

# A UNANIMOUS CRY OF DISSENT AGAINST THE REGIME

*Ruben Suriñach*

The Western development model and the lifestyles associated with it are the harbingers of disaster for long-term sustainability, the building blocks of subsistence and the ongoing survival of people and the environment throughout the entire planet. They are undermining the ability of societies to recreate in an acceptable form the material and cultural bases necessary to meet individual and collective needs. This continued negligence is cyclically magnified through the recurring crises of capitalism, which, through the shock doctrine, increasingly attempts more and more aspects of our lives at the service of capital accumulation.

This constant abuse, however, is becoming more and more evident, and a collective discontent is emerging in different parts of the planet, in different (and often dangerous) ways, but with one thing in common: dissent against the established regime.

Nevertheless, in the midst of the fervor of this communal outcry, we find ourselves between two opposing positions: that of fear, and that of hope. That of fear, nurtured by the far-right and ultranacionalism, directs a collective outrage towards any and all minorities, and attempts to create false boundaries between fellow citizens within the working class. That of hope, which seeks to put the spotlight on the real culprits of this permanent crisis, and to generate strong grassroots alliances among citizens to stand against the 1% that have dragged us into this situation: the great (in)visible hand of the financial market and of the people with given and family names – the gatekeepers of capital – ready to pounce in front of any unprescribed anomaly.

The contradictions of the neo-liberal capitalist regime have, in fact, reached such a scale that we have seen, from the heart of the system to the protectionist discourses of the far-right, how the hegemony of the free market has trembled. The 'end of history' heralded following the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), opens up new cracks that give rise today to a debate about a novel development model that goes beyond the false dichotomy between liberal social democracy and neoliberalism; the foundations that have, until now, supported the structures of power. The biggest challenge we face is to be capable of proposing an alternative to previous frameworks that are distinct from the monstrosities emerging from the far-right, and to convince our fellow citizens that the economy can work for and driven by the people.

## THE CHALLENGE OF A COMMON AND MOBILIZING NARRATIVE

The debate about the economy, which is to stay, about how we synthesize the means of allocating resources to attain satisfactory fulfillment of people's needs in the long-term, continues to revolve around its two historical polarities - the market economy and those economies established by the state; or, the neoliberal pole and the socialist pole (and a social democratic grey area put through a neoliberalism filter, blurred by financial globalization and the progressive weakening of the Keynesian state). Yet these approaches no longer convince the dissenting masses. In the context of economic globalization, the credit granted to a market economy domesticated by the state has run out; nevertheless, the proposals for strengthening the centrality of the state as a distributor of resources have proved incompatible with the strengthening of democracy and the collective appropriation of the means of production (there is, in fact, an ongoing debate about the concept of the "public" that goes beyond the state and the public sector).

In order to build a common narrative that coalesces around a transformative socio-economic project, it is essential to abandon this unrealistic dichotomy, and to imagine and develop new ways of meeting our everyday needs and structuring economic life which go beyond the two traditional poles (leading to a broader understanding of history and a recovery of forgotten traditions). What leads us to believe that such a restlessness is commonly felt is the effervescence of economic proposals and practices that differ from the dominant frameworks: the social and solidarity economy, collaborative economy (the commons), feminist economies, degrowth, etc. And it is not enough to merely talk about already established proposals that are, as such, identifiable, but also of those experiences of collective organization for the fulfillment of people's needs, projects that are becoming essential for basic sustenance and that often operate under the radar of the conventional economy and on the basis of community self-organization. We might also consider the emergence of new concepts such as circular economies, and social entrepreneurship and innovation as attempts to alleviate or soften the hard edges of the neoliberal framework.

The fact is that today we have in front of us a rich mosaic of proposals for socio-economic transformation that aim - in different degrees and measures - to transcend traditional frameworks, but which, given their dispersion and the lack of a common narrative, do not allow for the spread of a more clear and attractive message to the population at large. It is essential to propose an inclusive alternative, and to make this mosaic of transformative economies visible as a whole, allowing us to go beyond the marginal position that we currently occupy at the table.

## WHAT ARE THE TRANSFORMATIVE ECONOMIES?

The first challenge is the name; what to call this set of proposals and practices without falling into the temptation of creating a new label? New economies, social economies, other economies - any denomination whatsoever will prove inaccurate by default, given that such diversity cannot be concentrated in a single term. In spite of this, we need a name by which

to call ourselves, and one that serves, at least, to conceptually encompass the ideas that we want to be called for. To this end, we have chosen the term transformative economies.

