



Stream III: The Social Economy and Governance - Ethics, Responsibility and the Social
Economy

Solidarity Economy and the Conscious Consumer

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Abstract

The model of economic organization, which led to what is known as solidarity economy, was reinvented in the 1990's as an ideological alternative to confront the excluding effects of capitalism and as an alternative of employment policy to the poor, unemployed or underemployed population. We analyzed two cases of Porto Alegre, Brazil. The results demonstrated that there is still a long way to go. Since the majority of producers affirmed that they were better off because of their participation and some consumers appeared to be conscious of their purchase decisions effects, the solidarity economy might be an alternative to the capitalist economy. However, doubt still remains as to if it could include all the population excluded by the capitalist economy, without overlooking the benefits generated until now, and even enlarging them, and as to the relationship of the solidarity economy with the capitalist economy and with the government.

Résumen

El modelo de organización económica, que llevó a lo que conocemos como economía solidaria, fue reinventado en los años 1990 como una alternativa ideológica para confrontar los efectos excluyentes del capitalismo y como una alternativa de política de empleo para la población pobre, desempleada o subempleada. Analisamos dos casos de Porto Alegre,

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Brasil. Los resultados demuestran que hay un largo camino para recorrer. Como la mayoría de los productores afirmó que estaban en mejores condiciones debido a su participación y algunos consumidores parecían estar concientes del efecto de sus decisiones de compra, la economía solidaria puede ser una alternativa a la economía capitalista. Sin embargo, permanecen dudas relacionadas a su capacidad de incluir toda la población excluida de la economía capitalista, sin dejar de generar los beneficios conquistados hasta ahora y incluso agrandarlos, y a la relación de la economía solidaria con la economía capitalista y con el gobierno.

Résumé

Le modèle d'organisation économique, qui a mené à ce qu'on connaît comme l'économie solidaire, a été reinventé dans les années 1990 comme une alternative idéologique pour confronter les effets exclusives du capitalisme et comme une alternative de politique d'emploi à la population pauvre, au chômage ou sousemployée. On a analysé deux cases de Porto Alegre, Brésil. Les résultats démontrent qu'il y a un extense chemin à parcourir. Étant donné que la majorité des producteurs a affirmé que ils étaient en meilleures conditions grâce à leur participation et que quelques consommateurs paraissaient être conscients du effet de leur décisions d'achat, l'économie solidaire peut être une alternative à l'économie capitaliste. Néanmoins, il y a encore des doutes liés à sa capacité d'inclure tout la population exclue de l'économie capitaliste, sans oblier les bénéfits déjà acquis, et sur la relation de l'économie solidaire avec l'économie capitaliste et avec le gouvernement.

1. Introduction

Even though the solidarity economy was born approximately at the same time as the industrial capitalism was rising, it was reinvented in the 1990s. In this period, the solidarity economy was created as a concept and as a recover of the principles of democracy, equality, self-management and employment not based on wages. The focus was on the emancipation movements of the civil society, which sought to deepen political democracy so that it could also include economic democracy. Hence, the distribution of roles between the civil society and the State would be more evident, and the citizens could change from being protected by the State to being participants in the society. We need to study the solidarity economy as a

locus of real enterprises as a means to find out if they constitute an alternative or a mere substitute to the employment in a capitalist enterprise. To achieve this goal we need to understand the reasons to place it in the first case, instead of the second one, or in other words, we need to discover if it presents advantages or complementarities to the capitalist model.

Nowadays, the solidarity economy has been largely used as employment policy, that is, as an alternative means of resolving the allocative issue of labor and income. Because of its characteristic of labor and income allocation, solidarity economy is a subject of great importance in Economics, in spite of the fact that it can also be studied in other fields as alternative means of management or socialization.

The literature on solidarity economy stresses that the goal of this type of economic organization is not only an employment alternative to the people excluded from the capitalist economy. It is also the increase of workers consciousness and their education as citizens, expanding the democracy by their participation in the management of the enterprises in which they work.

