

The representation of alternatives to capitalism : The solidarity economy and the problem of power

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Introduction

‘Solidarity economy’, a widely used term for which the most common French equivalent is *economie solidaire*, is generally thought of as comprising five distinct classes of activity : Social Entrepreneurship Consulting Services, Micro-finance, Local Exchange Trading Systems, proximity services, organic small-scale farming and fairtrade distributions. Because they try to answer to the Aristotelian theoretical question “what can we do to live harmoniously together?”, these solidarity initiatives are deeply political in the philosophical sense of the term. They galvanize civic commitment at the “micro” level. But today, an important question arises regarding the kind of formal political institution that would speak in the name of all these initiatives. In France, some intellectuals who have an interest in these solidarity initiatives see them as new economic models with the potential to solve the current financial crisis, and they are eager for academic specialists and leaders of the movement to achieve some kind of consensus about the kind of concrete political identity such initiatives may be expected to generate. However my own research studies their way of establishing a basis for moving from micro level initiatives to substantial “macro” polity unity. This communication, using the insights of french pragmatic sociology, and particularly the notion of grammar of justification, aims to understand what the obstacles to this aim being realised are.

In this paper I will first present what we are calling “solidarity economy in France”. Second, I will show that leaders of its organisations share with sociologist a common grammar to talk about their concrete political identity on the very local field. Their argue that their political characteristics are on the one hand a kind of horizontal, direct and participative democracy and on the other hand a strong critic of the Leninist or Trotskyite left in which some leaders pretend to talk in the name of unemployed and excluded people when Solidarity Economy gives them a real voice. Third I will analyse a struggle between two Solidarity Economy Network. Then, in a fourth point, I will point out how the question of the political representation of the Solidarity Economy is a problem even if they share the same political libertarian grammar.

1. What is solidarity economy ?

The focus of this paper is solidarity economy, a widely used term for which the most common French equivalent is *economie solidaire*. It can be placed in one of the following four categories (Laville, 20010, Frère, 2009) :

1. Micro-credit and savings – these include such organisations such as the cooperative Garrigue. It invests in the financing of the above mentioned micro-“alternative” companies set up by and for unemployed workers.
2. *Local Trading Exchange Systems* (LETS), are community-based groups practising multilateral exchange of goods and services using vouchers or other designated accounting units to balance internal transactions. Their operation may include services as non-monetised swaps of decorating services, language lessons or child-care, etc. Some poorly-off

participants subsist almost entirely on such swaps and service exchanges

3. A third category comprises parallel *food distribution networks North-South and North-North*, namely products from organic farming and fairtrade distribution. That is, in France, networks such as *Biocoop* or *AMAP*¹ (Association for small farmers) for the help to organic small farmers, *Artisans du monde* and *Andines* shops network for fair trade. In both cases the economy of scale necessary to pay those producers who wish to produce unprocessed quality food. I'm talking about Fair trade North-North with actors themselves. They use this term to emphasize their ecological dimension : the only way to save the world is to focus on proximity consumption (without plane, and so on)

4. The fourth category is that of so-called *proximity services*, a term widely used for the last 30 years to refer to initiatives such as neighbourhood cooperatives. Proximity services organisation include providers of everyday support such as help for older people; urban initiatives such as communitarian restaurants, public space improvement groups; hobbyists' networks and other leisure-time and cultural organisations; environmental initiatives such as locally-generated recycling. These initiatives are usually built by *specific consulting services*.

These cooperatives and organisations are informally federated in the Mouvement pour l'Economie Solidaire which is important in this talk. As we will see, its actual representatives live a important struggle with an other network organisation : Les Pénélopes. Les Pénélopes aims to federate the Solidarity Economy initiatives on the international scale, as MES already does on the national scale.

2. What is a grammar ?

Following French pragmatic sociology , grammar can be understood as a set of rules which forms the basis of experience. These rules underpin how people judge and justify their own experiences (Boltanski, Thévenot, 1991, p. 177sq). Pragmatic sociology uses a “grammatical approach” starting from what people say and identifying the building blocks which structure what they express when they are justifying their actions. Contra Bourdieu, the sociologist is no longer seen as the only one with the ability to highlight the determinations which would drive the behaviours of social actors because they are embodied in them as habitus and therefore hidden from their reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1987). Within the pragmatic sociology paradigm, which shares common grounds with Latour's ANT² approach (2005), sociologists ‘would abandon their belief that their interpretations carry more weight than those of social actors’ and instead would attempt ‘to clarify the words used by actors to justify their actions because actors themselves do not have the time to do so’ (Frère, 2004).