By transformative economies, we understand all proposals for socioeconomic reorganization that bring elements of criticism of the dominant economic framework into play, and that formulate schemes for socioeconomic change - both in theory and in practice - that endeavour to alter this framework, and to prevent or alleviate the adverse effects generated by it. The fundamental difference between this and the capitalist economic structure is summed up in two principal axes, which should be the cornerstone of a common narrative: **the sustainability of life** (in terms of nature, our bodies and our communities) and the **equal distribution of power** (the democratic and non-profit-seeking organization of the different ways in which systems of production are organized), breaking with the structures and the culture of power established under the current economic order.

## A PROPOSAL FOCUSED ON THE NEEDS

The first exercise that has to be undertaken to break the dominant economic framework is precisely that which is within the realm of the economy, bypassing such imprecise and simplistic indicators as Gross Domestic Product and job creation. The allocation of resources and the fulfillment of people's needs must be placed within a complex framework of interdependencies between social, ecological, political and cultural processes. The proposal of Cristina Carrasco and Enric Tello (2013) of the **socioeconomic system as a chain of needs support**, summarizes this idea:

The functioning of the social system depends on different closely interconnected areas, structured under different types of relationships and with varying degrees of dependence between them. Although the borders between these spaces are generally porous and ever-changing, we can identify certain different areas where our everyday life develops as if they were different networks in a support chain. (...) Both economic theory and a significant part of historiography have tended to forget the vital support role that communities, family units, and natural systems have continued to exert underneath the markets and states in all known human societies up to the present day. There is, therefore, only one clear operational way by which we should be able to imagine how to sustainably meet current social needs without endangering the fulfillment of the needs of future generations: to analyze the whole support chain in which these needs arise, are expressed, satisfied or thwarted through different fulfillments and access rules.

This definition offers some key mechanisms for moving away from narrow market frameworks and the state as resource allocators for the resolution of needs. The first contribution relates to how these needs arise, are expressed, met or thwarted according to their fulfillment or rules of access. Talking about needs situates us in shifting sands which move, once again, between established historical polarities - where neoliberalism tells us that a rarified absolute individual freedom must be prioritized, and socialism entrusts the definition and resolution of this question to the almighty state - and new perspectives which aim to find other grey areas capable of encompassing the complexity of the meaning

of what a necessity is; how it is expressed and satisfied; how it is prioritized in the face of the rise of individual necessity over collective necessity, and the relationship that this process has with collective empowerment and the strengthening of democracy.

Explicitly or otherwise, proposals for transformative economies are present into this battlefield, particularly so in terms of questioning the end goals of the dominant economic framework, both in its collective expression (economic growth, profit, investment-seeking) and in different individual expressions (differing patterns of consumption, the search for status, the deification of work). Thus, for example, an economy based on the commons sends a message about focusing the production and the economic reproduction in the construction of the commons itself. Lifestyle activism and ethical consumption invite us to question our needs from an individual perspective. Feminist economies talk about putting life and care work at the center. Degrowth encourages us to forget about GDP as an indicator of wellbeing and to focus on healthy living and biophysical indicators. With their narratives, each of these movements addresses the question changing the priorities of the economic system, and underlying each is the idea of questioning the pursuit of economic gains and increased GDP - and their associated mechanisms – as fundamental goals of the economic system. The common reading that emerges from the bulk of transformative economies is one that points to **directing our efforts and priorities towards the effective fulfillment, in a broad sense, of people's needs, and the ways to accomplish this.**

In any case, talking of individual and, above all, common needs, transcends the economic realm and moves into the political field. This supposes conceiving the structure and operation of the economic system as a consequence of - and subject to – a political debate around collective needs, in place of the present, diametrically opposed configuration, in which common needs are defined by economic dynamics. From a practical point of view, this change of approach poses challenges in many areas and at different levels, something which some of the movements try to address. One of these challenges has to do **with how we measure this effective satisfaction of human needs**, something which also entails entering into the complex task of defining requirements. A second challenge is the **level of democratic culture and of participatory structures necessary** to effectively manage debates around certain decisions that may condition the effective satisfaction of needs (and the potential social conflicts that may arise when established authorities feel threatened).