As to the commercialization, there is a type of trade called the fair trade. It is a commercial relationship that involves a double commitment: the producers are committed to comply with a series of principles and the consumers are committed with paying a fairer price for the products, that is, a price that would be enough for the material reproduction of producers. Since this strategy involves the increase of the consumers' consciousness and their commitment, the price of the product should embody an idea, as, for example, the protection of a social movement.

In this way, our aim is to identify the perspectives and the potential of the production and commercialization of products in a model of solidarity economy. This aim is achieved by the study of two enterprises of Porto Alegre, Brazil: the open-air markets of Cooperativa Ecológica Coolméia and the shops of Etiqueta Popular. For this reason, we tried to identify how the cooperatives' members understand their participation and the potential of their enterprise, and of the solidarity economy as a whole. We also sought to identify the reason that the consumers presented for the acquisition of these products, if they are conscious of establishing a commitment with the producers, as well as the model the producers use to form their prices.

2. Solidarity Economy

In this part we seek to understand how old and new perceptions of solidarity economy are associated. On one hand, there are historical roots that remount to at least the beginning of capitalism, which presented a greater or smaller importance, depending on the country and the historical period. On the other hand, there is a new context in which the solidarity economy developed on the last two or three decades, which implies a “reinvention” of the solidarity economy.

Since the end of the 1970's, we have been facing problems such as the end of the period of high economic growth rates, the crisis of the Welfare State, the transformations in the capital-labor relationship, which lead to a movement of work flexibilization or precarization, and the increase by the capital of its efforts to absorb a greater part of the productivity raise by incorporating new technologies. In Brazil, the change of the development axis from the country to the city, as well as the change of the agro-exporter pattern to the model of import

substitution industrialization in the previous decades, had caused an enormous afflux of people to the cities, to be employed mainly in these new industries.

However, this entire contingent could not be employed by the mercantile economy, especially when the employment growth started to decline in the 1980's. From the initiatives of part of this population excluded from the labor market, the solidarity economy started to take place in Brazil. That is why the reinvention occurs in two fronts. In the first one, it was impelled by the movements of the Left as an alternative to the end of the expectations of a social change lead by the ideals of the real socialism, which means that it was an ideological alternative to affront the excluding effects of capitalism. In the second one, it was meant as an alternative of employment policy, when civil society organizations and governments started to perceive the solidarity economy as a way of generating income to the poorest, unemployed or subemployed part of the population.

In spite of the changes of the last three decades, mentioned earlier, employment is still important to the organization of the society, since it is a social experienceⁱ. This fact leads us to ask what happens, then, to those who do not have employment because they were never included or because they were excluded from the labor market. That is the main issue that the solidarity economy addresses, and that is why the enterprises assume different forms.

The term solidarity economy possesses different definitions. All of them however have in common the idea of solidarity. This solidarity occurs in two directions: to the members of the organization (of production, consumption, credit or other goals) by means of self-management; to the workers, in general, by means of the help to the least favoredⁱⁱ. The initiatives related to the solidarity economy might appear spontaneously and receive support

from organizations of NGOs or universities. Most recently, solidarity enterprises may also be created under the support from governments of cities, of states or federal. On June of 2003, the Brazilian National Office of Solidarity Economy was created, under the Work Ministry, with the aim of elaborating programs related to policies of employment generation, poverty relief and social inclusion.

In a related movement, we can place the fair trade. While in the solidarity economy, solidarity is established among workers, in the fair trade, solidarity takes place between consumers and producers. From this second type of solidarity, emerges a commitment between agents. On one hand, the producers are committed to follow a series of principles, such as the democratic organization of production, the gender equality, the non-use of child labor, environmental sustainability, among others. On the other hand, the consumers are committed to seek information on the production and quality of the products, as a way of guaranteeing the fulfillment of these principles, and they are also committed to paying a fairer price of these products, that is, a price that is enough for the producers' material reproduction. The concept of fair trade, which initially meant the South-North trade, ended up being expanded. Nowadays, this concept includes other types of trade relations, such as the internal trade.

