

“Solidarity Economy”: Challenges to Social Movement Theory

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Beyond protest

The political innovations that emerged from the Latin American “Pink Wave” of the 2000’s, as well as the European anti-austerity and environmental mobilizations of the 2010’s, challenge the focus on protest that has characterised social movement scholarship in the last decades (Pleyers & Capitaine 2016). At the core of these innovations is the promotion, through movement praxis as well as public policy, of community-led initiatives, based on democratic solidarity (Hulgard et al 2019) in which economic activity is pursued as a means to the achievement of political ends. This implies that economic praxis cannot be isolated from the overall dynamics of collective action (Laville & Eynaud 2019: 62). Such initiatives are based on the setting up of “autonomous and intermediary public spaces” (Op. cit.: 60) where “socio-ethical and counter-cultural practices” are experimented with, enacted and coordinated (Fois, 2019: 108). These spaces are “micro-public spheres” (Keane 1998) or “mobilizational commons” (Esteves 2020), in which participants re-signify economic activity through deliberative processes aimed at promoting cooperation among otherwise competing producers and consumers, contact and trust between segregated social sectors, as well as the engagement of the state in rethinking the economy over time.

The praxis of such community-led initiatives is conceptualized as “solidarity economy” by scholars from Latin America and Europe, who frame them in Polanyi’s vision of an “active society” in “contradictory”, but creative, “tension with the market” (Burawoy 2003: 198). Such concept includes grassroots-level, community-based practices of economic self-governance that prioritize the creation of social value over capital accumulation (Mance 2007; Auinger 2009; Ould Ahmed 2015; Laville 2016). At its core is the promotion of economic resilience of territories, supported by participatory politics (Bauwens and Niaros 2017: 24; Estivill 2018: 15), as well as the normative orientation of economic activity towards democratic deepening within community-based economic activities (Laville 2016: 244–5). This promotes an ontological reframing of “the economic” and “the political” beyond the market/state dichotomy (Lucas dos Santos & Banerjee 2019). This implies the conceptual recognition of a diversity of economic imageries, as well as narratives on social emancipation and good living (Gibson-Graham 2002, 2009; Santos 2006). It also expands the understanding of economic activity beyond the focus on organization and ownership structures, which prevents the acknowledgement of the transformative potential and political embeddedness, in the social fabric and well as in collective action and public policies, of small-scaled grassroots practices based on reciprocity, redistribution and householding carried out by subaltern groups (Lucas dos Santos & Banerjee 2019).

Beyond organization

Besides being spaces of production, commercialization and/or consumption, “solidarity economy” initiatives are sites of promotion of what Escoffier (2018) calls “mobilizational citizenship”, through processes of “production of belonging” inherent to the local identities

of struggles “updated and reformed through processes of micromobilization” (p. 775). Literature in the field shows a variety of forms in which such initiatives exist and function (i.e. Gibson-Graham 2006, 2008; Mendell 2009). Among them are initiatives aimed at promoting the economic resilience of territories, by supporting production re-localization and food system re-territorialization through incentives for direct producer-to-consumer exchanges (Grasseni 2014, Rakopoulos 2015). These include alternative commercialization networks mediated by social currencies, Community-Supported Agriculture, Solidarity Economy Markets and Solidarity Purchasing Groups (Graziano and Forno 2012; Migliore et al. 2014; Forno et al. 2015; Forno 2018; Giambartolomei et al. 2018; Lekakis et al. 2018). These initiatives are based on politically motivated networks of trust, constituted by relationships of proximity and direct collaboration between consumers driven by environmental and social justice goals over instrumental concerns, and producers whose characteristics match those preferences (Grasseni, 2014: 184–5). They aim to promote transformative collective action, either by engaging the state in the promotion of favourable regulation and policy programs for “solidarity economy” initiatives (Sarria Icaza & Freitas 2009, Mendell 2009), or creating grassroots incentives for their integration into “local cooperative ecosystems”, based on “system-like stock-and-flow” circuits of value which (re)produce the material resources, norms and rules that are necessary for their self-sustenance (De Angelis 2017: 270–1). Such self-sustaining circuits of value require instruments, such as community currencies, which re-frame market dynamics by coordinating lateral interactions among a diverse set of actors, as well as socializing them into norms and practices of effective communication, internal trust and reciprocity (Bar-Yam 2002; Poteete & Ostrom 2010; Lietaer et al. 2012; Rigo and França Filho 2017).

From political to conceptual innovation

According to Laville & Eynaud (2019), “solidarity economy” expanded the already disputed conceptual boundaries of “social entrepreneurship”, through a transdisciplinary and intercultural approach that liberated them from a “cloistering in economic and management sciences” (p. 62). The authors classified “solidarity economy” as new category of “social entrepreneurship”, joining the Anglo-Saxon “social business” approach, based on philanthropic solidarity and managerial criteria of efficiency, and the continental European “social economy” paradigm, based on the promotion of democratic solidarity through equality in status within enterprises.

“Solidarity economy” is recognised as a form of “social entrepreneurship” aimed at promoting the symbolic and institutional recognition, as well as articulation and support, of “autonomous and intermediary public spaces” where economic activity is carried out as a means for people to “come together to define the rules governing their common world.” (p. 54). This signifies a decolonization of the concept of “social entrepreneurship” from the western capitalist cannon, which is seen as invalidating forms of economic organization beyond the enterprise, as well as forms of solidarity beyond philanthropy or the common interests of members in organizations of the social economy (Laville & Eynaud 2019). It is also seen as not comprehensive enough to understand the political embeddedness of non-capitalist economic practices of the popular sectors both in the “Global South” as well as marginalized social groups in the “Global North” (Lucas dos Santos & Banerjee 2019: 3).

At the core of “solidarity economy” is a recognition of the inherently public dimension of economic activity, namely of the wider social, cultural and environmental implications of its organizational forms and practices. The “non-contractual, non-utilitarian democratic solidarity”, dealing with “the living world” that it is based upon (Laville & Eynaud 2019: 61) invites a deepening of Fraser’s (1990) criticism of Habermas’ approach to public sphere theory (1990). It requires an expansion of the understanding of the principle of integration underlying democratic solidarity beyond the liberal-democratic canons of representative democracy, given that it is “a factor of resistance, another form of social and political bond which derives its strength from the indignation triggered by the magnitude of inequalities and injustices.” (Laville & Eynaud 2019: 61). It also challenges social movement theory to go beyond the “Political Process” and “New Social Movement” approaches that dominated the last decades and into a territory of dialogue and hybridization with radical approaches to “public sphere” and “social entrepreneurship” theories.

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