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► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Louis Laville. The cross-fertilisation between feminism and the solidarity economy. RIPPESSE Eu Scientific Committee – International webinar on solidarity economy, Mar 2021, [online], France. hal-03256995

HAL Id: hal-03256995

<https://hal-cnam.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03256995>

Submitted on 10 Jun 2021

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The cross-fertilisation between feminism and the solidarity economy

Today there is an international infatuation with a grouping most often called the social and solidarity economy, evidenced by the fact that, since the start of the 21st century, more than thirty countries on different continents have adopted public policies or laws in this area. Of course, there are numerous ambiguities attached to this institutionalisation, but all the same it represents a change in relation to the debates focussed in the 20th century on the respective importance of the market and the state. This at least partial recognition has been made possible by the existence of non-capitalist enterprises and organisations with the status of associations, cooperatives or mutuals. These have been brought together under a single label – that of the social economy – because they adopt a number of common rules: the limitation of profit-making, the constitution of a sustainably collective capital, equality of the vote among members. This set of rules was challenged by a proliferation of civil-society initiatives that appeared at the end of the 20th century, emerging first of all in South America and in Europe and then elsewhere under the name “solidarity economy”.

Critical feminisms, in particular materialist ones, share with the social and solidarity economy (SSE) the key idea that domination is exercised largely through the dominant economic model. This observation is even more pertinent today with neoliberalism, which – as theorists have clearly identified – gives primacy to the principle of competition even if this means moving towards a “limited democracy” (Hayek, 1983). Furthermore, numerous social and environmental demands have been rejected on the basis that they would run contrary to the economic laws to which “it is necessary to adapt” (Stiegler, 2019).

Once we recognise the radicalisation induced by neoliberalism, we can see that it is the very future of democracy that is under threat if we do not deconstruct orthodox representations of the economy. It has fallen to feminist approaches to economics to address this question and highlight the hierarchisation inherent to the “capital-centric” imaginary that valorises market production to the detriment of reproduction, which encompasses the activities of caring for others and domestic work. Studies that take into account the work done by women within the household have demonstrated its importance.

As an equally undervalued economic form, the social and solidarity economy should thus logically – we might suppose – come together with feminism to assert the complexity of real economic practices against the homogenising and totalising discourse of generalised competition. But there remains a distinct lack of mutual understanding between the two. The first part of this contribution will go over the reasons for this mutual ignorance. This will enable us, in the second part, to develop an integrated theory that both takes advantage of their complementarities and envisages a new dialogue between South and North in order to do so.

1. The reasons for mutual ignorance

The first reason impeding the convergence of critical feminisms with the social and solidarity economy dates back to the second nineteenth century, to take up Hobsbawm’s expression (1978, 1980) which contrasts this era “of capital and empires” with a first nineteenth century, “the era of revolutions”. This reason resides in the very genesis of what will become the theories of social movements and of the social economy, respectively.

1.1 Separate theories

In this second nineteenth century, the worker's movement was considered the central social movement that would unite those struggles capable of overcoming capitalist power. After the dissension of the First International, the popular marxism that took hold following the Second and Third Internationals – under the impetus of Engels, who sought to found a scientific socialism – was largely characterised by the combination of an economic determinism and a political fetishism.

Its economic determinism lay in an evolutionist perspective that distinguished successive historical phases, synonymous with human and civilizational progress. In this account, the revolution appears as inevitable from the moment when the development of the productive forces proves sufficient – and it is supposed to open onto a final stage of human progress. Economic determinism and political fetishism are thus in league with one another. The centralisation of the workers' movement is supposed to increase the efficacy of mass organisation, and taking hold of state power is supposed launch a liberation as sudden as it is definitive through the structural modifications it enables. This messianism holds up the goal of a new society and thus logically devalues all attempts prior to this great disruption, just as it eludes democratic conflict and compromise.