Fair trade seeks the development of alternative forms of trade, which are based in solidarity, that is, greater equality and sustainability in the commercial transactions, the economic and social local development with emphasis in the local culture and values. This type of trade also requires the existence of "conscious consumer" or "solidarity consumer", a consumer that would not make his consumption decisions based only on his immediate needs, publicity, his

own welfare or in the decisions of other consumers. This consumer would think of the effect of his decisions on the welfare of other people.

3. Economics and Solidarity Economy

It is suggested that there is a plurality of reasons and motivations for both producers and consumers to participate in social movements. That is why neither the traditional economic theory nor an utopist view of the substitution of the traditional capitalist firm can be verified when dealing with this subject. Solidarity economy was reinvented by the reaction of workers so that they could keep their material reproduction, when facing the changes of the capitalism. These changes lead to unemployment, work precarization and destabilization of the relation between State and market. However, the discussion of the theories that explain the solidarity economy and its development are not enough to the understanding of this sector and movement.

The associations involved in solidarity economy and fair trade are related not only to the economic field but to the social and political ones as well. For this reason, even if the *homo œconomicus* is egoist and maximizer (according to traditional economics), in these associations, individuals participate not only as economic agents, but also as citizens and as members of a community.

When disregarded individual interest as the only motivating principle of economic behavior, when apprehending the social structure of economic relations and the plurality of fields in which the solidarity economy acts, it becomes possible the existence of solidarity as a motivating principle of human action and the justification of the fair trade functioning.

With modernity, the individual becomes responsible of his welfare, and, thus, of being (un)employed. The unemployment is then viewed as a choice of the individual and not as a social or systemic issue. However, how can the individual be responsible for his unemployment when his not his own employer? He might be responsible for it in a self-managed enterprise, where each worker is the owner and responsible of its main decisions, as in the case of solidarity economy.

In the beginning of capitalism, the freedoms acquired were perceived as positive, when compared to the privileges of medieval feudalism, as stressed by Marx in chapter 24 of *The Capital*. With capitalism, men became free in the sense of free from the means of production and free from the privileges of the Church and the nobility. Nevertheless, the increase in impersonal relations and the fragmentation of personal relations lead to a process of independence between the economic and the social spheres. At the same time as the market economy was being constituted, the market society was formed as wellⁱⁱⁱ. Thus, interest became the main motivation in an increasing number of day life activities.

Both fair trade and solidarity economy demand the integration of concepts such as equality, democracy, justice and freedom when evaluating economic development. Trade, in this case, is not determined only by the auto-regulated forces of the market, but also by the social notions of justice.

Sen^{iv} points to two origins of economics; one is related to engineering and the other one to ethics. In modern economics, the first origin prevailed and economics went far from ethic issues. The author emphasizes that the two approaches are important, but each one has a greater importance depending on the subject assessed. In the case of solidarity economy and

fair trade, it is very useful the emphasis on the ethics because they cannot be understood when assessed only by a logistic and coordinating analysis. That is due to their difference with mercantile trade, which is related to allocation and to impersonal relations in a self-regulated and social unembedded market. According to the author, the recover of some kind of ethics by economics would imply the refuse of homogeneous rationality, that is, the perception of individuals in a wider way, admitting behaviors others than rationality and the approach of social institutions in a less simplistic way.

There is another concept suggested by Sen^v that would make it possible to describe human behavior and that would not be excluding of other concepts. This concept is commitment and is related to moral. This concept is embedded in social relations because it is determined by ethics, which is part of the culture of a society. Besides, the concept of commitment can also be related to habit. The importance of commitment is explained in another paper. Sen^{vi} presents two reasons to explain why it is important to consider commitment as one of the rationality principles. First, it is because it widens the concept of rationality, making the *homo œconomicus* less robotic, since besides satisfying his needs, he would also have “[...] *freedom to decide what to value and how to pursue what we value*”^{vii}. Second, it allows us to better apprehend human behavior, especially because it allows us to explain variations in behavior between societies and periods of time, by incorporating society into individuals.

