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WORKSHOP PRESENTATION

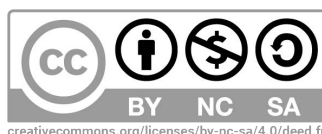
A SOCIAL ECONOMY OR A RECIPROCAL ECONOMY?

6TH INTERNATIONAL KARL POLANYI CONFERENCE

WORKSHOP ON

“THE DEBATE ON THE SOCIAL ECONOMY: PERSPECTIVES IN THEORY AND PRACTICE”

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INTRODUCTION

I was recently invited to attend a strategic planning meeting organised by the Ontario Council of Alternative Businesses. The Council is, for all intents and purposes, a network of autonomous and semi-autonomous commercial ventures called community businesses¹ that employ — and, as often as possible, are managed by and controlled by — their members. In this case, the members are consumer/survivors located in Ontario, individuals who have survived mental illness as well as the system of treatment, services and practices dispensed by health and social service professionals in both institutional or non institutional settings. Their ventures are true businesses operating in the market economy, although certain functions may be supported or sponsored by public or private funds, and their operations are geared towards the specific needs of the psychiatric survivors. The meeting was organised to explore various issues such as the problems related to “selling” their approach to both public and private funders, the difficulties in establishing relationships with conventional businesses of the private sector, and the obstacles to extending economic opportunities for consumer/survivors, either as workers or managers or owners.

A couple of days later, I received an invitation to Québec’s community economic development training institute’s next annual meeting. One of the questions that will be discussed will be a proposal to change its name from “Institut de formation en développement économique communautaire” to another as yet undetermined one. In the documents accompanying the proposed agenda, there is a suggestion that the expression “économie solidaire” should be incorporated into the new name since the notion of economic solidarity seems to correspond quite well with the objectives of the organisation. However, in an another document, IFDEC’s president wonders out loud if there is, in fact, a distinction to be made between “économie sociale” (social economy) and “économie solidaire” (reciprocal economy), since the terms are somewhat nebulous, often confusing and invariably overlapping.

This paper would like to try to shed some light on this question by examining differing development strategies. At the same time, it will try to link the difficulties and the issues related to the full-fledged integration of consumer/survivors to each of the various economies being put forward.

THREE VISIONS OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

It almost seems that everyday someone comes out with a new proposal on how to get the economy back on track. Over the years, however, most of the serious recommendations and analyses, and even many of the more farfetched ideas, can be related to at least one of three grand visions of how a society should be organised in order to most efficiently manage and share its resources in order to respond to the needs of its population². For the purposes of this paper, Boothroyd and Davis' typology of strategic options for community economic development³ is used to identify each paradigm: economic growth; structural change; development of new expressions of solidarity. Each of these visions can be examined in order to see what type of economy that it seeks to develop as well as the type of empowerment that will probably result, since both economic development and empowerment will have some bearing on how marginalized segments of the population, such as consumer/survivors, can best take their rightful place within the different social and economic systems offered by their societies.

ECONOMIC GROWTH

Proponents of the economic growth paradigm believe that a society's well-being increases proportionately with the wealth that it generates. They are therefore primarily preoccupied with the production of goods and services and they consider the market to be the most satisfactory mechanism for regulating economic activities and allocating wealth. Economic activity is generally seen as being limited to commercial and monetary transactions and facilitating such transactions thus becomes the goal of a society's institutions. The economic growth model of development sees the importing of capital investment as the most efficient way to create additional jobs. Overall, the various socio-economic actors' responsibilities therefore need to focus on increasing competitive advantages, augmenting the efficiency of existing firms, creating new businesses, and strengthening the immediate physical environment.

This paradigm considers the community as being the geographical location for economic activity. Partnerships are encouraged among individuals and enterprises recognised as having a valid interest in the deals to be made. Social, environmental, and cultural concerns necessarily become subordinated to economic ones. The economic growth model of development espouses a liberal economy wherein traditional economic capital is exploited (land, labour, financial capital) to generate wealth.

