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## Solidarity Economy Markets as “Commons Ecologies.” The Politicization of the Market-space by *Esperança-Coesperança*, Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyses how Solidarity Economy markets contribute to the development of post-capitalist livelihoods, as spaces of politicization of production and consumption through the establishment of collaborative linkages between producers, between these and consumers, and with social movements. The case study analysis of the solidarity economy markets promoted by Esperança/Coesperança, a solidarity economy network in the central region of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, indicates that such spaces support the emergence of counterpower by re-signifying economy activity and facilitating collective action. Fieldwork data indicates that they promote “commons ecologies” by creating linkages among commons and promoting commoning at larger scales. They also facilitate mobilization, from the part of participating producers and consumers, as well as the wider public, against existing institutional barriers to commoning.*

**Keywords:** *Solidarity Economy; Commons Ecologies; Mobilizational Citizenship; Alternative Markets; Public Sphere*

### 1. Introduction

In order to be self-sustaining, post-capitalist livelihoods and initiatives must be based on “local cooperative ecosystems”, constituted by “commons ecologies” based on “system-like stock-and-flow” circuits of value which reproduce the material resources, norms and rules that are necessary for their self-sustenance (de Angelis 2017: 270-1). De Angelis (2017) defines “commons ecologies” as “interrelations among different commons and their environments brought about by a particular type of *commoning* that put them into communication and sustained cooperation, that is *boundary commoning* (...)” meaning a process that “(...) activates and sustains relations among commons (...)”, in this case practices of economic subsistence developed within families and communities, “(...) thus giving shape to commons at larger scales (...)” (p. 287). This concept can be framed by Polanyi’s vision of an “active society” in “contradictory”, but creative, “tension with the market” and its tendency to commodify three fictitious commodities, labour, land and money, by reducing them to exchange value (Burawoy 2003: 198). The still-evolving concept of Solidarity Economy frames that challenge as a bottom-up process, based on prefigurative practices of economic self-governance that prioritize the creation of social value over capital accumulation (Mance 2007; Auinger 2009; Laville 2016; Ould Ahmed 2015). At its core is the normative orientation of economic activity towards democratic deepening within enterprises and at the state level (Laville 2016: 244-5), as well as the promotion of economic resilience of territories (Bauwens and Niaros 2017: 24; Cohen 2017: 3; Estivill 2018: 15).

Community currencies support the constitution of “commons ecologies” as means of exchange that socialize its participants into the norms and practices of effective communication, internal trust and reciprocity (Poteete and Ostrom 2010; Lietaer et al. 2012), which support the coordination of lateral interactions among a diverse set of actors (Bar-Yam 2002). They facilitate the “co-production” of networks of trust that lead to the emergence of local and regional-level supply chains (Lietaer et al. 2012; Rigo and França Filho 2017).

If community currencies are not in place, it is necessary to promote, as an intermediary strategy, a bottom-up system of counterpower which questions the status quo and engages consumers, philanthropies and the state in reimagining the economy over time. Central to this process is the setting up of “alternative spaces” where “socio-ethical and counter-cultural practices” are experimented with, enacted and coordinated (Fois 2019: 108). Studies of prefigurative politics have shown a variety of forms in which “alternative spaces” exist and function (i.e. Gibson-Graham 2006, 2008). These include grassroots networks of “political consumerism”, such as Solidarity Purchasing Groups, as well as Solidarity Economy markets (Graziano and Forno 2012; Grasseni 2014; Rakopoulos 2015).

Besides being spaces of commercialization, Solidarity Economy markets are sites of incubation of a “subaltern public sphere” (Fraser 1990) through the co-production of networks of trust and collaboration across different actors, social groups and institutional environments (Rakopoulos 2015). They promote the economic resilience of territories by supporting production relocalization and food system reterritorialization (Migliore et al. 2014; Forno, Grasseni and Signori 2015; Rakopoulos 2015; Forno, 2018; Giambartolomei, Forno et al. 2018; Lekakis et al. 2018). This happens through the promotion of direct producer-to-consumer exchanges, which maximize income for producers by cutting middlemen out of transactions (Grasseni 2014; Rakopoulos 2015). They also promote what Escoffier (2018) calls “mobilizational citizenship”, by engaging social movements in forms of political incorporation that emerge from processes of “production of belonging” inherent to the local identities of struggles “updated and reformed through processes of micro-mobilization” (p. 775). That is the case of “slow food” and sustainability transition movements in Italy (Grasseni 2014), of grassroots resistance to EU-imposed austerity measures in Greece (Rakopoulos 2015) and anti-Mafia movements in Sicily (Rakopoulos 2018). These exchanges are embedded in processes of “co-production” of networks of trust, based on relationships of proximity and direct collaboration between consumers whose purchasing choices are motivated by environmental and social justice goals over convenience, affordability and other instrumental concerns, and producers whose characteristics contribute to the pursuit of such goals (Grasseni 2014: 184-5).