This connection between economy and society can also be established by considering that agents do not have complete information for the decisions they have to make neither the mental capability of interpreting them completely^{viii}. In consequence, agents form ideologies, dogmas, myths and prejudices to guide their choices, and the instrumental rationality of the

traditional economic theory is not suited for most of the situations in which agents have to make choices^{ix}. These situations in which choices are made under incomplete information and deficient rationality occur mainly in markets where the property of goods and services are not easy to measure. Hence, we can include in these situations the cases when a relevant and hard to measure characteristic of the goods is fairness, as in fair trade.

The abandon of the idea of the *homo œconomicus* as egoist and inclined to trade is also necessary to understand market as a social construction and economic behavior as embedded in social relations. That is due to the fact that both solidarity economy and fair trade appeared as an alternative to the logic of capitalist production and trade. Also, the utilitarian logic cannot comprise economic practices that did not dissociate from the society^x, or the ones that have dissociated and that now try to retrieve this relation between economy and society, as it is the case of the practices analyzed in this paper.

Individualism did not take over all the society or all the economy. Society influences the market in three main ways^{xi}: by personal relations and networks; by power structures and formal institutions; by culture and habit. So, when we see the market as a historical construction and as an allocation form as any other, we have the opportunity to discuss the influence of both economic and non-economic variables on economic relations, that is to say, those relations related to production and allocation of goods and services.

A society is not able to endure the fissures created by the transformation of society into a market society without creating protection mechanisms against them. “*The more comprehensive the market system became, the more it revealed its incapacity to satisfy the requirements of a stable society.*”^{xii}. Thus, men, nature and mercantile trade need protection

against the devastating forces of the self-regulated market. This is not a critic against the market *per se*. It is a critic to the market economy with self-regulated markets, which lead, as stressed by Stanfield^{xiii} when analyzing Polanyi's work, to the 1929's crisis. The market *per se* does not deserve generalized critics, since the restriction of access to the market lead to more poverty than the mere existence of the market.^{xiv}. The critic of this unembedded economy does not imply the suggestion of returning to the past because a great part of the freedom acquired by people on this passage was important, and markets can help improving the life of the poor, as long as this population is allowed to participate in the market in a less unequal situation.

We need to think the market as a social/historical construction and the economy with social structures if we want to understand solidarity economy as more than just an answer to a crisis. Or as an answer to a crisis that leave roots, since it is also an answer to failures of capitalism with alternative or non-capitalist solutions that are inserted in capitalism. Therefore, in spite of constituting non-capitalist forms of production, the solidarity economy does not have the intention of revolution. This is clear when we realize that its reinvention occurs at the same time as the end of real socialism as an alternative for the people that are not satisfied with the current system. At this time, many people were changing strategy, embracing other forms or other ranges of change and emancipation, allied to the plasticity of the capitalist system, that is, its capability to absorb the contra-culture, and, many times, transform this contra-culture in capitalism.

Since the market is a social construction and prices are not the main issue, how then do enterprises form prices and consumers make consumption decisions in a market? Certainly

culture, habit and the comparison with other enterprises and other consumers are important factors to be considered. Consumption and price decisions are not based only on preferences and costs curves; they are made in a world with time and uncertainty. That occurs because agents are *bounded rational*, because non economic factors have influence on people's decisions and because individuals are not influenced only by their self-interest.

Even though it is possible to justify the price differences in fair trade by means of the traditional economic theory, it is not possible to explain the product difference and the growing importance of this type of trade. It is had to believe that the same difference that explain choices between Coca-Cola and Pepsi, for example, can also explain the choice between a fair trade product and one of the traditional trade. In fair trade, the conscious consumer acquires not just products but also a commitment relation with producers when he receives information of the origin of these products^{xv}, since the “education” of this conscious consumer is one of the goals of fair trade. The choices of an individual might have a power of transformation. It is evident as well that for this transformation to take place this conscious consumer cannot be alone. Even if acting alone, when making his consumption decisions, the transformation would require a certain number of consumers making choices in a conscious way instead of a passive way.

When technology made necessary for entrepreneurs to build strategies to stimulate and increase consumption, the creation of a market became the role of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur because new products do not spontaneously have consumers. Products that caused lesser environmental impacts or that were produced by solidarity economy enterprises would also be innovations, and henceforth would require this market acceptance period. In

other words, they would also need their “different” qualities publicized. Non-governmental organizations and social movements have been contributing for this the publicity of these qualities and, in some case, for the certification of products and processes. This gives more knowledge and confidence for consumers in what concerns the products that are said to be social and ecologically improved.

