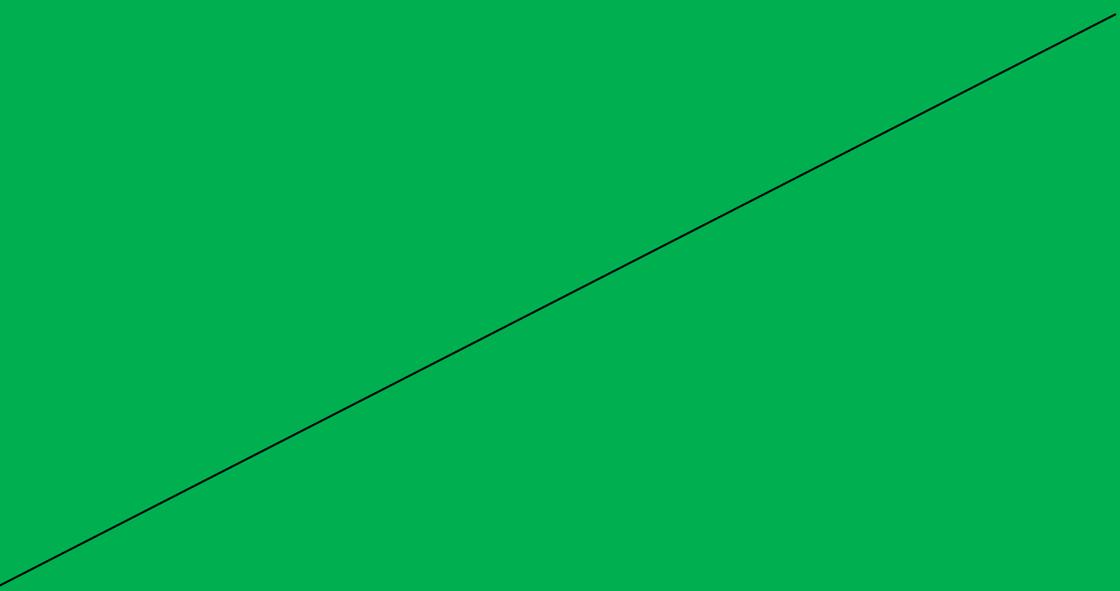


The Revolutionary Potential of Solidarity Economy

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Year of publication: 2016

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Brief History

Instead of an introduction

The solidarity economy proposes more transparency, much more democracy, much more participation, much more redistribution of wealth and goods of production. The solidarity economy fights for free software, for free knowledge, for freedom of access to information, completely.

Beverly Bell and Jessica Hsu¹

In a sense the so called solidarity economy was always existing in one form or another. Many thinkers were interested in it and themselves developed theories that, can be said, contributed to its development: people like Beatrice Webb, Charles Fourier, Robert Owen and many more. But various forms, that can be assumed as typical for the solidarity economy, like sharing, barter and non-intermediary producer-consumer relations, organized through direct community participation and equality, were present in various historic moments in the everyday life of humanity from ancient times.

According to Pierre Clastres² in primitive societies the people controlled their own actions and the circulation of products, deriving from them. In these societies production is being measured according to needs that have to be satisfied. When their needs are satisfied, the primitive men did not strive to produce more, i.e. to alienate their time by working for no reason, instead of filling it with creativity, rest, fun, thinking etc.

Afterwards we can point at the guild economies that emerged in the medieval European cities. According to Peter Kropotkin³, the guilds were setting common economic rules, but they themselves were based

¹ *Solidarity Economies: A Guerilla War Against Capitalism* (available online on: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/beverly-bell/solidarity-economies-a-gu_b_5479762.html)

² See Pierre Clastres's *La Société contre l'État*, 1974

³ See Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Facrot of Evolution* (1902)

on different interests. The medieval guilds were unities of people, sharing the same occupation (traders, producers, artisans etc.), regardless of their status: master or apprentice. Each guild was sovereign in its sphere, but couldn't alone by itself take decisions, regarding the rest of the guilds. That's why they formed federations, through which collectively to determine the rules of the ongoing economic processes in society.

In recent years considerable interest towards the solidarity economy was experienced in many countries accros Latin America. There, during the 80s, the 'solidarity economy' was established as term and set of practicess⁴. But the number of people involved in it continued to increase during the next decade, as a result of the economic crises⁵ tearing the continent, as well as the spreading consumerist culture, stripping human life of meaning. Thus the people, involved with practicess that could be attributed to the solidarity economy, didn't had homogenous character, but were coming from different mileaus of life: from poor families to middle and upper middle class ones. But all of them helped for the creation of many producer and consumer cooperatives, community associations, collective kitchens etc.

In 1998, in the brazillian city of Porto Alegre, famous with its system for participatory budgeting, took place the "Latin American Solidarity Economy Network". Participants in it were activists from all over the continent and even Europe: Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Colombia and Spain. The commonalities between their practicess are many: the strive towards justice, creativity, self-management and autonomy.