During the same period, social economy crystallised separately around another variant of economic determinism – “enterprisism”. This was characterised by the belief in non-capitalist enterprises supposedly capable of spreading by example. The cooperative model was held up as the principal vehicle of transformation, but at the cost of neglecting the necessity of political mediation. As such, feminist critiques of capitalism, such as those of Frederici (2012), can be expanded to social economy, which endorses a productivism fed by a growth in enterprise as the sole vehicle for social change. This conception maintains the illusion that the multiplication of cooperatives will be enough to generate the desired transformation in relations of production, which casts into the shadows all those relations that belong to the domestic sphere. Finally, social economy enterprises – which are different to begin with – prove incapable of modifying the system; what we see is more their gradual normalisation. They are subject to the phenomenon of institutional isomorphism, which leads them increasingly to resemble the capitalist enterprises with which they are in competition in the same field. Unlike social movements, social economy restricts the political dimension to matters pertaining to the internal organisation of enterprises.

1.2 Recent developments

The mutual ignorance of social movements and social economy is thus an old one. But it also has more recent causes.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the new social movements sought to do away with the economic determinism that had so hobbled the workers' movement. The desire to distinguish themselves from the previous economism led to what observers have called a cultural turn – or, in other words, to focus on demands related to identity. There is thus the risk – and this is the concern raised by Fraser (2015) about the Western feminist movement – of culturalism taking root. The emphasis on identity-based dimensions may drift, she says, towards “dangerous liaisons” (Eisenstein 2005) between the feminist movement and the new capitalism. Feminism may abandon questions of inequality and thus be instrumentalised by this “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski, Chiappello), which takes up the discourse of

authenticity, of respect for differences and of self-realisation. It may also turn away from economic questions on the basis that, while they structured the contestations of yesterday, they are now obsolete.

While analyses of social movements seem for this reason to neglect the economy as a whole, the social economy specifically is understood with reference to the emergence of solidarity initiatives, arising for some actors in these movements who would like to enrich their repertoire of action by establishing concrete initiatives in their everyday lives. This effervescence calls for negotiation with the authorities, and the outlines of a strategic compromise emerge with the aim of strengthening this negotiation: the social and solidarity economy approach proposes that the most established entities of the social economy be grouped together with the most contestatory tendencies of the solidarity economy. But while this compromise is empirically useful, it cannot remove all trace of the theoretical differences. On this level – that of academic research – we have just mentioned the inadequacy of the conception of social economy caught up in enterprisism, which leads it to advocate the success of cooperatives on the market, resulting in fact in the tendency of these organisations to become normalised. But we must also note that a particular form of solidarity economy approach has aligned itself with the expansion of the social economy. We see this with Paul Singer in Brazil, who – in his first books, as well as when he became Secretary of State – advocated a version of the solidarity economy composed mostly of cooperatives characterised not only by their special status but also by the implementation of internal self-management. This version was supported by the unions and consolidated through employee takeovers of companies during capitalist restructurings. The mutual ignorance of the recent period thus results from the culturalism of some Western feminisms centred on differences and identities and little concerned by economic questions, on the one hand, and the persistence of a productivist imaginary in numerous representations of the social and solidarity economy, on the other.

This imaginary is, however, undermined by the multiplicity of actual practices and it is to the credit of Singer and his team to have embraced very different collectives (communities of descendants of slaves called *quilombolas*, coco farmers, rubber workers, artisanal fishermen, shellfish collectors and myriad craftspeople, embroiderers, beekeepers, growers of medicinal plants, ...). Over 20 years, Singer and his team in the Ministry for the Solidarity Economy in the Brazilian federal government were able to remain open to all these variants of a popular economy – particularly those that came from the least industrialised regions of Brazil.