2. 1. A micro-public space

A common argument of actors and researchers with Solidarity Economy is that involvement in their many-faceted initiatives is political. These arguments are always built within interviews and articles with the same words.

What emerges is a specific political order according to pragmatic sociology which can be compared to a grammatical system because it can be described using categories describing subjects (actors of solidarity economy), objects (cooperatives and associations : 1), qualifiers/adjectives (2) and relationships articulated by verbs (3)”. (Boltanski, Thévenot, 1991, 177, own translation) These categories subsume the terms which are used in the language games of researchers and actors : “public micro-spaces (1)”, “ordinary citizen” (1), “local arena” (1), “proximity commitment” (2), “direct democracy” (2), “equality in the decision-making process” (2), to defend unemployed (3) to take part (3), to exercise choice (3) (and so on). These are opposed to terms such as “political definition of politics”, “State”, “big politics”, “representative democracy” and so on. These words are meant to convey a specific representation of action in the world which structures justification. Researchers and actors make the same judgement about solidarity economy experience and have a common way of talking about it: what they seek to articulate is a new democratic style of politics.

2.2.2. The critique of the Far-Left

¹ . Associations pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne : Association for **small farmers**

² . Actor Network Theory.

The objective of solidarity economy is to turn into the concrete basis for an alternative form of globalisation as a practical suggestion against **neocommunist** organisations and their abstract criticisms of capitalism. Even though solidarity economy stands in the same oppositional relation to capitalism, it considers that neocommunist organisations have failed to develop any genuine revolutionary praxis. From a solidarity point of view the **Trotskyite** far left such as the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) in France has failed to come up with any new proposal beyond blaming the government, the State, or now the European Commission in Brussels. Its only concern has been to denounce capitalism and seize power without translating this into action. Its commitment is in **words only** (Boltanski, 1993), which serves to relieve moral anxieties without in any way lessening the plight of those who are excluded.

Many if not all proponents of solidarity economy are agreed to define solidarity praxis in opposition to the Far Left : “The Far left model no longer suits us because we must no longer function with **classical forms of representation** any more. We need a **horizontal redevelopment** that allowed the very local citizen to talk everywhere and every time in the name of solidarity economy ”.³

Once again, we can see that the vocabulary used in the development of a specific grammar, which can be used in language games, namely “horizontal redevelopment”, “new proposal”, “economical practice or praxis”. A political ideology gives rise to a shared representation of the world governed by specific lexical rules. These rules exclude the usage of words such as “parties”, “trade-union”, structures of representation “federation”, “verbal protestation”. These words belong to the Far left grammar.

3. Case study analysis: The problem of representation

The incident which follows is an illustration of the paradoxes contained in the refusal to create political structures whilst seeking representation across the movement based on a grammar of action. It concerns the clash between the womens’ association “les Pénélopes” and MES (Solidarity Economy Movement in France) representatives . “Les Penelopes” is an network of associations wich tries, as the MES, to create a federation of solidarity economy initiatives. The main differences is that “Les Penelopes” focuses on Women initiatives and that its network is interested in more subjects than just solidarity economy (as feminist movements, etc. etc.). Representatives of the MES and of “Les Penelopes” met in a workshop during the second World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (31 January to 5 February 2002). Its name was “Women in solidarity economy”.

In a face to face interview Martha, President of “Les Penelopes”, describes the initiation of the network:

“Act I: At the first forum in Porto Alegre (January 2001), *les Pénélopes*, which we had started some 5 or 6 days earlier, we thought “we are not going to the other end of the world just like that, in a social forum, without meeting people (with whom we could work)”. We made a start earlier, **we had established connections. We were already very interested in solidarity economy practised by women because it is a way of resisting globalisation, patriarchal society, violence**, etc. We met two of the cooperatives, it was great! We filmed everything, we took pictures of us all together, then we decided to set up partnerships with those cooperatives seeing as we are in touch with cooperatives over here. This is act I.

