation)

Based on Macaronesia's experiences, Amaro systematizes solidarity economy around eight dimensions: (1) an *economic project*, involving the production and sale of goods and services; (2) a *social project*, promoting social inclusion and cohesion; (3) a *cultural project*, respecting and promoting cultural diversity; (4) an *environmental project*, valuing and protecting the environment; (5) a *territorial project*, mobilizing endogenous resources and capabilities and promoting local development; (6) a *management project*, involving the adoption of specific management methods; (7) a *knowledge project*, constantly monitoring and learning from the experience; (8) a *political project*, based on democratic principles, at the internal level, and on shared governance and co-responsibility, at external level.

This multidimensional approach focuses on the potential of social and solidarity economy in terms of a holistic and integrated development model. According to the author, it aims at integrating the economy with all aspects of life, acting as a factor of social and human development. Empirically, it tends to be related to a welfare-mix, complement to the private and public sectors, and its main protagonists are, perhaps, development agents and Local Development Associations (ADL).

Namorado (2009), referring to the Portuguese case, says that the social and solidarity economy “works within capitalism, albeit it follows a different logic from the capitalist logic. (...) its subordination within capitalism does not prevent it from having the alternative energy needed to be conceived as part of a post-capitalist horizon” (Namorado 2009: 69; my translation).

Differently, in Brazil, social and solidarity economy is clearly advocated as an alternative to the social and work relations of capitalism, characterized by exploitation, competition and commodification. Singer, its main protagonist, defines it as “an other mode of production, whose basic principles are the collective or associated propriety of capital and the right to individual freedom” (Singer 2002: 10; my translation).

In recent years, Brazil has evolved from a periphery of the world-system, “whose historic function was to provide elements for capital accumulation in the center” (Oliveira 2003: 126; my translation) to a clear insertion in the new global capitalism, with impressive growth rates that rendered the country an “emerging market”. However, this newly advanced economic development occurs in an extremely unequal society, in which it prevails a large part of the population living in poverty and a precarious working class. This is a fertile ground for the emergence of social and solidarity economy:

In Brazil the idea of building solidarity economy, especially from the nineties, is emphasized through the large number of associative experiences that are organized by workers in urban and rural areas, in different economic and social contexts, along with experiences of bankrupt companies that are recovered by workers; formal or informal community groups and associations; associations and cooperatives formed by family farmers and agrarian reform settlers; urban cooperatives (labor, consume and services); solidarity finance, among others.

Given this context, the social movement of solidarity economy, in Brazil, is organized together with the popular movements for the country's democratization and gain visibility from the nineties. (SENAES 2011: 12-13; my translation)

Today in Brazil there is a clear recognition and a widespread use of the concept of solidarity economy.

It is interesting to notice that, while in some places, as in Portugal, the terms social and solidarity economy and third sector are used as analogous, in Brazil, there is a clear distinction between them. The charter of principles from the Brazilian Forum of Solidarity Economy clearly diverges from the third sector stating that it replaces the state in its social obligations and inhibits workers emancipation as active protagonists of their own rights. According to its proponents, the third sector is considered a state partner, which develops top-down approaches. On the contrary, solidarity economy should be grass-rooted and its main characteristic is the workers' autonomy and self-management.

According to the Brazilian perspective, the main focus is on the production sphere. Therefore, the main protagonists of social and solidarity economy are the workers seen as historical subjects in social transformation, defending in a militant way a new mode of production and wealth distribution. Self-management and the productive character are essential features of the initiatives, which is not so much the Portuguese case. In addition, it is also close to unions and the labor movements.

Many initiatives are linked to attempts to fight against unemployment and to guarantee income for workers made redundant in the labor market, such as in the case of former companies recovered by workers under self-management. In fact, the main reason stated for the creation of solidarity economy initiatives in Brazil is the "alternative to unemployment" (SENAES 2007).

In Brazil, there is a stronger common identity among solidarity economy actors, namely through the existence of a consensual term, a common Charter of Principles, a national forum and regional forums, and a public body for solidarity economy, the National Secretariat of Solidarity Economy (SENAES), that do not exist in the Portuguese case. This stronger identity is also noticeable in the main protagonists, the workers, as well as in the clear opposition to capitalism, the social adversary.

The Brazilian National Secretariat of Solidarity Economy also recognizes solidarity

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