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BOOK REVIEW

**Peter Utting (Ed.):
Social and Solidarity Economy beyond the Fringe**

Zed Books, United Kingdom, 2015, 400 pp.

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The collected volume edited by Peter Utting with chapters by Suzanne Bergeron, Stephen Healy, Carina Millstone, Bénédicte Fonteneau, Georgina Gómez, Marguerite Mendell, Paul Nelson, John-Justin McMurtry, Cecilia Rossel, Abhijit Ghosh, Ananya Mukherjee-Reed, Jean-Louis Laville, Justine Nannyonjo, Bina Agarwal, Béatrice Alain, Cristina Grasseni, Francesca Forno, Silvana Signori, Darryl Reed, Roldan Muradian, José Luis Coraggio and Milford Bateman critically analyses the vast and diversified field of action of the social and solidarity economy, paying particular attention to its determinants and challenges. Unlike other contributions, the book has the merit of adopting a non-ideological approach intended to evidence the tensions and contradictions inherent in the growth and expansion of the social and solidarity economy. It is consequently essential reading for those interested in understanding the bottom-up dynamics driven by groups of citizens concerned to promote a more inclusive and democratic economy. The book is therefore addressed to a plurality of readers, including practitioners in the field of international cooperation, researchers, activists, and policymakers.

The concept to which the authors refer has the merit of linking the more conventional notions of “enterprise”, “entrepreneurship” and “social protection” to concepts with greater significance for change: rights, equality, active citizenship, ethics, solidarity and (social, environmental and distributive) empowerment. Whence derives the book’s strong emphasis on the social justice of the social and solidarity economy, which encompasses not only those organizations traditionally

belonging to the “social economy” or the ‘third sector’, such as cooperatives, mutual societies and non-governmental organizations, but also a myriad of mutual aid groups, ranging among organizations for the production of goods and services (fair trade and solidarity networks and other types of solidarity purchase groups) associations of workers in the informal economy, more recently-established social enterprises, alternative currencies, and certain types of digital crowdfunding.

The fundamental characteristics common to social and solidarity economy organizations are the priority given to social and often environmental objectives, the importance placed on aspects to do with ethics, and the rethinking of economic practices in order to promote democratic self-management and active citizenship. In essence, unlike other concepts commonly used in the literature, the social and solidarity economy integrates economic, social, environmental, and cultural goals with the political dimension inherent in the participatory and inclusive governance models that distinguish it.

The research question which the authors address through theoretical and empirical analysis is the conditions under which the social and solidarity economy can grow in size, or expand horizontally at local level, while retaining its values and objectives. More specifically, the first part of the book is devoted to analysis of how the meaning and development of the social and solidarity economy have been influenced by institutional changes, the evolution of the relations among state, market, and civil society, and the various philosophical and ideological currents of thought which have become established over the past two centuries. A survey of the history of the social and solidarity economy identifies various stages in its development and explains its fluctuating evolution. The birth in the early nineteenth century of numerous mutual-aid associations to promote economic and political empowerment through collective action was followed by philanthropic solidarity aimed at reducing poverty through individual donations, then by the advent of the state-market model which largely relegated the voluntary sector to a marginal role, and then by a revitalization of collective solidarity as a result of the social movements of the 1970s — the forerunners of a new mobilization from below. The book also devotes ample space to the relations established by social and solidarity economy organizations with public agencies. It stresses the key role played by policies, regulatory actions, and public programmes to support the social and solidarity economy and to ensure its stability; but it also highlights the risks related to the integration into public policies of the organizations belonging to it. Whence derives the importance of co-definition of policies by the social economy and solidarity organizations that many authors cite with a view to identifying goals to be pursued, the resources on which to draw, and the priorities of the interventions to be carried out, which should reflect the community’s interests and endowments.

The second part of the book uses case studies on organizations operating in a variety of sectors and countries of the North and especially the South of the world to analyse the various dimensions — horizontal, vertical, and multi-sectoral — of the expansion and growth of the social and solidarity economy. It dwells on the relative opportunities and difficulties. The cases selected enable analysis of the tensions which characterize many social and solidarity economy initiatives when small-scale schemes centred on personal exchanges, local-level trust and reciprocity relationships give way to large-scale impersonal ones.

This is therefore an extremely topical book which brings issues often overlooked by the dominant literature back to the centre of debate; in particular, the role and limits of participation and collective mobilization in the construction of a new model of development that is both fair and sustainable for the planet.