What we see, therefore, is that this change of priorities for the economic system is closely linked to the democratic traits of society itself, if not directly dependent on it. Participation, collective empowerment and public debate for the definition of common needs and how they are met should be an intrinsic element of economic activity, and thus constitute the axes on which they turn.

## MAKING THE HIDDEN FACES OF THE ECONOMY VISIBLE

Diagram 1 shows a proposal for a needs support chain [2]. In this diagram we can see different links located at the base of the productive system: the foundations of needs support are the 'life economies', understood as the capabilities and resources provided by both natural systems and domestic and community environments (which are not measured by conventional economic assessment: in terms of GDP, income, prices, etc).

There is an easy way to understand this: without natural resource and family and community care and support, neither the public nor commercial economy would be able to function. Above the economies of life, we find the productive economy, understood as that set of activities organized and deployed, to a large extent, around the circulation of money, paid work, and money consumption.

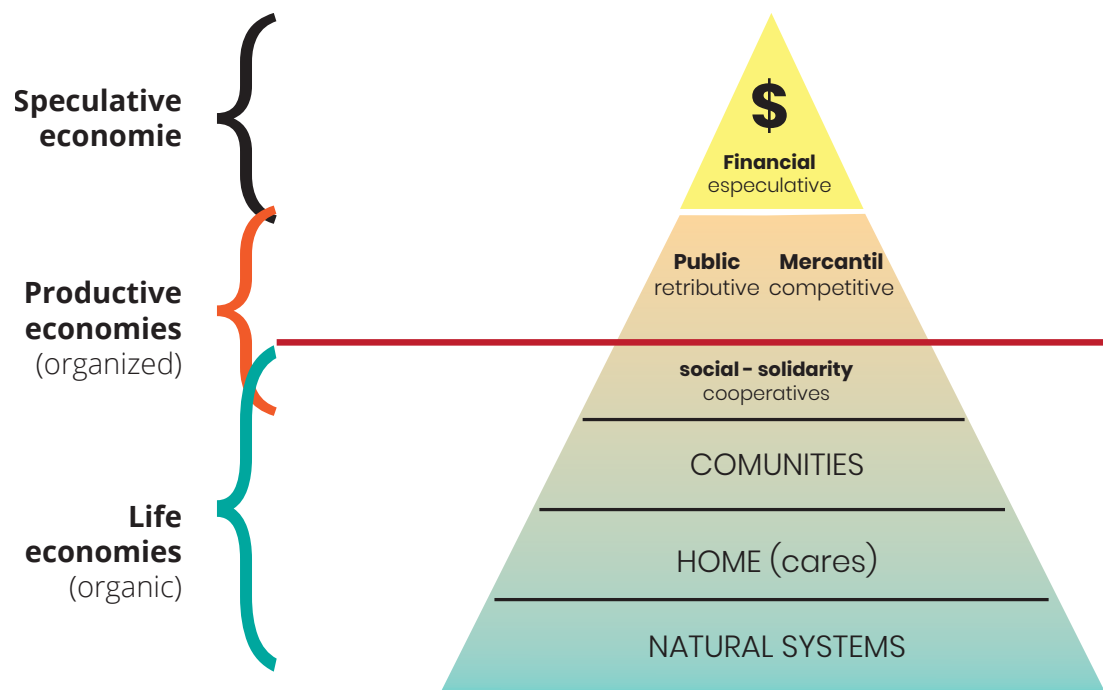


Diagram 1. The chain of needs support in the context of a plural economy.

The productive economy can be divided into three segments:

- The public economy, as a set of activities and economic initiatives promoted by the public sector (state ownership, centralized control).
- The commercial economy, based on the experiences promoted by the traditional market economy (private ownership, competition-based control);
- Social-solidarity economies, based on the set of activities and initiatives that are markedly different from the dominant profit-driven market economy framework (collective ownership, cooperative control).

The financial economy, being especially visible and hegemonic in the sense that it induces the others via mechanisms of external debt and investment funds, takes primacy. If we understand the pyramid as an iceberg, the financial economy occupies the highest and most visible space in political and media terms, although it may be considered more of a paving stone and, above all, a means of invisibilizing the other types of economy that keep society afloat.