4. Perspectives and Potential

We understand the term development as an improvement in the quality of life, in a way that people can live the lives that they have reason to cherish, that is, as more than a survival strategy when facing adverse conditions. That is why we try to understand the possibility that the solidarity economy is a development alternative to capitalism, stimulating economic motivations others than the self-interest, such as commitment, and also understand the impact of these motivations on the economic relations.

The assessment of the cases studied here was made by interviews with producers and consumers of these solidarity enterprises. The aim of these interviews was to study the range of opinions, that is, the different views of the production and commercialization in a model of solidarity economy. Both cases are related to the production and to the commercialization of products. Also, in both cases, the producers are responsible for the commercialization of their own products, with intermediaries, establishing a direct contact with the consumers. The reason for this direct contact to be necessary is the inexistence, in Brazil, of an organism of labeling of these products in the model of the FLO International, which is responsible to create a pattern and to give credibility to fair trade in Europe. We also chose a case of agricultural products and one of manufacturing. The Coolméia’s open-air markets started as

an initiative of Cooperativa Coolméia and the producers, which received support and training from the cooperative. On the other hand, Etiqueta Popular started with the support of the government of the city of Porto Alegre, with the ideal of generating employment and income.

Some producers decided to participate because they were unemployed and others because they needed or wanted to raise their income. Others, because they believed that there was a different economy, compared with the capitalist model. For the producers of the Coolméia's open-air markets this difference between the familiar ecological production and the traditional one would be that in the first case they had more control over their production and their way of living, which means that these would be economic relations more embedded in a social context, or in an interpretation à la Polanyi^{xvi}, this would be the construction of a social protection to those that participate in a market economy. For the producers of Etiqueta Popular, the most evident difference between the solidarity economy and the capitalist economy would be that they were no longer "exploited by a boss", and that for this reason they showed since they were the owners of the enterprises. Some producers had decided to participate, at first, as an answer to the unemployment, but, afterwards, they kept on participating also because of the movement, when they had contact with the solidarity economy.

The reasons given by the producers to participate in these solidarity enterprises indicate that the solidarity economy would develop in answer to the decrease in economic growth and increase in unemployment. But not only this: it would also develop as an answer to the excluding effects of the capitalist economy, as demonstrated by the producers dissatisfaction with this type of economy and by the non-monetary benefits they perceived because of their

participation in the solidarity economy. Interviewed producers manifested a desire to participate in a fairer model of economy. Nevertheless, they had doubts as to how this economy would be organized and, mainly, as to what the relation between this fairer economy and the term solidarity economy.

Some producers have affirmed that they felt a greater autonomy by producing ecological products, in the case of the Coolméia's open-air markets, and by being "their own bosses", in the case of Etiqueta Popular. Notwithstanding, this feeling is not demonstrated by all producers that were interviewed. Some of them have affirmed that they would accept a job in a capitalist enterprise or build their own capitalist enterprise if they had the opportunity. Others, believed that the solidarity economy movement, identified as the enterprise to which they belonged, "did not work".

Many of the producers that were interviewed affirmed to be satisfied with the results reached until now, and optimists about the growth of solidarity economy and about the increase in consciousness of consumers, whom they believed to be starting to know the movement and to take interest in it. What was missing, according to some of the producers, would be a greater contribution of the government and a stronger publicity about the movement, not only of these enterprises, but about all the sectors involved in solidarity economy. One deficiency that was not mentioned by producers was the lack of articulation among enterprises. For example, one of the stores of Etiqueta Popular is located near one of the Coolméia's open-air market; however, these two did not establish any kind of relationship, as well as very few consumers that we interviewed bought products of both enterprises.