From then on, the solidarity economy became international movement. During the first World Social Forum in 2001 was established the Global Network of the Solidarity Socioeconomy. In 2004 it was already

⁴ Ethan Miller in "Other Economies Are Possible!": Building a Solidarity Economy

(available online on: <http://www.geo.coop/node/35>)

⁵ See Roberto Frenkel in *Globalization and financial crisis in Latin America* (2003) (available online on: <http://www.ift.org.ar/pdf/documentos/18-2003.pdf>)

including networks from over 47 countries from all over the world, i.e. tens of thousands democratic economic initiatives.

From 2008 and onwards the solidarity economy started flourishing accros Europe, boosted to a big degree by the economic crisis, which hit all European social stratas. Especially in countries like Greece and Spain the combination of, on the one hand, high levels of unemployment, and on the other, long tradition of resistance and self-organization, led to the creation of thousands of horizontal economic structures, covering wide specter of services, which provides for the livelihood of growing amount of people, with different social status and ideas.

Solidarity economy versus social economy

Quite often the solidarity economy is being mistaken with social economy. There is, however, significant differences between the practicesess and the very logic between the both of them.⁶

The social economy usually signifies the third sector of the economy, which plays a subsidiary role to the first (privet/for profit) and the second (statist). The definitions of what social economy is may vary, but there are certain commonalities amongst them that help us draw a general idea: it is a sector, based on cooperatives, associations and non-governmental organizations (NGO-s), which have rather collective character and prioritizes social goals rather than increasing of profits. This does not mean that in reality it's not realizing profits, needed fot reinvestment and maintainance.

At the core of the logic behind the social economy is the idea of covering the gaps that the present system is unable, for one or another reason, to cover. In a sense it can be viewed as a third pillar of capitalism, together with the private and the state sector. In accordance with this logic, those involved in the social economy often resort to and depend on various charity foundations, state programs etc., seeing in them potential ally.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solidarity_economy#Social_and_solidarity_economy

The solidarity economy, on the other hand, is rooted in much different paradigm, based on direct democracy, equality and mutual aid⁷. Thus it is incompatible with and antagonistic to the dominant politico-economic model of 'top-down' bureaucratic decision-making and competition (social cannibalism). It strives at the complete replacement of the state-private dichotomy. The solidarity economy opposes the very doctrine of constant economic growth, on which capitalism is based, and proposes in its place, not a retreat to the stronger state of the past (also based on the same growth doctrine), but the establishment of autonomous communities, which democratically to determine their needs, instead of some artificial market mechanisms, for greater synergy to be achieved between humanity and nature.

What differentiates the solidarity economy from other movements for social change and revolutionary currents is its pluralist approach - it refutes the idea of one sole and correct road and instead recognizes that there are multiple practicess, many of which rooted in antiquity. Its target is not the creation of one utopia from scratch, but to locate and connect the many mini-utopias, germs of new worlds, already emerging and existing around us. The solidarity economy places the human at the heart of the economy, thus the direct citizen participation and the establishment of solidararian relationships, based on trust, play central role in it.

All this indicates that the solidarity economy have completely transformatory, anti-capitalist and non-statist character, while the social economy deals with contemporary injustices in the frames of the state and the free market, striving to humanize capitalism.

⁷ <http://www.geo.coop/archives/SolidarityEconomicsEthanMiller.htm>

Main Characteristics

What we call labour has not the slightest resemblance to a commodity.

It is simply an aspect of man's life, which is neither detachable from him, nor capable of being hoarded, or transported, or manufactured, or consumed.

Karl Polanyi⁸

Beyond economism

Nowadays the social imaginary successfully is being modelled in the framework of economism. We can say that everything is being subjected to the economy and its basic engine - the paradigm of constant growth. Local communities, the nation-states, entire populations as well as nature are being subjected to the will of the "all mighty" markets. Our inhabitat (cities, homes) as well as the way we think, are being narrowed along economism's basic principles: hierarchy, alienation and competition (social cannibalism).

However, many on the Left entrap themselves in the narrative, imposed on us by the authorities through all the tools they have on their disposal - media, educational system, police etc. - that the contemporary politico-economic model is extremely decentralized, if not "anarchic". Thus many leftists oppose its "chaocity" by proposing a return to the big bureaucratic governments of the past. But if we inspect the dominant system more carefully we will see that this narrative is just a cover, masking an equally authoritarian and centralized model of decision-making, with transnational financial and economic institutions dictating the political direction of entire societies.

The domination of this logic of hegemony of the economic over the political, is being absorbed by society. The most common way of life, as we can observe it in every contemporary capitalist nation-state, is based on mindles consumption and alienating individualism. And resistance towards the dominant order, since it emerges from the midst of this very culture, remains entrapped in this economically-centered

⁸ *The Fascist Virus*, 18-8, n.d.

way of thinking: for a long time the alternative economic demands and models were amongst the top priorities of activists worldwide.

The paradigm of solidarity economy represents a radical break with economism. Although it ostensibly seems like just another economic model, it goes much further than this. First of all, by placing the political question of inclusive and participatory forms of decision-making at its core, solidarity economy is embedding itself into one wider project of direct democracy, which encompasses all spheres of human life and nature, placing above all, the political (i.e. the question of who and how determines the way of life). Thus it cannot be viewed separately from wider social and environmental emancipation.