Act II: at the second Porto Alegre forum (in January-February 2002), we thought: we're going to set up a workshop for these cooperatives to meet... and thus try and start a network. **Not a network of representatives, no, of actual active partners**. And since it's a world forum, it's fantastic, there'll be lots of people from all over the world. And indeed there were lots of people, including MES people. (They) **were very late, they hadn't proposed a workshop, so there was no possibility of their having a workshop, so she** (a member of MES, AN) negotiated with *les Pénélopes* for them to participate in our workshop. We said all right but could not agree on a title, so we said “we'll just share the allotted time, you can have one hour and a half.” They were first and launched a regular attack on “ *Les Pénélopes*” (the speaker quotes the MES delegate, AN): “*it's outrageous, you cannot set up an international network in solidarity economy, it's much too soon, anyway you are new into the field, you have no past history in solidarity economy, we were first in that field*”. Imagine! In our workshop! There were people from the Brazilian Workers' Party, feminists involved in solidarity economy we had invited

³ . MES Executive Committee, 2004, About the General Assembly of the 23rd April. In *La lettre du MES*, 12.

because they were quite interested (those people the speaker said they had made friend with during the first forum, AN). And what do they do?! They start a dog fight, they **take over our right to speak**. People had come to say things and instead they attended an undignified brawl (...). We were very angry (...). This was repeated at the European Social Forum and this was just a clash between people”.

“Les Penelopes” represent another network of actors involved in solidarity economy at an international level, but in competition with the MES. The logic of networking demands that MES members accept “Les Penelopes”. However who in the web of networks can claim to be a 'better' representative of solidarity economy? There is no doubt that the Brazilian cooperatives, which “*les Pénélopes*” have met and which its president is talking about, belong to solidarity economy, a movement that has strongly developed in Brazil. They also use a grammar of praxis and action rather than one of representation and denunciation (the grammar of the far-left). In addition the president of *les Pénélopes* chairs a cooperative in Paris. But this is not enough for those who see MES as the only worthy representative of solidarity economy.

Here is the presentation of the same situation (the workshop in Porto Alegre 2002) put forward by Monique, President of MES (and director of a proximity services consultancy in Paris), who was present:

“*Les Pénélopes*, that's bullshit” We keep having problems with them. In Porto Alegre in 2002 we had a workshop with them. It also ended in a fight. “Les Pénélopes” **consider that they speak in the name of actors of solidarity economy**. I say no. You do a lot of things other than solidarity economy. You do feminist activities, theoretical articles against domination and capitalism on your website, and so one. If you want us to work together, you do your job, but you are not actors, it's not the same. You can't represent them (...). At that common workshop we insulted each other. We said “let us set up a common network of women in solidarity economy”, they said “*les Pénélopes* must lead it!”. There were 100 people in the room who said ‘No!’ Penelopes can't lead an international movement of solidarity economy.’ They went and did it anyway. (...). They didn't care about what had been achieved before. It led to the exchange of mutual abuse on a grand scale (...). **I've been doing this for 20 years (working within solidarity economy), it took me time. I will continue, even if there is no Office for Solidarity Economy and its subsidies. You see, some people just pop up one morning, and because solidarity economy is in, they are ready to kill!**” I had a problem with joining Penelopes because 1) it wasn't democratic, 2) I found it annoying that an **allegedly far Left** [“*Les Pénélopes*”] I thought: “this is one network claiming an object which is not theirs.” It was politically annoying (...). Because I know their discourse. Penelopes goes to Porto Alegre only to protest and to show themself. It is just « **a critical analysis of the system and all that. But what did they propose ??? »**”

4. Discussion : participation or corporatism ?

MES members (Monique, Marcel) use the libertarian grammar **of praxis** to disqualify “Les penelopes”. They accuse them to belong to the “far left” movement which always pretend to represent and to speak in the name of workers or cooperatives without listening to them really. “Les Penelopes”, as trotskyistes, try to take secretly the power on solidarity economy movement. They would not let the local organisations (whose make solidarity economy in “praxis”) create their own network in a free democratic and horizontal movement. And, in the the spirits of MES leaders, these concrete propositions (fair trade organisations, LETS, etc.) are the ones of their own network. As a reminder, the libertarian grammar of solidarity economy imply a negative connotation of such words as “parties”, “trade-union”, “structures of representation”, “federation”, “verbal protestation”.

But the problem is that the argumentation of Les Pénélopes against the MES is exactly the same !

MES and “les Penelopes” share the same representation of the world and use the same language to describe it. Their grammar has the same specific lexical and grammatical rules that organize permitted and forbidden words in the description of theirself : “direct democracy” rather than “representative democracy”, “public micro-spaces” rather than trade unions, local (workers or citizens) political power rather than party, spontaneous forms rather than centralisation, network rather than federation, “ordinary citizenship” rather than “intellectual apparatchiks”, “libertarianism” rather than “Trotskyism”. The grammar also promotes practices of “engaging in economical praxis” rather than “verbal protest”, and participating actively in the new economy rather than contesting passively.