## 1.1. Case Study

The case study analysis of the Solidarity Economy markets promoted by *Esperança/Cooesperança*, a solidarity economy network in the central region of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, indicates that Solidarity Economy markets promote “boundary commoning” by fulfilling three functions:

- a)** being spaces of trust building among participating producers and socialization into cooperative practices of production, distribution and commercialization;



- b)** being spaces of proximity between politicized consumers and small producers marginalized by globalized supply chains which “socialize and mobilize individuals and families over environmental and social justice issues, starting with day-to-day consumption practices and decisions” (Graziano and Forno 2012: 122);
- c)** being spaces of engagement of social movements in processes of “mobilizational citizenship” by building counterpower against institutional barriers to commoning and post-capitalist economic activity.

*Esperança/Coesperança* is an anti-poverty project, founded in 1987 in the municipality of Santa Maria, in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. It is based on a bottom-up methodology of formal and informal learning and mobilization that aims to promote “urban, rural and regional sustainable development” through the promotion of post capitalist cooperative livelihoods. *Esperança/Coesperança* engages civil society, as well as the state, in supporting the most vulnerable sectors of society in developing the know-how, technology and skills needed to enter the modern economy. Its markets had a significant impact in poverty reduction in the city of Santa Maria and across the state of Rio Grande do Sul. They were a template for a national-level policy of support to Solidarity Economy-based commercialization during the governments of Luís Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff. They also became a source of best practices for Solidarity Economy fairs across Europe. This was made possible by the mediation work carried out by the institutional structures of the Catholic Church, namely the Diocese of Santa Maria, with the support of the regional branch of *Cáritas Brasileira*, an organization of the *Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil/Brazilian Bishops’ Caucus* (CNBB). At the time of fieldwork, this role was carried out by a team of project managers, headed by Sister Lourdes Dill, member of the religious congregation Daughters of Divine Love and vice-president of *Cáritas Brasileira*. This team was accountable to an Assembly of Representatives, elected among participating producers for tenures that vary between one and three years.

## **1.2. Methodology**

This case study is based on participant observation, semi-structured interviews and archival research carried out during three periods of fieldwork: July 2008-July 2009, January 2012 and September-November 2016. It uses a hermeneutic methodology based on the Grounded Theory Method (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006; Czarniawska 2014). Fieldwork consisted in archival research and participant observation in events that took place at *Centro de Referência Dom Ivo Lorscheiter*, the permanent marketplace of *Esperança/Coesperança*. These included the weekly markets, thematic fairs and gatherings of social movements. It also included participant observation of meetings with public officials and of the project’s participation in public festivities of the Brazilian Independence Day (September 7), as well as *Dia do Gaúcho* (state holiday of Rio Grande do Sul, on September 20).

During fieldwork, I carried out 33 semi-structured interviews with *Esperança/Coesperança* project managers, participating producers, regular consumers, activists of MST and *Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores/Small and Subsistence Farmer’s Movement* (MPA), as well as civil servants from the municipality of Santa Maria. I used a snowball sampling method for identifying interviewees. The sampling process began with indication from the project management team, which was by gatekeeper to the field. I asked each interviewee to indicate another person in the

same actor category (producer, consumer, project manager, activist). I finished the interviewing process when the data collected did not add any new information to that of previous interviews. The interview guides were structured around the respondent's role or relationship to the project and, in the case of producers, their area of activity.

All the quotes were transcribed in Portuguese, the original language of communication, and translated to English in a way that attempted to retain as much as possible of the original meaning. I was granted permission to use the real name of the subjects in the quotes related to the overall functioning of *Esperança/Coesperança*. In those that refer to particular producers, I used pseudonyms. Due to time, resource limitations and issues of consent, it was not possible to obtain financial data from *Esperança/Coesperança* or individual producers that were backed by official documents. As a result, the data used in the analysis of these topics are based on estimations made by participating producers or project managers, or participant observation, unless otherwise specified.