It could be said that the general objective of this model is the self-empowerment of entrepreneurs and consumers. This vision generally negates the need for collective action, unless it has to do with the removal of barriers to self-empowerment (such as, government regulations and bureaucratic constraints), since it sees individual self-interest as being the motivating force driving relations between individuals as well as the power behind the invisible hand of the marketplace. To a great extent, “survival of the fittest” is the pragmatic principle guiding the way businesses operate as well as the way employees obtain and retain their jobs.

Bearing in mind that the onus is on the individual organisation or person to assure its or his/her survival, it then follows that if consumer/survivors as individuals cannot compete in the labour market and if their businesses cannot compete in the commercial market without some kind of outside assistance, then they are not seen as contributing to a community’s economic development but rather as draining some of its resources. In a liberal economy, such businesses and individuals become beneficiaries to be “helped” in the most economically efficient way possible. Moreover, since economic self-interest is the guiding principle for everyone, consumer/survivors included, then some form of programmed supervision must be established to ensure that people like consumer/survivors do not taking undue advantage of society’s benevolence. In fact, this model still seeks, as it did more than a hundred ago, to distinguish between the “worthy” and the “unworthy” poor and it usually chooses to aid the former who, for reasons beyond their power or because of a personal shortcoming, are unable to support themselves and who, through training, behavioural modification, and occasionally even occupational therapy, can be rescued from pauperisation.

Generally speaking, organised consumer/survivors reject this point of view and it is therefore to be expected that relations will become strained between them and private and public decision-makers who belong the economic growth school of thought. In a nutshell, in a liberal economy based on the rules of competition, solidarity is a moral issue and thus outside the realm of economics. This kind of fragmentation of economic and social agendas is a characteristic of social organisation in most of today’s industrial nations.

STRUCTURAL CHANGE

While proponents of a structural change model of development do not deny the need for economic growth, they believe that the laws of supply and demand left to their own

purposes inevitably produce inequalities. Market forces therefore need to be corralled lest they breed injustices that can't be corrected or abuses that can cause injury or damage to weaker, less competitive, segments of society. Believing that the movements of all forms of capital can be controlled by public bodies or legislation, advocates of structural change are thus more concerned with regulating market forces than with encouraging them. The ways to harness these forces and to ensure a more equitable sharing of wealth span a wide spectrum of mechanisms of redistribution that vary according to the degree of State presence to ensure the required control. Indeed, control over economic activity is needed on both macro and micro levels and this usually translates into State intervention on international and national policy levels and less frequently in the local arena in order to bolster local power. Market and capital diversification, import substitution, broadening sources of outside investments, and increasing local control over resources are some of the actions that need to be taken to offset imbalances produced by the market and thus strengthen economies weakened by what some have termed "economic malfunctions"⁴.

A structural change paradigm recognises legitimate economic activity in both commercial and non commercial transactions provided that these have some kind of a monetary nature. The community is seen as a mixture of networks and relations that have to be moulded and restructured in order to achieve social harmonisation and equitable redistribution of wealth and resources. The general idea is to develop and exploit social capital⁵ along with the economic ones. The economic model which is developed is that of a social economy where benefits ensue to members of a particular society or organisation. In recent years, universal, insurance-based models such as the one developed by the Welfare State have grown in disrepute and this has brought about a drifting towards the redefining of national social contracts to tackle the problems being generated by the massive transformation of the labour market and the resulting socio-economic exclusion of a horrific number of people all over the world. It is therefore not surprising to see new strategic options being put forward — such as the concerted action of leaders of heretofore antagonistic social groups in order to reduce sterile conflicts such as strikes and lockouts — as well as older options being resurrected — such as the development of co-operatives and kindred organizations.

Individual and collective empowerment of the members of a specific community or organisation is generally the end result of structural change. If we look behind the buzzword, we find that empowerment of this nature is a multifaceted process whereby individuals gain control — either individually or collectively, but always through the

structures or communities that they are members of — over some or all of the resources that they need to ensure their well-being. There are essentially four components to this type of an empowerment process⁶, each of which evolves along a continuum of its own:

- 1) participation (outside of the realm of psychology, power is always exerted in relation with someone or something else);
- 2) competence and technical ability (to exert control, a person needs skills and information);
- 3) self-esteem (power cannot be exerted without some belief in one's own legitimacy);
- 4) consciousness-raising (to remove the burden of guilt for being disempowered from the individual's shoulders and to allow for social change by identifying the role of a society's political, social and economic systems and institutions).