2. From mutual ignorance to a shared endeavour

But this diversification of initiatives has too often been taken into account only at the margins of public policy, which has remained primarily focussed on cooperatives – for example those that came out of the takeovers of industrial companies by their workers. It is necessary to go further, however: diversification also calls for a theoretical reformulation of the solidarity economy – one that leaves the orbit of social economy. This can be done with the epistemologies of the south, which recommend a sociology of absences and emergences. The sociology of absences “aims to show that what does not exist is actually actively produced as non-existent, that is to say, as an unbelievable alternative to what exists” (Santos 2012, p.52). Non-existence takes the form of what is ignored, taken as backward, inferior, local and particular, unproductive and infertile. When they are made visible, some phenomena – such as the domestic work of women – can then be integrated into thinking about what is at stake in a whole series of emerging initiatives. Complementary to sociologies of absences, the

sociology of emergences “consists in replacing the emptiness of the future according to linear time (an emptiness that may be all or nothing) by a future of plural and concrete possibilities, utopian and realist at one time” (p.54). It “enlarges the present by adding to the existing reality the possibilities and future expectations it contains” (p.56). The aim is to highlight the emancipatory traits of alternatives so as to strengthen their visibility and credibility. Without renouncing rigorous and critical analysis, it seeks to consolidate initiatives rather than undermining their potential, as is usual when experiments are condemned on the grounds of their contamination by the dominant system.

From this perspective, we may posit a congruence between feminism and the solidarity economy when they are both embedded in epistemologies of the south – that is, when we talk about the aspects of reality that have been invisibilised so we can then better identify the significance of current emergences. The two conceptualisations can thus offer another way of envisaging the economy and politics while critiquing their separation, which is too readily endorsed by western-centric approaches.

2.1 Rethinking the economy

The orthodox conception of the economy is centred on the creation of market-based wealth. This has been challenged neither by marxists nor by developmentalists. They, like those who champion the social economy and new social movements, have supported the productivist conception of the economy; either in order to adhere to this in the case of the former two, or to give priority to struggles conducted outside the economy in the case of the latter two. Only the social-democratic version of marxism has managed to accept that in addition there exists a non-market economy arising from state redistribution that corrects the undesirable effects of the market dynamic, thus legitimising the interventions of the welfare state. But the activity corresponding to the non-monetary economy has been hidden. This is a sign of our neglect of the roles played by slavery and domestic activities in an international division of labour established at the end of the seventeenth century – one that enabled the production of important commodities for the Industrial Revolution – such as cotton, sugar, tobacco, tea – and all food-producing cultures. Smith omitted this non-remunerated work among the reasons he gave for the wealth of nations, and Marx barely analysed their significance.

The modern economy was also constructed on the ignorance of the process of reproducing life, in particular that other form of unpaid work, *care* – considered by Fisher and Tronto (1990) “as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can lie in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (1990, p.40). This definition encompasses a social ecology (health) and an environmental ecology (protection of nature) (Larrère, 2017, p. 32). It suggests that the negation of these two aspects of reproduction, like their separation, has its roots in the notion specific to modernity that the thinking subject is externally positioned in relation to his body; in relation to others, since he is able to make decisions autonomously without moving through any kind of intersubjectivity; and in relation to nature, whose laws he must establish in order to tame and discipline it. Knowledge through reason thus becomes synonymous with mastery and omnipotence.

Taking up the discussion of *care*, economists like Carasco, Faber and Nelson, Folbre, and Larrère have criticised this dominant view, which neglects the activities of *provisioning* whose end is not gain but rather the preservation of life and the concern for well being. On the contrary, they have asserted that, to reintegrate the dimensions of race and gender into the

economy, it is crucial to take into account all forms of production – those that make room for monetary flows as well as those that occur through non-monetary flows – and “to reinsert production into reproduction” (Larrère, op. cit, p.31).