## 2. Re-signifying the Market through “Boundary Commoning”

### 2.1. Spaces of Trust-building between Producers

The focal point of *Esperança/Coesperança* is *Centro de Referência Dom Ivo Lorscheiter* (CRDIL) a marketplace that hosts a weekly Solidarity Economy market, known as *Feirão Colonial*, as well as three-day thematic markets on the first week of Spring (*Feira da Primavera*) and during Advent (*Feira de Natal*). Sources from the project management team claim *Feirão Colonial* receives several hundreds of visitors every Saturday, most of them resident in the municipality of Santa Maria. The thematic markets receive several thousands of visitors from across Rio Grande do Sul. CRDIL is also the host of FEICOOP – *Feira Internacional do Cooperativismo* (International Fair of Cooperative Economics), a four-day event that takes place every year during the first fortnight of July. According to internal documents of *Esperança/Coesperança*, the first edition of FEICOOP counted with 27 vendors, while its 25th edition, which took place in 2018, counted with at least 200. The thematic fairs receive a much higher number of visitors. The archives of FEICOOP indicate that this event receives an average of 200 000 visitors every year, originating from different parts of Brazil and Mercosur, as well as other parts of the world. All these commercialization events have a parallel schedule of workshops, debates and performative activities organized by *Esperança/Coesperança* and like-minded social movements.

The publicity materials of the fairs organized by *Esperança/Coesperança* include the motto *Uma Feira Ensinante e Aprendente*, which can be roughly translated as “A Market of Self-Teaching and Self-Learning”. The way different project managers and producers interpreted this motto indicates that such events are regarded as sites of socialization into economic practices based on trust, reciprocity and cooperation. Such process begins with the condition that, in order to commercialize at CRDIL, individual producers need to be aggregated into *grupos de produção*. These are producers' associations, containing at least three family units, which have a common accounting and fiscal identity. Their purpose is to facilitate the access of subsistence producers to the market, as well as to promote economies of scale in production, through incentives for cooperative practices such as the sharing of production spaces and machinery and collective purchases. It also promotes the diversification of supply within the *grupos de produção* through incentives





for individual producers to specialize and add value to their output, instead of maximizing the quantity in production. This includes training on cooperative economics, business accounting and management, manufacture development and commercialization. This combination of incentives for cooperation and specialization promotes non-competitive commercialization arrangements, in which one producer within the group is responsible for selling and keeping the account balance of another production unit. That is the case of “Larissa”, part of a family of livestock-producing *colonos*, subsistence farmers descending from European immigrants who came to Rio Grande do Sul in the late 19th and early 20th century. Her production unit specializes in the production and commercialization of ham and sausages, while other units in her *grupo de produção* specialize in other livestock produce:

*“This week I am here, taking care of our vending place. [Name withdrawn] could not come, so I am selling the milk, cheese, cream and curd they produce from their animals. It is not necessary for all of us to be here together at the same time. There is a lot of trust among us. They know that I will not cheat when writing down the transactions and that I will give them all the money from sales, as agreed. They also know that I will return the produce they were not able to sell. We also transport their produce here to the market in our truck. There is no need for each of us to have our own truck. We share it among us. Next week, if necessary, someone will be here in my place at the vending table.” (Interview nr. 23, 22/10/2016)*

## **2.2. Spaces of Proximity between Producers and Consumers**

CRDIL is a space of encounter between the wider public and otherwise socially and spatially segregated socio-economic realities: Those of the urban poor, including *catadores* (recyclable waste collectors), manufacturing workers living in the industrial periphery of the city who were left unemployed by the bankruptcy of local industries during the 1980’s. It also includes those of the *colonos* living in the rural belt of Santa Maria or neighbouring municipalities, and those of indigenous and *quilombola* afro-descendent communities, as well as MST settlements. Besides, the fairs organized at CRDIL also include producers from intentional communities inspired by Deep Ecology and New Age philosophies. Such producers, besides selling products such as essential oil, herbal remedies and vegan food, also offer preventive and holistic health treatments. It is common for them to directly exchange know-how, goods and services with producers issuing from other social groups represented in the market.

Due to logistic limitations from my part, as well as from the project managers of *Esperança/Cooperança*, it was not possible to carry out a survey which could help identify different profiles among the regular consumers of CRDIL. From participant observation and interviews, it was possible to identify a specific profile of local consumer, whose cultural capital and disposable income predisposes them to favour environmental and social concerns over instrumental motivations when making purchasing choices. This type of consumer is predominantly middle class, with a left-of-centre political orientation a background in militancy in progressive Catholic circles and tend to work in education or in the public sector. That is the case of “Bette”:

*“During my student years, I was against the dictatorship. I was a member of Juventude Universitária Católica [Catholic Youth Student movement]. We observed the state of the*