Even though this process is played out differently for each individual and is influenced by internal and external contextual factors, a structural change approach sees empowerment as inherently collective. This leads its advocates to emphasise the need for democratic mechanisms of control based on personal membership as a constituent rather than on wealth or social standing. Since consumer/survivors tend to organise themselves within some kind of co-operative or self-management framework, they have a great deal in common with those who believe in a structural change approach.

However, the degree of empowerment produced will vary to the extent that evolution along the continuums necessary for its process are facilitated and supported. In the field of social intervention, this has been hampered by a medical model approach to protecting a society's weaker components. Fuelled by research fragmenting disempowered and oppressed segments of society into various "groups at risk", the structural change approach can take a paternalistic bent where the end result is not much different than the charity-based approach of the economic growth paradigm, in the sense that the individual is still seen as being responsible for ensuring his or her well-being. Where this does not seem possible or feasible, society — through the State — has a duty to take charge or, at the very least, to set the social parameters for those who cannot do so for themselves. It is here that consumer/survivors have problems in dealing with public officials since they, like most other survivors of oppression⁷, require simultaneous autonomy and support whereas the structural change model seems to offer them either one or the other but seldom both at the same time.

This paradox is at the heart of the present debate in Québec in which the social economy is often seen in opposition to the Welfare State and touted by some as a vital part of a quick-fix solution to the dual ills of deficit spending and massive unemployment. The fear is that public support of autonomous collective action responding to social needs from a commercial marketing perspective — for example, in the field of home health care — will be nothing more than a transfer of the State's responsibilities to private, hopefully co-operative or not-for-profit, business ventures without accompanying adequate resources and training and without adequate quality control over services rendered. Herein lies the rub for consumer/survivors: for the State to be responsible, it can only do so by setting up frames of reference — i.e., public programmes — and by ensuring that their supervision is done by knowledgeable and competent people — i.e., professionals. This creates a form of bureaucratic domination of the type that consumer/survivors are striving to break free from. On the other hand, agreeing to the complete autonomy of action desired by consumer/survivors makes it difficult for the State to reconcile principles of accountability in the redistribution of public funds and of collective responsibility in the maintenance of public health. It seems like a catch-22 situation: is the partial funding of a consumer/survivor courier service a shirking, by the State, of its duties to persons who have struggled with mental illness by using them as cheap labour, or is it the way of the future for social intervention by supporting the empowerment process of organised victims of oppression who seek to re-enter the labour market on their own terms by developing and using their own tools? The answer to this question is avowedly quite unclear.

A similar paradox is also at the heart of the debate surrounding community economic development (CED). CED is a community-controlled institution-building process whereby empowered constituencies obtain access to resources required for individual and collective fulfilment. The underlying premise here is that communities are poor or in decline because they do not have control over the tools and economic resources that they require to ensure their well-being⁸ and that institutions under their authority will enable them to obtain and maintain the control that they need⁹. CED practitioners believe that such institutions can only be achieved and maintained through community participation and awareness and that programmes are most effective when they address the needs of the community as articulated by a representative membership of that community. However, a community's economy is not insulated against forces outside of its control — such as technological changes affecting production processes — and efforts promoting local economic development can be seen as a sham by those

who think that only macro policies will have some effect on economic activity on a more global scale.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW EXPRESSIONS OF SOLIDARITY