## THE ECONOMIES OF LIFE

If we look at the different segments that make up the economies of this socio-economic iceberg, it is vital, in the first instance - given the work carried out within **ecological economics and the degrowth movement** - to determine the biophysical limitations that envelop economic activity, understood as the set of natural systems that guarantee the supply of natural resources within the system of production, as well as the regulation of the waste that the system generates, and other fundamental environmental services (such as climate regulation). The first hidden face that needs to be made visible, is that of the natural systems that are at the bottom of the economic system, with their constant flows and exchanges of materials and energy according to the functionings of the economy. The closest expression of the interdependence between natural systems (and the resources they provide) and the sustainability of people's needs, is the provision of food and the agricultural production. Communities and organizations grouped around the struggle for **food sovereignty and agro-ecological practices** are, in fact, the main defense movement on a global level and, therefore, a fundamental part of the transformative economies mosaic.

The second hidden face, bringing together developments from **the feminist economy**, seeks to give visibility to all those activities and practices carried out within the domestic sphere with the purpose of caring for people throughout their life cycle. This is to refer, more specifically, to affective and emotional support; direct care for other people (especially relationships of physical dependence, such as the elderly or children); the provision of preconditions on the basis of which care tasks are carried out (housework, shopping, and cooking) and the management of care tasks (coordination of schedules, school runs and trips to other institutions, supervision of remunerated domestic work, among others). Generally speaking, women have been those who have taken on these tasks, while men, although able to perform them, concentrated on productive work remunerated within the labor market, thus configuring the historical sexual division of work. Within the feminist economy it is considered that, as the tasks of care are considered a fundamental basis for the sustenance of life and the assurance of well-being, economic and social objectives ought to be focused, in first instance, on these foundations, with productive mercantile work relegated to a secondary tier (Carrasco, 2014) [\[3\]](#).

Thirdly, in an ill-defined boundary with home care, we find in community networks or infrastructure a third cornerstone in the satisfaction of people's needs. Pro bono and reciprocal relationships that function where community networks exist are key in determining the ability of an individual to prosper in society, and in establishing a large part of what is called social capital. The quality and quantity of a community ties varies

greatly from one culture to the other, but it is undeniable that it plays a fundamental role in meeting human needs beyond the productive economy. It is on this cornerstone that we could situate many systems inspired by the **traditional management of the commons**, or new practices of urban cooperativism, which also develop new visions of the public sphere not necessarily connected to public sector management. Historical examples of the management of the commons also evince the interdependence in the capacity of a community in needs support, social conventions and natural resources, which make up an inseparable whole. These examples show that the ability of the economy to survive in time is linked to the persistence and adaptability of community ties (for, even if this is undertaken in an inclusive and transformative way, the shared values of the community in question are the deciding factor).

We might say that under the productive system there are economies of life (or reproductive economies), areas fundamental to our economic livelihood that allow for long-lasting socioeconomic sustainability, that nevertheless go unnoticed when measured by conventional economic standards. The differentiation between productive and reproductive systems is not always easy: a cooperative that pays great attention to care tasks, conciliation and mutual support among people, even though it can be placed in the field of the productive economy through the provision of goods and services, plays a crucial role in sustaining the living conditions of its members beyond the salaries that it pays (in this case, the salary would be the productive support and the rest, the reproductive support). Also in the agro-ecological production sector, in many rural communities it is virtually impossible to draw a dividing line between productive and reproductive systems (we could say that the productive aspects emerge where productive surpluses are marketed and an economic compensation is provided, but in such a formulation all work related with self-production would remain within the reproductive sphere). Although this division has an artificial aspect, it serves to indicate how ecological economies, agro-ecology, feminist economies, and the commons provide essential contributions to our understanding of the productive system as based on an enormous amount of unpaid and uncompensated work from ecosystems, homes, and communities.

## THE PRODUCTIVE ECONOMIES

We find the productive economy atop these three cornerstones indicated in Figure 1, both in its historically visible poles – the public-state economy and the market economy – as well as in a third segment where the liminal experiences of production-distribution-financing-consumption appear. This third segment has been called the social and solidarity economy, given that it is a movement resting largely on professionalized economic practices. We have seen, in fact, a large number of companies and practical initiatives for the fulfillment of people's needs emerge from within the social and solidarity economy in the recent years, with 15M as a turning point. These have been able to bring together markets on the basis of solidarity: consumer groups and cooperatives, exchange networks and social currencies, networks of collaborative production of digital assets, childcare groups and self-managed schools, new co-ops focused on social transformation, cooperative platforms for green

electricity supply, new urban commons in the form of allotments and cooperative social centers, etc.

