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CONFERENCE LETTERS

ISCTE-IUL 2019 International Conference: Social Solidarity Economy and the Commons - Contributions to the Deepening of Democracy

KEY-WORDS

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The second edition of the international conference dedicated to the social and solidarity economy (SSE) and the commons was organised by the Centre for International Studies (CEI-IUL), with the support of the Department of Political Economy at ISCTE-IUL, the Centre for Ecology, Evolution and Environmental Changes (cE3c) in the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Lisbon and the Solidarity Economy Incubator at the Federal University of Alagoas (UFAL) in Brazil.

The aim of the conference was to promote dialogue and exchanges of knowledge and experience among academics, practitioners and civil society activists about new governance models of the commons and the necessity to find alternative or complementary socio-economic development paradigms based on new spaces for collective action to re-establish social ties and build new life and work opportunities¹.

¹ The conference was held from the 6th to 8th of November 2019 at the Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL) in Lisbon, Portugal. Conference program is available online at: <https://ssecommons.cei.iscte-iul.pt/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Short-Programme.pdf> [Accessed: February 2020].

To reach this goal and to better understand the contribution played by social and solidarity economy organisations in different parts of the world, the conference was divided into five macroareas: (i) institutional innovations and new participatory organisation models for economic development; (ii) urban regeneration and rural development; (iii) inclusive technologies and forms of governance; (iv) climate change, renewable energy and sustainable water management; and (v) social movements promoting and supporting justice and human rights.

The opening plenary session benefitted from the contributions of several scholars from Europe and Latin America. Donatella Della Porta (Scuola Normale Superiore - Pisa, Italy) offered examples of SSE in response to the 2007-2008 crisis, not only from the economic point of view but also from the idealist one. In her speech, she introduced the role played by social movements and global mobilisations underlying the connection between different protest movements, from “Fridays for Future” to local independence movements such as “No to the High-Speed Train” (NOTAV) or how different protest movements refer to each other, as in the case of the Hong Kong demonstrators with Catalan flags. A typical reaction of the “system” seems to be the criminalisation of these protest movements and more in general of civil society organisations. This also happens in Europe, as in the case of the rebellion movements in Barcelona and non-governmental organisations rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, in a time of economic crises and the Great Recession, the idea behind new forms of commons through these new social movements is a response to the consequences of the austerity policies implemented by various national governments. These social movements are demanding concrete alternatives to capitalism to achieve an higher level of economic justice and human solidarity able to produce and transform into the commons those goods and services that really meet the needs of local communities.

In line with this assumption, Philippe Eynaud (Sorbonne University - Paris, France) proposed a reflection on the concept of social enterprise. In particular, he underlined how it is not only a matter of combining “social” and “economic” factors but also of stressing the democratic and political dimension of these organisations. Trying to understand if the existing models of social enterprises can represent an antidote to social inequalities, he suggested decolonising the idea of social enterprise as bounded by the issues of gender, colonialism, ecology and race within the mainstream economy. In his opinion, what is needed is to go beyond the idea of the economy as a market economy, and social enterprises allow us to overcome this paradigm and imagine “reframing the idea of what economy is”. Moreover, it is necessary to overcome the myth of market self-regulation and the hyper-specialisation and reductionism of dealing with questions from a single point of view, through combining different disciplines, from historical and political studies to economics and sociology, to re-embed the economy in the social and political orders (Eynaud et al., 2019).

The topic of how to reconcile economy and society was the central theme of the conference. Genauto Carvalho de França Filho (Federal University of Bahia - Salvador, Brazil) proposed an analysis of social and conventional enterprises positioning democratic governance in relation to social purpose and economic-financial sustainability, considering, however, these two quantities antithetical. His interpretation is that solidarity economy organisations must strengthen and

expand their aims if they want to be a credible alternative to capitalism, in contrast to the dominant thought based on the legitimacy of the principle according to which the only goal of a company is profit maximisation. . Essentially, he proposed reconfiguring the concepts of sustainability and viability, considering that what is sustainable in an economic sense may not be sustainable in a social or environmental sense. Therefore, it is necessary to consider different plans to ensure genuine and overall sustainability and viability and to achieve an economy of solidarity.