Both the contradictions noted above and the increase in ecological models of social intervention and environmental protection may explain a bit of why there is an increasing — albeit still marginal — tendency among certain people to see the structural change paradigm as being too limited in its results and the development of a social economy as an unsatisfactory solution to the problems of poverty and social exclusion. While they believe that market forces can occasionally have some merit and that many structural changes can be seen in a positive light, they are more preoccupied with the values underlying the way that wealth is produced, used and shared in a society than in its quantity or in the mechanics of its redistribution. Since they see the community as being comprised of individuals who are mutually responsible for each other's well-being, they are thus invariably concerned with factors regarding social and economic exclusion and believe that each individual can and should play a significant role in the development of an harmonious and just society. They believe that reciprocity is the best mechanism for regulating economic activity and see transactions within a society as being both commercial and non commercial, monetary and non monetary in nature. They therefore seek increased mutuality and co-operation among individuals and institutions with an overall objective of reducing marginality and exclusion. They thus direct their efforts towards promoting and collaborating in the development of policies and programmes that foster these objectives. At the same time, they believe that democratically-controlled, community-based organizations exemplify the type of institutions where such reciprocity can be fostered and materialised¹⁰. They also have a tendency to promote non-monetary exchanges and to develop ways in which all persons concerned can participate in decision-making processes at all levels.

While the proponents of the development of renewed solidarity can be thought of as promoting a subsistence economy mentality (since the only “true” examples to be found of reciprocal economic development are in the more “primitive”— i.e., non industrial — societies¹¹) or as yet another wave of utopian communists or hippie freaks, new thinking is indeed emerging in which community empowerment based on a sense of belonging and of human dignity can become a resource for development purposes. For example, innovations such as certain comprehensive community initiatives in the United States “aim to marry human, neighborhood [*sic*], and social capital development through the

two guiding principles of comprehensiveness and community building”¹². Another illustration is the *québécois* model of a community development corporation which is basically an umbrella-group of various community groups and organizations and, in some cases, co-operatives, whose constituents generally emanate from disadvantaged segments of the population, for the purpose of ensuring their participation in the community's development. Specific programmes relating to economic development are not universal within the network of CDC's but, where operational, involve the pooling its member organizations' efforts in order to reinforce these same organizations, to develop alternative forms of businesses (such as worker co-operatives), and to make their concerns heard by participating on the boards of more traditional development institutions (such as Community Futures Committees)¹³.

In other words, every person who wants to participate in the economy should have a place to do so since everyone has something to contribute to collective well-being and their aggregate contributions will ensure a decent quality of life for all people, not for just the fittest or the brightest and not just for the members of a specific organisation or community. The model here is one of a reciprocal economy, in other words one based on solidarity, an economy that is embedded in a broader socio-political framework.

This perspective gives way to a non-fragmented social intervention that, instead of instituting completely new programmes, will be more inclined to enhance and build on existing ones. Casework methods build on strengths rather than insisting on weaknesses¹⁴ and community organising is encouraged as social practice with a goal of capacity-building for all members of a community. Community empowerment thus becomes a key in transforming this vision into reality. While this phenomenon has, unfortunately, not been studied all that much from an economic development perspective, a few truisms abound. For example, it is quite probable that “[as] empowered people join together to address and act on community issues and wider political concerns, communities become empowered. In turn, empowered communities provide a growing place for empowering people.”¹⁵ Some pieces of the community empowerment puzzle have nevertheless been identified. These include: participation in all of a community's systems for all, particularly for its most disenfranchised members, including increased control by their organizations over consequences that are important to them and to others in the broader community; decision-making bodies open to the participation of all members of the community, including individuals not seen as “natural” leaders; an equitable distribution of community resources and power; communication mechanisms that promote positive interaction among a diversity of

viewpoints; support for and management of social change; accountability among community systems that promote both individual and collective empowerment¹⁶.

This is the type of approach that consumer/survivors tend to promote and the type of economy that would most likely best suite their purposes. The problem is that it is based on an overwhelming confidence in human nature and most decision-makers are not inclined to open up public coffers to fund innovations here without some form of guarantees and accountability. Consumer/survivors must therefore insist on the fact that member-controlled, democratic structures are most likely the best tools for ensuring that public funds will be well-spent and that such autonomy must not be seen as a by-product of financial support but as a condition for its being granted. It follows that groups such as the consumer/survivor business network need to develop alliances with individuals and organizations who are proponents of this model of development since any change at this level will undoubtedly be political in nature.