It should also be noted that SSE practices do not function in a static space, devoid of interaction with the state or with the free market as spaces for meeting social needs: rather, they are in constant interchange and interaction. With regards the public economy and the role of the state, the SSE parts from an assessment and space aimed at confronting the dominant economic framework, shared with the Critical Political Economy [4] and its Marxist analysis of means of production. An ongoing debate within the alternative economies sector concerns the re-invention of the role of the State in satisfying people's needs, in order to guarantee a greater openness in the public sector and to recover popular sovereignty. In these debates, a consideration is put forward, for example, regarding the management of public-common resources through non-state practices. At the other extreme - that of the commercial economy - we also find crosscurrents with the SSE. The market-based economy is, in fact, not entirely homogeneous, and indeed one can observe a degree of variation from responsible small and medium-sized businesses (and self-employed professionals) embedded in their local area, to large multinational companies seeking the greatest possible financial dividends. There is, therefore, a current discussion as to the role of small businesses, especially when it comes to local shops, industrial workshops, farming, etc., and their participation as allies in the journey towards economic transformation.

## UNDERTAKING THE JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION TOGETHER

When looking again at the different transformative economies as a whole, we may note several related narrative nuances; we can see the ways in which they have different ideological points of references, on the basis of which they have adapted their own discourses. Thus, in childcare, skills training and group management, we can see how the narrative of the feminist economy comes to the fore; in consumer cooperatives and agro-ecological projects, that of food sovereignty; in green energy cooperatives, energy sovereignty; in cooperative work and urban associations, the social and solidarity economy; in social centers and self-managed urban allotments, common assets; in many neo-rural collective living projects, degrowth; in projects of free software and digital production systems, the pro-commons collaborative economy, and so on. We might say, therefore, that in each area there is an outstanding central idea, albeit one which is blended with many others to different degrees. Each micro-experience provides its own contribution to the construction of this commonality that aims to transform wholesale the economic system. There are four 'movements of movements', interconnected with each other and with other schools of thought, which are the heart of virtuous circle of the transformative economies:

**1) The social and solidarity economy, alongside fair trade and ethical finance**, built on the bases of cooperativism and the construction of social markets, bringing together the traditional social economy with new practices of self-organization and **democratization** of the economy, in all aspects of the economic cycle, thus providing goods and services for the **fulfillment of people's needs** rather than for the pursuit of profit.



**2) The economy based on the commons or pro-commons, with three major subgenera: urban, natural, and digital commons.** The commons, as a third way of managing resources and producing value, is based on **community** management, breaking the duality of the state-market as the only clear and legitimate space for the production, management, and allocation of the resources of the economic system.

**3) The feminist economies**, which aim to remove the market and capital from the center of socio-economic organization, and in their stead place life itself and all the sustainable processes that make it possible, with a particular emphasis on **the care economy**, and the crucial role of women and feminized values within these processes.

**4) The agroecology and food sovereignty movements**, with their essential role in the reassessment of the agro-food framework as a key piece of the puzzle in the sustainment of life, which in turn entails the reconsideration of our relationship with **the Earth and the natural cycles**, and therefore connects all struggles in defense of the earth with its own, most prominently those of **social ecology** and the likes of the **degrowth movement**.

**The transformative economies propose putting the sustainability of life at the center of economic activity on the basis of equality in organization and distribution.** Consequently, it is no longer merely a matter of giving visibility to that which has been invisibilized, but also of defending and placing the long-term sustainability of natural systems, care tasks, and community networks at the center of our economic life; of doing so in such way that the forms that economy organization might take are based on the equal distribution of power and resources; that they are therefore focused on the fulfillment of needs (as opposed to the pursuit of profit), and are undertaken on a democratic and transparent basis.

[1] In addition, this groundswell of ideas is especially relevant in the city of Barcelona, where the cultural background (linked to associations, cooperation, self-organization, and social mobilization) and a certain institutional receptiveness, support and enhance the expansion of this universe of proposals and practices.

[2] Taken from the book *Transformative Economies from Barcelona (Economies Transformadores de Barcelona)*.

[3] According to the Survey of Time Usage from 2009-10, to maintain the living conditions of Spanish society, 17 additional minutes of domestic care work are needed on a daily basis, in place of market work. This timeframe might be extended when considering the tasks of emotional mediation or family support that are not measurable in time.

[4] This school of thought in Catalonia, is mainly represented by the Taifa, The Seminar of Critical Economy.