The renewed perspective on the economy thus initiated can be consolidated by setting out the plurality of economic principles as formulated by Polanyi (2011): these refute the idea that the economy is solely formal, that is, based on calculations of utility by each participant; they claim that the economy can be understood in a substantive way, that is, as centred on the satisfaction of needs through social interactions whose nature is circumscribed by institutionalised processes. According to them, we can add to the market and to redistribution – which, as noted above, have shaped the institutional framework of the 20th century through the opposition and synergy between market and state – the principles of reciprocity and of householding. Reciprocity is a specific mode of interdependence of activities and the use of resources that establishes a deliberate complementarity between persons and groups (Servet 2013, p.193). Householding ensures the production and sharing of resources with a view to satisfying the needs of a closed – but not necessarily autarkic – group (Hillenkamp 2013, p.222). These two principles have been hidden precisely because they exist largely in the non-monetary economy.

By combining feminist and Polanyian insights, we thus see that the official story about the economy is truncated because it rests on the absences of the non-monetary economy. These include both production activities extorted through violence in the case of slavery, and reproduction activities that rely strongly on reciprocity and householding.

2.2 Rethinking the political

Echoing economic reductionism – which rejects all but the formal economy – is political reductionism. This consists in restricting the political domain to the mechanism of elections, which enable the selection of representatives who exercise the role of political authorities benefitting from a monopoly over legitimate violence in democracy, according to Weber. Now, authors such as Arendt and Habermas argue that politics cannot be limited to delegation; it is also the means by which societies are able to establish rules of living together – and this depends on a public sphere in which modes of deliberation and decision-making based on citizen engagement can be carried out. Just as the solely productivist view of the economy ignores some of its components, our view of democracy is amputated when it neglects the public sphere. This concept is important: it allows us to move “beyond certain confusions that have harmed many progressive social movements and political theories associated with them” for example, this “longstanding [inability] of the socialist and marxist tradition’s dominant tendency to fully recognise the importance of the distinction between state apparatus, on the one hand, and public arenas for the expression and association of citizens, on the other” (Fraser 2005, p.108).

Habermas’ contribution, decisive for the concept of the public sphere, deserves to be clarified because it has been elaborated several times.

The first, in 1962 – largely influenced by Arendt – is pessimistic: in becoming permeable to the private domain, the bourgeois public sphere has lost its critical substance and become susceptible to manipulation (Habermas, 1997, [1962], p.186) through media that lead to its vassalisation. His conceptual reformulation in 1990 (Habermas, 1997, [1990], I-X) was prompted both by commentaries on his work and by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The

historiography of the 19th century (Calhoun 1992) and the popular resistance at the end of the 20th century led to a positive re-evaluation of the power of civil society. Habermas recognised the need to pluralise his approach and to distinguish among those public spheres subject to integration into the systems and those that re-emerge as autonomous public spheres. Honneth (2013) suggests that their roots can be found in denials of recognition, which attack democratic principles and drive engagement in collective action. Rather than anchoring the communicational dimension in language alone, he links it back to struggles against injustice and disrespect. For his part, Negt (2007) moves from the identification of plural public spheres to study oppositions between bourgeois spheres and plebeian or proletarian spheres.

It is while outlining post-bourgeois public spheres that Habermas encounters associations. In order for intersubjective solidarity to recover its own regulatory power, faced with the economy and the state, it is necessary - Habermas says - to take into account “the associations around which autonomous public spheres can crystallise” (Habermas, 1997, p. XXXII). Associations thus cannot, from a theoretical and practical point of view, be likened to mere private organisations. As detailed studies of associations (Laville, Sainsaulieu, 2018) show, they take on a political dimension. They end up addressing questions of meaning and of the legitimacy of collective action during discussions that take place within them; and they can be structured so as to transform an institutional framework even if it is unfavourable to them. If “society cannot be reduced to a simple amorphous mass”, then this is thanks to this associative fabric which forms the substrate “of this plural public, so to speak, that emerges from the private sphere, constituted of citizens who seek to give public interpretations to their experiences and to their social interests and who exercise influence on the institutionalised formation of opinion and will” (Habermas 1997, p.394).