CONCLUSION

Is there a distinction between a social economy and a reciprocal one? From an empowerment perspective, the answer seems to be affirmative. That a social economy promotes the empowerment of its members is a giant step towards a more equitable society than what can be expected from a liberal economy but it cannot, however, hide the limitations of its approach. The difficulties faced by the co-operative contingent of the social economy's most hailed success story, the Mondragón worker co-operatives¹⁷ in the Basque region of Spain, in trying to maintain a narrow gap between highest and lowest compensation packages¹⁸ indicates that even viable economic development and guiding principles of solidarity cannot guarantee a value-based approach without disheartening compromises and that empowerment, at an organisational level, cannot change the larger political and economic context on its own. Numerous studies show how "alternative" practices of management and governance have, of necessity, been replaced by more traditional, hierarchical models in order to ensure economic viability¹⁹. Some indicate that conventional business development approaches have been more efficient in providing economic benefits in poor inner cities²⁰. The problem isn't worker co-operatives: the problem is that initiatives of a social economy operate on a playing field where market forces presently rule. To ensure full empowerment, the playing field, as well as the rules of the game, have to change.

Does this mean that a social economy is nothing more than a reformist strategy defending the status quo or opposed to social change? Actually, the answer to this question is not easy to answer because of the wide range of enterprises and organizations that comprise what is referred to as the “Third Sector”²¹. Many of these may not want a more equitable distribution of power and wealth if it means taking some away from their members. What can be said is that, at least in Québec, there seems to be a consensus that the expression “social economy” presently refers to “a mechanism for meeting people’s needs which integrates market and redistributive methods with an enhanced element of reciprocity”²². The argument for developing such a strategy is that markets for such services already exist, that these markets are relatively impervious to the fluctuations of the global economy, and that exploiting them requires little start-up capital and can make use of local labour. On the other hand, jobs in these markets are usually low paying (especially considering the academic requirements to fill them and the responsibilities that providing services entail) and without fringe benefits. Contradictions abound, and nowhere is this truer than around the issue of where a State’s responsibility ends and where the local community’s as well as the individual citizen’s responsibility begins. What is known through research, is that the social component of this sector’s practices will never become self-financing, even though its ventures are engaged in revenue-generating practices and therefore, a social economy must not be interpreted as condoning the public sector’s disengagement from its social responsibilities.

To a great extent, any discussion about the social economy is much more about solidarity and citizenship than about economics. The main issue goes beyond the simple economic development of a society in that it entails the search for a harmonisation of resource allocation and need fulfilment, of economic development and social development, by creating and adapting social and economic institutions, programmes and strategies in such a way that the resulting development will: a) benefit all people in society; b) comply with the community’s social, cultural, and political values; and c) be concerned with and cares for the environment. In practice, this means that a person with disabilities, whether mental or physical, has to have a place within society’s systems, and this includes its businesses, and this individual has to have an opportunity to influence decisions that will affect his or her well-being. This in turn means that relationships between productivity and compensation have to be looked at through new lenses and that social and economic organizations have to make room for people simply because they are people, not because they are the best and the brightest, not because they are the most technically competent. From my point of view,

this goes beyond what a social economy can offer and thus requires the emergence of — or the return to — a reciprocal economy. And one of the keys to attaining this goal may reside in seeing individual empowerment as inextricably interwoven with community empowerment (and vice versa) and in evaluating and modifying economic and social development policies and practices accordingly. By doing so, initiatives belonging to the social economy may just become the building blocks of one based on mutuality and solidarity.

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 - ³ Boothroyd, Peter and Davis, H. Craig, “Community Economic Development: Three Approaches”, Journal of Planning Education and Research, N° 12, 230-240, 1993.
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- ¹⁷ The Mondragón worker co-operatives are seen as one single organisation. "More specifically, in signing the Contract of Association the co-ops commit themselves to uniform principles pertaining to capital ownership, employment creation, earnings differentials, distribution of surplus, and democratic organization. It is for this reason that we today talk about the Mondragon co-ops as a group rather than as individual enterprises." See Lutz, Mark A., and Lux, Kenneth, Humanistic Economics: The New Challenge, New York: The Bootstrap Press, 1988, 253-279.
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