The MES takes the moral high ground using the grammar of solidarity economy to assert its own legitimacy

and to weaken rival networks. The libertarian grammar paradoxically becomes a weapon to argue for the right of **“talking in the name of”**. Still, why should solidarity economy be more legitimately represented by the MES than by those whom Monique calls “apparatchiks” ? This appears paradoxical when considering that the strength of solidarity networks lies precisely in the claim that they can represent anybody? How can it be proven that MES stakeholders in solidarity economy are more attached to solidarity and ordinary citizenship than stakeholders in the cooperative network set up by *Pénélopes* ?

On the other hand this grammar does not allow the correlation of concepts such as power, representation, delegation, and institution, as this would be the language of a political programme. This is unacceptable to a very large proportion of the actors of the movement of solidarity economy and Social Forum. Both should be a source of creativity, mobilisation, renewed modes of thinking. The fact that such words are censored in its official lexicon means that other modes of domination might creep in. In spite of their political claims to be the quintessence of solidarity representation, both MES and “les Pénélopes” leaders still use the corporatist registers of relatives and friends. The relationships thus created on an intersubjective level can be defined as a corporatist network. However to “represent” means “to speak in the name of” many people who are not necessarily relatives or friends, as Boissevain (1974) argued.

In this sense, in solidarity economy, as elsewhere in the anti-globalisation movement, the emotional dimension of personal relationships is implied by the libertarian grammar, which conceives of politics as located within the boundaries of small circles of friends.

Conclusion : the problem of power

The problem with solidarity economy in its current multi-faceted form was well understood by Castells when he wrote about contemporary social movements at the time of globalization. Its paradoxical ambivalence results from its network model: its main strength is “a networking, decentred form of organization and intervention, characteristic of the new social movements, mirroring and counteracting, the networking logic of domination in civil society”. On the other hand, “it is the decentred, subtle character of networks of social change that makes it so difficult to perceive, and identify, new identity projects coming into being” (1997: 362).

Formalising the grammar of justification in solidarity economy reveals their libertarian representation of an ideal world. Associations and cooperatives built by actors are some kind of non-reflexive, spontaneous, and democratic micro public spaces on their very local level. The ‘on-the-ground’ experience in local cooperatives must be used as the model for constructing a higher organisational level to be present on the Social Forum. Actors insist on the lexicon of horizontal participation and praxis in opposition to abstract and intellectual politics, which is the vertical organisation of far-left parties and trade union (etc.). Sentences involving terms such as “leader” as subject, “represent” as verb and “federation” as complement are not grammatically correct in the minds of the actors of solidarity economy. Moreover, a discourse about theoretical political questions is rejected. Because activists of solidarity economy avoid the explicit exercise of power, it is impossible to ‘empower’ any particular political institution or network to describe what an alternative to capitalism might look like. Because everyone claims to appear uninterested in achieving power in any form, it is exercised everywhere by leaders of some informal corporatism.

Because the MES as well as “Les Pénélopes” keep rejecting all political forms (parties, trade unions, or federations), they refuse any form of power. But perhaps Giddens was not entirely wrong when he said that the Third Sector must acknowledge the inevitable nature of power and stop seeing the use of power as inevitably evil. Power in the larger sense of the term is how we can achieve things. For Giddens, there can be a positive power when it is not used towards hoarding caste privileges (TNC, etc.) but taking all citizens into account (1990: 162-163).

The question which arises is the following one: how can we suggest a way for libertarian organizations to manage power without falling down in the usual? A possible response could be to ask “practitioner” actors and “grammarians” to be aware of that other dimension of their forgotten libertarian tradition: self-management (autogestion) and its writings about the rotation of work and leadership tasks and about the possibility of removing “collective representatives” (Castoriadis, [1952], 1974). For a real political form of the libertarian grammar it would be necessary that the malignant properties of political activity (Power, representative, delegation, ... are known and accepted as inevitable. According to Castoriadis, to accept them provides the only chance to manage them collectively. The censoring of questions of power and representation in their theoretical writings has deprived activists in solidarity economy of the tools that would enable them to propose a powerful counter-proposal to the capitalist hegemony.

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