These enterprises would already be articulated with market, by making economic transactions with and within it. By getting help from the government they could also be articulated with the State. In this way they could also build their own dynamic by forming a network that should include not only solidarity enterprises but governmental organisms as well. Help from the government would be necessary both to control the inclusion on the beneficiaries of this movement (as producers, as well as consumers) of the most vulnerable population, and to form the conscious consumer. The publicity of the difference of these products is important, and that is exactly what we see everyday in the publicity of the traditional trade products, when there is at least a small degree of monopolist competition. However, in these cases that we studied the publicity would have as aim the formation of a consumer not only conscious of a physical difference between products, but also of the social results of his consumption decision.

Despite of being risky for solidarity economy enterprises to depend on conscious consumers for them to be viable, since they constitute just a limited portion of the population, fair trade may allow producers to have a fairer remuneration for their work. This would be mainly when they are small producers or family producers and when they produce traditional goods that have reduced prices, as it is the case of agricultural products.

Some producers and consumers that were interviewed pointed to a more positive perspective for solidarity economy. They believed that there was a possibility of growth of this of economic relation, with benefits greater than simply the acquisition of a better income. Some also perceived the transformation potential of they consumption decisions. Even though these producers and consumers constituted a minority of the ones interviewed, they might be

pointing to a change or indicating that a stronger publicity of this movement among consumers and producers could expand solidarity economy as an alternative to the capitalist economy, at least for the population marginalized by the capitalist model.

Even if prices are not that fair, in the sense of being able to provide a level of income that allows a worthy life, other benefits that are identified by producers as a result of their participation in these enterprises might improve their quality of life. This improvement could be generated either by generating a solidarity network capable of reducing the vulnerability of this group of people, or by allowing an increase in consumption by the exchange of products among producers.

As to producers, we found a plurality of motives to participate in the enterprises and of benefits resulted from it. At least in a second moment, the functioning of these enterprises does not depend on high unemployment rates or lack of income, since the majority of the interviewed producers believed that the form of economy in which they participated was different, when compared to the capitalist economy. In the first, they have a greater control of their production, work and way of life. Solidarity, however, seemed to have a greater presence among producers than between producers and their consumers. Only a small portion of the consumers that were interviewed in both cases demonstrated to be worried also with the welfare of producers and with the environment. The consumers that appeared to have this worry, showed it in various forms, pointing sometimes to the environment, others to the familiar production, considered by these consumers as a better way of production, and others to the value of workers and of the craftwork.

In spite of that, consumers also presented a plurality of reasons to participate, that is, to consume products from these enterprises, and some justified their participation including a concern on the quality of life of producers. This issue is so important because when the recognition of product differences is essential, but not easily perceptible, as it is with fair trade, the price formation needs to consider the degree of consciousness of consumers, so that enterprises can be viable. This, however, might result in prices smaller than the ones necessary for producers to lead a decent life.

5. Conclusions

We have discussed here an ancient movement in a new context. The solidarity economy could have different definitions, but all of them are related to the increase of solidarity and the decrease of individualism among agents, if they are producers, consumers, credit takers, etc. Thus, we found a variety of motivations in the cases studied here. These motivations could include the concern in obtaining income (greater or complementary) as well as non-monetary benefits, such as friendship, generating a better work environment and personal ties.

Solidarity economy is both an alternative to unemployment and a way of confronting the effects of the capitalist model, or the model *per se*, without being necessary to substitute it. Henceforth, there are, at least, two alternatives to the solidarity enterprises: competition with capitalist enterprises or fair trade. We do not postulate that the fair trade alternative is the best one for all cases. Notwithstanding, for the enterprises we studied here, this alternative seems to be a good one, since the traditional market prices for the products they produce (food and low-technology durable goods) could be too low to allow them life with quality.

The result of the analysis of the interviews demonstrated that there is still a long way to go through, and that the producers have realized that. The fact that the majority of the producers has affirmed that they were better off because of their participation and the fact that some consumers appeared to be conscious of the effect of their purchase decisions might indicate that the solidarity economy is an alternative to the capitalist economy. However, doubt still remains as to the size of this economy, that is, could it include all the population excluded by the capitalist economy, without overlooking the benefits generated until now, and even enlarging them. There are also doubts as to the relationship of the solidarity economy with the capitalist economy and with the government.

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