During the conference, many keywords repeatedly emerged among scholars and the keynote speakers. One of these words was “solidarity”. In his speech, Boris Marañón (National Autonomous University of Mexico - Mexico City, Mexico) proposed a reflection on the meaning of solidarity in terms of “solidarity to think, practise and learn” but also to “feel”. He suggested reflecting on the discourse on solidarity and democracy in its historical sense, in its diachronicity. When we talk about economics, what are we talking about? The dominant thought is univocal, but in recent decades several critical discourses have arisen. Modernity and development are in crisis, giving space to what he calls “humanity’s paths of liberation”. His point of view leads to modernity as destructive, for humans and for Mother Earth, viewing both as merely objects. This approach is based on the European colonialist culture, which is also reproduced in other societies. For this reason, it is necessary to include the historical and cultural dimension in the discourse, to understand how modernity and capitalism are bound together. They are “brothers”: we cannot have the one without the other. Modern science and culture permit colonialism and dominance of the stronger over the weaker. The solidarity economy is a new project for humanity; it speaks of tolerance, cohabitation and reproduction of life and not of capital and verticality. It is about “de-patriarchalising” culture. The new economy must integrate, as a fundamental element, a feminist approach: the care approach for social and material reproduction. In this sense, the economy should promote the production of consumer values that allow the development of humanity. A plural economy is needed: an economy based on a non-functional vision of life and instead functional for life. Marañón concluded by inviting us to talk about “economic solidarity” instead of “solidarity economy”, because the latter does not include the relationship between power and the political dimension. It is not a mere terminological question. We must rethink social science in accordance with this overcoming of modernity in favour of the transition to *buen vivir*. In the “nation-state”, citizens accept state domination and have only certain rights. In this sense, academics must place their knowledge and technical skills at the service of the community, in dialogue with people; they must make what is happening understandable. Academics are not a source of information but a “tool” for increasing the empowerment, responsibility and participation of the citizens.

These interventions provided the opportunity for Jeová Torres (Federal University of Cariri - Juazeiro do Norte, Brazil) to focus his speech on democracy. Through the title “Hacked Democracy”, he talked about various authoritarian leaders who dominate the international political scene. The key to the understanding he proposes is to highlight how, despite the democratic victory and the use of instruments of control, many leaders are faced with protests that are repressed, even violently, demonstrating the weakness of the power of heads of state such as Erdoğan, Morales and Bolsonaro.

The democratic response exists and is strong, although it must deal with a legal framework, which allows or does not allow the manifestation of dissent and possible repression.

After the first plenary session, the work of the first day continued with parallel sessions concerning many different interventions in terms of both themes and origins of academics, practitioners and civil society activists, even though the main topic was to criticise capitalism, offering different points of view and solutions for an “alternative to capitalism”. Among these, there was an intervention focussed on “re-institutionalise hope as a political space”, offered by Lars Hulgård and Jennifer Eschweiler (Roskilde University, Denmark). Citizenship is composed of various dimensions: a legal dimension linked to norms, a civil dimension linked to identity and a recognition of belonging, and an economic dimension linked to contract and property rights. The main critics of capitalism emerge when the market tends to transform citizenship into a contractual element with an ever-greater relevance of the contribution dimension of individuals to the market less and less involved in the political sphere, as this is brought under control by the market economy, which decides what is right to protect itself.

A proposal offered by Amadeus Narbutt (York University - Toronto, Canada) analysed, through the Gramscian interpretation, the ability of the Zapatista and Colombian FARC experiences to offer a real alternative to capitalism and neoliberalism in terms of popular consensus, a radically different social order and an equally distinctive economic system. The role played by local movements returned in different presentations from urban to rural areas to highlight the importance of narrating and re-narrating the experiences of SSE. Among these, we would like to mention two interesting cases. The first one is the case of the hip hop movement in the suburbs of Brasília, presented by Janaina Peres (University of Brasília, Brazil), as an awareness among the marginalised segments of society of their own value, identity and potential for change, asking to be recognised as social actors. The second one is the case of the Andean populations offered by Alfonso Ponce (University of Brasília, Brazil). In his speech, he stressed the importance of indigenous communities in affirming the right to *care* for the land and not *possess* it according to the ancient traditions, following another paradigm and another traditional agricultural system that unites and combines society, territory and plants so that the community treats the soil that produces plants, in a cosmological vision. The theme of food sovereignty also recurred quite frequently related to criticism of the neoliberal approach to food production and consumption, which neglects security in supply in critical macro-political conditions.

