

Title: Sustainable societies, (feminist) economic imageries and different rationalities¹

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1. Introduction

A broader scope of sustainability requires a different look at the very concept of the economy as well as of Economics as a socially relevant field of knowledge. Social and Solidarity Economies have played pivotal roles in this resizing since they demonstrate hidden aspects that a mathematised and neoclassical economic approach has insistently ignored. Nonetheless, we should question: to what extent are our theories capable of depicting the changes brought by ordinary citizens and communities where organisations have become a hostage to the State and the (capitalist) market? Have we equally valued all Polanyian principles of economic integration or have we just bet on a version of less aggressive market?

This short paper has thus three main goals. The first one is connected with the very concept of sustainability on which we have grounded our discussions. The second goal is concerned with the need for better framing the ones who have contributed to the re-embeddedness of the economy and the revitalisation of principles of economic integration beyond the market. I argue that we should pay more attention to the epistemological and political challenges women have brought to the concepts and their limits. Departing from some non-Western sustainable solutions, I present my third goal: to point up to the connection between sustainable societies and economic democracy, having in mind that economic democracy requires from us milestones such as environmental justice and broadened economic imageries.

2. A wider look at the concept of sustainability

The perspective I would like to propose has to do with new and challenging perspectives to think of a key concept, which is the notion of sustainability. To dialogue with this concept, I draw on two perspectives: the Epistemologies of the South (a concept proposed by the portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos) and a postcolonial re-reading of Feminist Economics. I have chosen five aspects to be stressed and they are, in fact, an attempt to think out of the box. My point is: social enterprises could benefit from a broader sense of sustainability to achieve their social goals.

The first aspect has to do with the very concept of sustainability with which we have worked in many pieces of research and projects of social intervention. Most of time, we have naturalised the idea that sustainability is a synonym for environmental issues and that efficiency or appropriate technologies are the key to succeed. I would like to invite you all to think of sustainability in its broadest sense - even if you prefer to focus on environmental issues. It is not possible for us to debate sustainable societies without paying attention to environmental justice. And it is not possible to think of environmental justice without debating seriously environmental racism. If we are concerned with social and environmental goals, we need to reflect upon how impoverishment, shortage of public equipment, and racial segregation have been intertwined. Because if it is true that all of us will be affected by climate change and global warming, it is also true that their effects (in

¹ This short paper refers to my speech at the opening plenary of the 7th EMES International Research Conference on June 24th, 2019.

health and conditions of material life) have been inequitably distributed by people all over the world. Black and poor people - but also Roma people and migrants in a (non-recognised) heterogeneous Europe - are the ones who have been gated in devalued areas with higher levels of toxic waste, industrial pollution and landfills.

It means that we should add to our discussion two aspects: 1) a critical thinking with regard to the flows of resources and residues among societies in geopolitical terms as well as among different social groups within the territories 2) an attentive look at the usual unequal partition of the burden of growth. It is not uncommon for us to think that the answer to poverty all over the world is to improve development indicators. Nonetheless, poverty we expect to combat is rather the consequence than the cause. Different asymmetries - of gender, class, race or national identity - are expected to be intertwined, shaping the economic inequality in the territories. We must also remember that these asymmetries do not just occur spontaneously to peoples who are not driven by development guidelines; they are starting from a continuously unfavourable position within the Modern world-system (Wallerstein, 2011). This world-system is not just an economic issue; it has constituted a cultural ground - in Amin's words (1989:72), "a way of organization in social life" - which allow capitalism to work as a well-oiled gear. Consequently, fighting against inequalities will require from us to unveil these long-term naturalised asymmetries of which capitalism feed itself. Including the gender asymmetries on which capitalist system also grounds in order to guarantee the working class (re)production.