It is this phenomenon that is central to eco-feminist mobilisations in particular, which - as Larrère (2017) says - “bring private life into public”. However, according to Fraser, this publicisation cannot come about unless people who previously had no access to public platforms can come together in order to consolidate their voice through learning among a group of peers, which the presence of protagonists with higher social status and more accustomed to speaking out risks preventing. For Fraser, the movements of African-Americans and women demonstrate this because they function “as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment [but also] as bases and training grounds for agitational activities” (1990, p.68). She also describes such collectives as subaltern counter-publics in order to emphasise how they must form separately in order first to strengthen their positions before pitting these against those of other groups better endowed with recognised knowledge. With this in mind, Fraser clarifies the ways in which the autonomous public spheres she is talking about - which emerge by making public certain previously undiscussed questions - appear.

2.3 Rethinking the mediations between the economy and politics

Reviewing economic and political absences provides arguments that allow us to better grasp the specificity of emergences collected under the label solidarity economy, many of which come out of women’s initiatives. In order clearly to identify their importance, we must first recover the forgotten memory of realities that have been invisibilised. It then becomes possible, supported by this contestation of the dominant history, to conduct research in the present that does not retreat into reductionisms but rather remains open to both economic and political plurality. This is how a link can be established between the sociology of absences and emergences, and how the perspective of the epistemologies of the south leads to the

methodological decision to carry out two phases of work: first, the task of re-reading the past, and second, a detailed description of current initiatives. This “strong” description must be coupled with “a weak theory” according to Gibson Graham’s provocative recommendations – in other words, we should detail the particularities of practices without masking them with preconceived conceptualisations. If we respect this approach, which sheds light on the stories of emergences by uncovering the extent of preceding absences, the specificities of solidarity-based initiatives will become clear, as long as we consider the two spheres – the economy and politics – together, along with their interactions.

Addressing private questions in public helps shift from inegalitarian to more egalitarian ways of implementing the economic principles of householding and reciprocity. Debates conducted among groups of women generate challenges to the forms of domination exercised in the domestic sphere and favour a reorientation of householding towards the renegotiation of gender roles (Hillenkamp, 2019; Hillenkamp, Nobre, 2018). Comparable developments may bear on reciprocity traditionally anchored in inherited allegiances. Democracy allows us to move beyond communities we are born into; it makes it possible to join communities we have chosen – communities involving a reciprocity in which freedom of allegiance can go hand-in-hand with equality among willing participants. The principles of householding and reciprocity can take on very diverse guises: they may be hierarchical or egalitarian. Here we come up against the ambivalences of modernity, which generates unprecedented discrimination – as we noted earlier – but also carries emancipatory potentialities. This “Janus face of Modernity”, to use Puleo’s term (2017), necessitates a dual strategy: fighting against “the new forms of oppression and exploitation” that it gives rise to, and simultaneously demanding fulfilment of the “ideals of liberty and equality that it promotes”. Even if these are not realised, subaltern groups can demand them so as to rail against the inequalities and exclusions that see them trampled over, as Lefort remarks. This is what they do when they structure themselves as counter-publics, Fraser adds.

In doing so, Fraser clearly identifies that there are two facets to these counter-publics: one centred on mutual aid, the other on struggle. Yet she remains focused on the agonistic register, in line with western critical theory. This is why it is important to expand our focus to make room for solidarity-based public spheres in the proximity services field (Laville, Nyssens, 2000) – spheres more dedicated to attempts to improve daily life and less focused on discursive opposition to the system. By identifying such spheres, studies on the solidarity economy converge with feminisms from the South fighting against the elitism of a feminism from the North obsessed by making political demands. In their view the women of the South are not victims as their sisters in the North believe, but they are involved in more praxeological associations and their resistance is engaged in asserting the value of their own lived experience, as well as in using their voice to facilitate emancipation (Mohanty 1988).