The plenary session on the second day offered wide space for the contribution of Jean-Louis Laville (National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts - Paris, France), who posed a clear criticism of the claim to match market and economy. Although cooperatives were born to change the market, it seems that the market changed the cooperatives. In fact, the importance of how we organise our cooperation must be underlined: commons are not just a matter of shared ownership. They embody a theme of governance, of sharing decisions. It is crucial to the resistance to institutional isomorphism as well as market rules and private property. Therefore, he suggests considering isomorphism not from the point of view of governance as a mechanism but as a recognition of

the legitimacy to represent communities and movements, considering how the epistemology of the global North has made alternative forms of economy invisible. Evolutionism is a key concept for this epistemic colonisation, together with political fetishism: this epistemology has reduced our understanding of reality and our ability to act. He invited us to consider biodiversity and the diversity of ideas as fundamental for the transition, which is not only material or procedural but also cultural and epistemic. It is necessary to conceive a new way of understanding how to move on to post-growth in which the community is the subject, the SSE is the process, and the commons are the goal. He then denounced how the European Union (EU) speaks so much of active citizenship and citizen involvement but not in the economy, where a direction different from that envisaged by neoliberalism is absolutely not desired. What the EU want to create is a renewed and integrated capitalism with some new initiatives, such as microcredit, social bonds, the green economy, etc., to prevent real change.

In line with this, Robert Hall (Global Ecovillage Network) argued that the solutions are not in the reform of the system, nor in violent rebellion, but in radically changing things without asking for permission. It is about resisting destruction, transforming practices, transforming minds. It is fundamental to empower citizens and communities, building bridges of hope and international solidarity for a sustainable future. However, this is not easy, and we must invest in the education of individuals by sharing the experiences and best practices of social and solidarity initiatives worldwide. Sophie Bloemen (The Commons Network) clarified how several studies in recent decades have shown that even in intentional communities it is common to fall back on the reproduction of hierarchical mechanisms. This happens because even when there is no declared structure, in reality, there is structure and there are hierarchies. She suggested considering the intersectional feminism approach as a possible solution.

The concluding plenary session of the conference, on the third day, offered an overall reading of the extensive research and many experiences proposed without omitting a certain dose of rhetoric with a “call to arms” to defend the commons threatened by the liberal economy, which seems unwilling to admit of resistance.

The SSEC conference did not offer only traditional plenary and parallel sessions. An interesting proposal of the organisers was the institution of “research derbies”, during which the participants, after presenting their research, established a dialogue with the stated intent of favouring the integration of the research results towards a common publication. During the conference, three derbies were held, one on each day, with different focusses.

In general, three main strands emerged from the SSEC conference - three areas in which the social and solidarity economy and the commons find themselves challenging the mainstream system: the *legal* dimension, in which local authorities, especially municipalities, can make a significant contribution; the *cultural and social* dimension, in which the ideality of civil society movements contributes to keeping alive and spreading awareness of the right to plurality; and the *economic* dimension, with experiments and attempts that in part seek to obtain economic and financial

sustainability within the market logics, trying at the same time to assert their own peculiarities by refusing to place themselves on the same level as for-profit companies. What is evident is both the difficulty and the tenacity that all these cases show in making the social and solidarity economy and the commons a viable alternative to the dominant logics.

In conclusion, the way in which the themes were presented during the conference, the emphasis on the necessity to oppose the current capitalist models, and the examples presented may seem too idealistic. However, it is a fact that “squares” are reviving all over the world. From Hong Kong to Bogotá, from Paris to Santiago, from Barcelona to La Paz. Something is happening.

More and more, people and movements are showing a deep sense of frustration and disagreement about the dominant capitalistic economic models, a sense of dissatisfaction linked to the worsening of their quality of life due to the lack of job opportunities and suitable services. What emerges clearly is the need to build new alternatives to current situations and challenges, new organisational models based on reciprocity, trust and cooperation to achieve results in terms of well-being, safety and development, which are not achievable individually.

However, how is it possible to promote the validity and goodness of these alternative models and proposals?

Above all, in a historical moment when even some capitalist enterprises are embracing certain themes (e.g., environment) - even if it is perhaps to curry the favour of consumers and find new opportunities to make more profit rather than for real cultural change - how is it possible to really contrast them?

Is it sufficient to promote certain themes by relying only on the values behind them? Or is it more relevant (if not necessary) to address the way in which the issues are promoted?

References

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