The second aspect I would like to stress today has to do with the much-vaunted concept of economic democracy. Our concerns with promoting economic democracy should not be limited to promote social and economic inclusion. There is no economic democracy without the proper recognition of different rationalities and rhythms concerning the communities' material life, even when they are not in agreement with the widespread perspective of performance and innovation. We could (and should) learn from other experiences and solutions all over the world, paying more attention to the ones we may assume as being residual just because they do not fit into our own patterns of development. On account of this usual stance, Eiman Zein-Elabdin and S. Charushella (2004) - the first one a Sudanese economist and the latter, an Indian sociologist - state that we should notice the small print in the narrative of development since this narrative has supported the perspective of an ontological precedence of western societies.

Having this in mind, it could be useful and suitable to consider other knowledges, other temporalities, other logics of production² as well as other forms of designing solutions for specific problems instead of replicating successful ready-made solutions. In the Andean highlands, for instance, it is the indigenous and peasant people who have developed local technologies of production to raise crops in inhospitable environment at high altitudes (Chila, 2002). The great variety of potatoes in such a inhospitable place results from specific techniques of seed conservation and handling. We should thus question: what is efficiency in social terms: a large-scale or a tailor-made solution? An outside-modelled proven solution or a solution that might be less efficient in our terms but that makes sense to local people? The fact is that usual techniques associated with efficiency and productivity might not apply right across the board.

² With regard to this, see the concept of 'sociology of emergences' proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, particularly the concept of ecology of knowledges (2006).

The same could be said about techniques of construction - just to remain attached to development concerns and environmental issues. Adopting large-scale solutions to housing problems and urban settlement issues might give us the impression of being succeed even if we are swelling the ranks of failure in the long-term future (as has happened in the case of some housing policies towards Roma people). Solutions that favour technical knowledge of groups of experts over the permanent taking of the community's pulse may undervalue the socio-historical contexts in which asymmetries are grounded, affecting the effective result of a social intervention proposal.

We could go further: why not learn from different rationalities in residencial construction, in the organisation of the space or in the handling of locally available and scant resources? I am referring, for instance, to African, Afro-Latin and indigenous architectures and their contributions in terms of sustainable techniques and methods. Why are these solutions usually understood as local and specific responses, not suitable for us, whereas Western solutions are assumed as deliverable for everyone everywhere? Sustainable societies will require from us to be open to different paradigms as well as to solutions that are likely to challenge the large-scale responses. Taking the pulse of communities to understand what makes sense for them could be more reliable in terms of achieving long-term results rather than engaging them in outside-modelled solutions. It leads us to the following message: economic democracy cannot exist in the absence of autonomy and power of choice.

The third aspect to be stressed has to do with the role played by solidarity economy towards sustainable societies. Social and Solidarity Economies have played a pivotal role in the process of resizing of the economy since they demonstrate hidden aspects that a mathematised and neoclassical economic approach has insistently ignored. Whereas Social Economy has made us aware, for instance, of the 'economic relevance' of the care and other aspects of material life supported by Social Economy institutions and despised by Economics, Solidarity Economy has valued citizens' autonomy towards economic arrangements. This autonomy, in turn, points out the political dimension that everyday economy may assume when gathering citizens towards issues of public interest - better cities to live in, environmental justice to all dwellers, rights properly guaranteed regarding strategic issues such as food sovereignty and water as a public resource, to name but a few. An increasing number of people all over the world - and Europe is not an exception - have engaged in community-led economic initiatives aiming at guaranteeing more sustainable patterns of production and consumption. European institutions of Social Economy, in partnership with local autarchies, are then expected to host and stimulate these citizen-led initiatives as a way to amplify the participation of communities in the outlining and legitimisation of solutions for sustainable environments and cities.

It is undoubtedly important to consider the connection between our economic practices and the environment. Nonetheless, different lenses are needed so that we can see the diversity of experiences that has happened within different contexts and territories, some of them by ordinary citizens. Right now there are many solidarity economy initiatives in the West devoted to foster articulation between citizens in the neighbourhood, develop an economy of proximity, reduce mass distribution impact, and reinvigorate public spaces. But we should bear in mind that not all of them are formally constituted. These short supply chains are economically important to the territory for reducing the environmental impact of long-distance freight transport and dependence on large stores. They are also crucial because they articulate consumers towards different patterns of production as well as producers towards the consumers' compromise on seasonable crops. A different way of making things happen is tried: collective response has replaced the idea of

ascribing full responsibility to the individuals. Community bonds and different sociabilities are fostered to achieve different standards of production and consumption as well as different logics of belonging and provisioning.

