

Economy of solidarity and Women

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The theme of “economy of solidarity”, which has been dealt with by a number of authors across the world, almost inexorably ignores the particularities of women’s contribution. Though she has not been completely left out by the men and women who see the unified economy as an alternative to prevalent economic practices, her role in it remains largely under-estimated and marginalised. I wish to present certain broad outlines for action, thought and exchanges concerning this concept.

Coming back to a sensible definition of the economy

The urgent need to come back to a sensible definition of the economy is not just a semantic issue. It has become a vital issue of the human society. The over-development of the commercial portion of economic activities combined with the growth of purely financial activities has slowly led to the exclusion of a whole range of human activities from the general meaning of the word “economy”. Originally meant to describe all the means available in a society to satisfy its needs as also those of its members, and the art of managing them, the field shrank considerably by making it a scientific discipline, following positivist methods. As a consequence the monetary aspect became dominant whereas at the same time various other important issues of every-day-life were being neglected, especially those of women and the exploitation of nature. This in the course of time has led to the spread of greed which will eventually hurle mankind into destruction.

A woman’s (“feminist”) point of view on economy has the merit of identifying and placing, at the core of our concerns, those values that are traditionally borne by women as well as those realities that many of them live: giving and maintaining life, preserving and restoring health, educating a person to become and remain the imprint of mankind.

It cannot be denied that every human activity has an economic “counterweight” to the extent that it is executed through material resources, work time, knowledge and organisation. At the same time, the activities carried out everyday by men and women, without any monetary transaction, have gradually been excluded from the shrunken world of economy, ignoring thereby concrete realities.

Acknowledging the contribution of women

In this context, can the urgency for redefining economic concerns - not at the conditions of the impersonal “economic world”- but in recognition of the plurality of activities and economic behaviour of people, be denied ? Here, I am of the belief that the only reasonable approach would be to become aware of the diversity of places and organisations where goods and services are produced, exchanged and consumed, as well as the consequences of these activities on humans and the environment. An acknowledgement of the contribution of women in the economic life will help in supporting a new paradigm for the economy which takes into account the traditional activities of women as well as the values that they, much more than men, helped to preserve. Thus, it is from a woman’s point of view that I would like to speak about an economy of solidarity.

Solidarity refers to a collective responsibility in which everyone feels responsible for the others. There is thus an entire social and political programme involved in the building of a unified economy. However, the models offered in the recent past under the name of “economy of solidarity” only mildly refer to all the economic players and conditions that contributed to solidarity in different social and cultural contexts.

A Social and Political Programme

The basic postulates associated with the *Homo Economicus* and the logic of action which is characteristic of the dominant economic sphere are in no way disturbed by the appeals for the development of an economy of solidarity - a concept created outside those markets which still represent the most common way of distribution within our societies. In the globalised world as we know it, the control of trade mechanisms allows to determine the distribution and to secure the accumulation of riches by only a small part of the population, giving only to the more fortunate the possibility to be charitable. The well-to-do, the major landowners and financiers, are only too happy to recognise a third sector as a “new forum” for solidarity between those who didn’t fit into markets and those who are looking for alternatives. Being closer to small local and cottage industries, the third sector fills in the gaps left by global markets which are gradually becoming part of the international economy.

An economy of solidarity, I feel, should go much further. It should signify that people - men, women and children - and the satisfaction of their needs are the ultimate goals of the economic system. Societies and the ways they are organised for satisfying individual and collective needs should not become choice means for the rich to grow richer but should contribute to the life and development of mankind. Production, exchange, consumption as also work, management, saving and investment are all inevitable economic activities. However, the manner in which these activities are carried out in an economy of solidarity should oppose the habits formed in the commercial world which, at present, contaminate and intoxicate the human mind.

It is not for me to specify the ways in which our diverse societies should organise their economies. Their social, cultural, historical, environmental contexts and their knowledge as well as traditions help them in defining the conditions for promoting an economy of solidarity which encompasses all aspects of life.

For conceptualising such an economy, it is necessary to start on the basis of existing and future practices and to recognise the complementary activities that are undertaken in various societies. I dare to imagine that it is possible in the near future to arrive at an economy of solidarity in which the presence or absence of monetary transactions will be related more to the setting up of the means required to attain the goals chosen. In this way, the economy of solidarity would be the summum of all our economic activities which have the mark of “common denominator value” and where the choice of using money to mediate transactions would no longer be imposed. Building an economy of solidarity could result from a collective choice in which individuals can have their own choices, interpersonal and social relations and where economic activity has its full significance. It is useless to try to separate the economy from the daily life and environmental conditions without turning it into a ridiculous mythology, as is presently the case, and without causing the grave consequences to human life and environment that can be seen in all corners of the world.

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