It is thus also a change in perspective that enables us to notice a politics more open to everyday concerns – one that involves the development of economic activities like in the people’s canteens in South America and West Africa, the local food networks in Senegal, the collective kitchens in Peru, the Women’s Self Employment Association in India, etc. (Guérin, Hillenkamp, Verschuur, 2019). Integrating such initiatives into the category of transformative activities, and placing them at the heart of analysis, we must start from the observation that associations supporting popular public spheres – in contrast to bourgeois public spheres – address economic questions because they relate to those problems that are felt to be the most urgent.

Conclusion

In adhering to a sociology of absences, this contribution has sought to highlight the consequences of invisibilising social reproduction in economics and the public sphere in politics. Beyond those mentioned throughout the text, a final invisibilisation remains: that of developing a promethean view of social change obsessed both by class struggle within sites of production and by taking state power. It belongs to a paradigm of uprooting, in the sense that transformation is seen as a rupture that facilitates the dawn of a new man, all-powerful and self-sufficient (Azam 2016, p.293). In this framework, emancipation is an exit from a prior state of dependence, of heteronomy, and an arrival at a final state of full and complete self-fulfilment, that of a perfect wholeness, of an entirely fulfilled essence.

The sociology of emergences gives us the means to escape this paradigm. Rather than remaining obsessed by this “man finally returned to himself”, taking a detour via the detailed description of feminist initiatives such as those of the solidarity economy leads us to think about democracy and fraternity as “present here and now” (Nancy op., cit) as long as emancipation and social protection are considered together. We can rejoin Fraser here; building on the double movement of commodification and social protection highlighted by Polanyi, she suggests a triple movement by introducing a third term, emancipation. Taking into account those dangerous liaisons mentioned above between movements that define themselves as cultural and commodification, she recommends “a new alliance between social protection and emancipation”. This intuition should be extended by taking into account solidarity-based initiatives, because they are trying to construct this alliance. Our task is not to pin an economism or a culturalism onto these initiatives, but rather to decipher their ambiguities between innovation and normalisation. If we move in this direction, then separations are replaced with hybridisations between actors’ logics, the paradigm of uprooting is substituted by the paradigm of transition, which pushes us towards a research programme that converges with “transformative social innovations” and the “Multi-Level Perspective on Sustainability Transitions” (Fossati, Degavre, Levesque, 2019).

This focus split between transformative innovations and the transition leads us to underline the proposition that emerges from the feminist and Polanyian contributions to understanding the solidarity economy: it consists in linking together the critical approach and possibilism. Two separate worlds of research have formed: one around social movements that denounce the multiple forms of domination and reproduction yet which can only envisage these being overcome through purely demand-making action, the other asserting the value of the micro-assemblages emerging from economic initiatives. These two worlds are insufficient, the first because it condemns all emergences with an economic dimension and thus ends up in a radical critique of the existing system but without any concrete possibility of moving beyond it; the second because it ignores the formatting of local economic action by the structures pressing down on it. Both the solidarity economy seen from a Polanyian perspective and critical feminisms converge towards the recommendation formulated by Hirschman (1971b, 1986a, 1995) that possibilism should be added to critique (Laville, 2011) – a possibilism that takes account of the multi-dimensionality of concrete activities, adopting repertoires that are simultaneously political, cultural, economic, environmental, etc. The plea for another system cannot argue from the position of a superior rationality, but must more modestly be conducted on the basis of an “order of populations and people” (Peemans 2002) as well as better information about the interactions between politics and economics.

This proposal has been taken up with force in the contribution already cited by Guérin, Hillenkamp and Verschuur, enriched by a focus on significant feminist points of view in

solidarity-based initiatives. It encourages a transdisciplinary research programme based on “a critical and possibilist analysis” that continues to analyse “the solidarity economy through the prism of gender” (2019,).

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