3. Feminist contributions to deepen the debate on the economic

What I aim to say is that a change in our patterns depends on creative and different ways of looking at the issues. Without different economic imaginaries, in the sense proposed by the feminist scholars Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham (2006), our patterns of consumption and production will continue to be market-oriented. So I ask, still in dialogue with the ideas brought by Gibson-Graham (2002): when thinking of sustainable economic practices, have we been concerned with different forms of calculating commensurability and redistributing surpluses? Have we been really interested in thinking of different and creative ways of performing a job or paying for it? Or, instead, are we trapped between the expectation of a sustainable world and the reaffirmation of the market as the privileged space for the economy to happen? This invitation to widen our views on the way economic decisions are made demonstrates not only the theoretical but also the concrete contributions Feminist thinking might bring to the debate on Solidarity Economy.

Some additional questions should be tabled here (and that is what I call “to think out of the box”): are our theories on Social and Solidarity Economies capable of depicting the changes brought by ordinary citizens and communities where organisations have become a hostage to the State and the (capitalist) market? Have we equally valued all Polanyian principles of economic integration or have we just bet on a version of less aggressive market³? To what extent have we seen the re-embeddedness of the economy produced by ordinary citizens, particularly the women in different contexts?

Last but not least, I would like to stress the role played by women, particularly the women of the South regarding sustainable societies and our everyday economy. South refers to the previously colonised countries with the remaining consequences that they still face but also the marginalised groups within the North. As Santos (2016) has said: South is not a geographical perspective but a sociological category⁴. In this sense, South might also be found in the Global North. There is a third way of considering this South, still in line with Santos’ idea: as a perspective of ‘reading’ the experiences around the world, now considered in their epistemological diversity. That is the implicit proposal behind the Epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2014). They make us aware of the different and non-universalising logics that might enliven knowledges, rhythms, ways of being and of living. In feminist perspective, it means, for example, to consider epistemological contributions by women, particularly from the South, towards a broadening of the scope of what is the economic.

³ With regard to this, see Hillenkamp (2013), Hillenkamp and Lucas dos Santos (2019) e Lucas dos Santos (2018).

⁴ Santos (2016: 18) explains: “The global South is not a geographical concept, even though the great majority of its populations live in countries of the Southern hemisphere. The South is rather a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level, as well as for the resistance to overcoming or minimising such suffering (...) It is a South that also exists in the geographical North (Europe and North America), in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalised populations, such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, ethnic or religious minorities, and victims of sexism, homophobia, racism and islamophobia”.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, women have played a pivotal role in the re-embeddedness of the economy, by reconnecting the everyday economy with social interest. Reciprocity, redistribution, exchange and provisioning are brought to the scene in diversified economic arrangements. They have also broadened the scope of what we have called “the political”⁵, gathering towards provisioning issues that are of public interest such as food sovereignty. They have demonstrated two facts: 1. that domestic and economic domains are not separated as some western feminists stated in the past, and 2. that different compositions of Polanyian principles are not a fiction.

To summarise, connections between solidarity economy, sustainability and human rights are totally advisable. Solidarity Economy can play a crucial role in projects compromised with new approaches on spatiality and community bonds. However, coming to the departure point - that of environmental justice - I argue that it is time for us to rethink the contributions Social and Solidarity Economies may give for subaltern women and minorities in European countries to rescue, by themselves, their decision-making power and symbolic autonomy. Since minority groups are the most affected by environmental hazards and the lack of basic services and assets for provisioning, it is time to intertwine alternative community-led economic initiatives and projects compromised with social and environmental justice. Time has come to really foster new economic imageries.

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⁵ With regard to this, please see Hillenkamp and Lucas dos Santos (2019). About the political, see also Eynaud and Laville (2019) and Hulgård, Avelino, Eynaud and Laville (2019).

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