*world and based our analysis in solidarity towards the oppressed. (...) For me, shopping malls and large supermarkets are a shop window of that oppression. The products are made from slave labor, from people paid less than a fair wage or a fair return for their product. Besides, those products have no flavor. They have no soul. (...) I've known Esperança/Coesperança since its inception. Their militancy is my militancy. (...) I know that the people there put in the products they sell at the market the same amount of care they put in those they produce for feeding their families. You can see it in their presentation, feel it in their flavour. Actually, that's what Sister Lourdes tells them: 'Put in your products the same amount of care you put in the food you give to your family.' (...) I'd rather pay a bit more but eat healthy, flavourful products that are made with care in an economy of fairness, than pay less, not be satisfied and contribute to the oppression of others.'* (Interview nr. 15, 08/10/2016)

### **2.3. Promoting Mobilizational Citizenship by Engaging Social Movements**

The Solidarity Economy markets promoted by *Esperança/Coesperança* build the political subjectivity and agency of its participants by mobilizing agentic memory, symbols and practices of belonging, as well as promoting grassroots leaderships through practices of decentralised protagonism. That happens mainly by engaging social movements that aim to promote agrarian reform, such as the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra/Landless Workers' Movement (MST)* and the *Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores/Small Farmers' Movement (MPA)*. It also includes engagements with international social movement networks, such as the World Social Forum and the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS). CRDIL is a space of encounter between *Esperança/Coesperança* and these movements, which share similar goals and practices of social transformation.

*Esperança/Coesperança* partners with *Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT)* in the movement for agrarian reform. Such partnership includes supporting the MST and MPA by hosting a native seed bank, as well facilitating the exchange agroecology know-how between activists of these movements and other subsistence farmers in the region. The MST and MPA have a visible presence at the weekly and thematic markets organized at CRDIL, where have vending areas, decorated with flags and other symbols of these movements. The same happens with the movement of *catadores* (collectors) of recyclable waste. *Esperança/Coesperança* complements the organizational and technical support given by *Cáritas* to its regional network of associations by providing training and support in business and product development, as well as spaces at the weekly and thematic fairs for the commercialization of products made of recyclable waste.

The engagement with social movements also includes artistic performances and the hosting of national and international organizational gatherings. During the thematic fairs, an area of CRDIL is transformed into a stage for speeches by activists, as well as thematic artistic performances. The marketplace also hosts organizational gatherings and performative events of the movement for agrarian reform, such as *Grito dos Excluídos* (Cry of the Excluded), a yearly march, included in the schedule of parallel FEICOOP, which departs from CRDIL and walks across the main streets of Santa Maria. On January 22-24, 2010, CRDIL hosted the first World Fair and World Forum of Solidarity Economy.



This event was a response of social movements, at the national and international level, to the cancellation, by judicial order, of the 2009 edition of FEICOOP, the 5th Mercosur Fair of Solidarity Economy and parallel events organized by social movements, on the 9th of July, one day before the due starting date for these events. The project managers of *Esperança/Cooperança*, together with a cohort of Solidarity Economy producers from 15 Brazilian states, as well as other Mercosur countries that were already in Santa Maria when the prohibition was issued, organized an impromptu protest march for July 10, known as *Marcha da Esperança*. This was the beginning of the international articulation that led to the organization of the I World Fair and World Forum of Solidarity Economy in the following year. This event counted with the support of RIPESS. The second edition of the event took place at CRDIL during the 24th edition of FEICOOP on July 11-14, 2013 and the third edition during the 25th edition of FEICOOP on July 13-16 2018.

### **3. Conclusion**

The previous analysis frames Solidarity Economy markets as spaces that facilitate the emergence of cooperative post capitalist livelihoods. They are sites of re-signification of economic activity through the promotion of networks of trust and collaboration that reconcile cooperative principles with the market. They promote cooperation among otherwise competing producers, contact and trust between otherwise segregated social sectors, and engage social movements in framing Solidarity Economy markets as part of wider political projects. Fieldwork data indicates that the reach and effects of the “mobilizational citizenship” produced within such spaces is limited by the fact that it reaches out mainly to a network of producers, regular consumers and institutional partners socialized in progressive Catholic circles. The judicial prohibition of the 2009 edition of FEICOOP, as well as parallel events, indicates that efforts by the project to reach out to public officials that didn’t share such background had limited effect.

These findings challenge scholars and practitioners to promote research on Solidarity Economy markets that frames the “mobilizational citizenship” they promote in the context of structural power relations. This includes the one happening as a result of the interactions between producers, between these and consumers, and between these and other actors such as supply chain providers, credit sources and regulatory agents. Such analysis should take into account the impact of structural power relations, as well as strategic coalitions, on the work carried out by institutional mediators, namely in what regards its capacity to mobilize resources and impact regulation and policy-making, as well as how it influences the relationship between these actors and other agents in Solidarity Economy markets. Such research agenda should also analyse the way in which structural power relations within wider society reproduce themselves in the interactions happening among these sets of actors.

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## 5. Notes

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