The very practices of solidarity economy are much more rooted in social deliberation and communitarian relationships, rather than the narrow questions of production and consumption, which also it tends to charge with ethical and political characteristics.

Ecology

In accordance with the worldview of economism, nowadays nature is being viewed as a mere tool, that can be placed in service to the economic growth. Forests are being rapidly cutted, water basins are being depleted, animal species are disappearing with scary pace, not to mention resources like oil. In a few words everything is being commodified, and the question being posed is not 'if' but 'when' and 'how'.

The very development of our societies is being presented as hostile towards nature. Usually this indicates more jobs, more cars and technology, which, according to today's predominant logic, requires overexploitation of nature. And this worldview is being shared by many on the Left as well, being rooted in the same growth-based, anthropocentric logic.

We can detect, in the root of this worldview, again the logic of domination, of hierarchy or 'power-over'. The idea of human domination over nature is the same one of human domination over other humans. Thus is the principle of hierarchy, that is located at the heart of our presentday ecological crisis.

But the approaches towards the preservation of nature nowadays do not seem to reach to this conclusion. Most people view nature as a commodity, completely in accordance with the dominant imaginary, thus their demands circulate around the preservation of certain areas, which then to be exploited for tourism. In economic terms, the equivalent of it is the so called "green capitalism", which includes certain state involvement in the economy and environmentally "responsible" behaviour of capitalist firms, but does not challenge the economic hierarchies and the very concept of constant growth.

Unlike the "ecological" approaches just described, the solidarity economy challenges both the growth doctrine and the hierarchical economic relations. Its target is not constant over-production and articulation of artificial needs in the name of profits for the few (i.e. economic growth). On the contrary, it aims at satisfying the needs of everyone involved in it through the mechanisms of common ownership and direct-democratic managerial procedures. The direct participation at its core ensures that the needs, created and satisfied by the solidarity economy entities, are real individual and communal needs, and not created by bureaucrats or CEOs.

As a result of this, the solidarity economy does not seek to exploit nature, but on the contrary, tries to nurture it, since the people and communities at the grassroots depend on their land, forests, fisheries etc. By rejecting the logic of domination of human over other humans, it sometimes consciously, sometimes not, repudates also the domination of human over nature. This is ever more evident from the adoption of ecologic practices (like permaculture) by many collectives and co-ops from solidarity economy networks in their production and services.

Beyond state and free market

There are countless practices in all spheres of human life, including the economic one, which mainly interests us here, that are successfully existing beyond and antagonistic to statist bureaucracies and capitalist markets. The contemporary ruling elites however have interest in the hegemony of the latter two, thus harnessing all their powers in the promotion of the market-state dichotomy as the only valid/realistic one. The mainstream narrative today have successfully been hijacked by this

"pseudo" dilemma, which influences the direction of the dominant politics as well as their "supposedly" alternatives.

On the one hand there is the capitalist model with its private sector, "free" market and constant economic growth. Nowadays these are the most powerful forces, influencing politics, social relations etc. However they are one of the main sources of desparation and misery. By the enclosure of common rescources by private owners many communities are left withouth nothing but their bare hands, to sell their labour power to the landlords. Even the societies in the so called 'first world' are suffering from the effects of the capitalist system. The consumerist culture and corporative hierarchy, enforced by it, are stripping everyday life from meaning and dignity, while the economic growth, as main engine of capitalism, destroys the environment, making it hazardous-like for people's health.

The market-state pseudo dilemma suggests that the sole alternative to the market based capitalism is the state based socialism. But a closer look at the latter one shows why this is a pseudo dillemma. In its essence the state is a hierarchical and bureaucratic mechanism that encloses common resources and then assigns functionaries to manage them for the society, whithout however to allow social participation. Thus it once again, deprives society from it's direct interaction with its environment and introduces a tiny managerial elite, which in practice is the owner, by having the last word about how things should be done.

The solidarity economy is cutting across this pseudo-dilemma, proposing instead direct management of the economy by the involved in it individuals and their communities. The direct-democratic procedures and collective/communal forms of ownership it incorporates, exclude the private owners, as well as the state/party functionaries, thus giving the control of the economy in the hands of society itself. This is evident from the incompatibility that practices of solidarity economy are showing towards the state and the capitalist business, as I have noted in the previous chapter. That's why it is important (and often is being done) for the solidarity economy to be incorporated into holistic project of direct democracy, which will be able to challenge the domination of the capitalist market, as well as that of the state, in all spheres of life.

Beyond determinism

Determinism is one of the main pillars of economism. Thus our current capitalist system, as well as the totalitarian socialist one of the past, is built on it. The economic determinism is based on the idea that a pseudo-science can exist, through which can be calculated the human potential and to be predicted the direction humanity will take in the future. In a sense it is a kind of mythology, which creates a certain narrative, excluding some practices and logics, while presenting other ones as realistic and possible ones.

It is a precondition for the dominant nowadays market-state dichotomy, for which I spoke earlier. The “free” market and the state are configured in certain historical stages, which can vary according to different economic and deterministic theories, but are necessary condition for the further advancement of humanity. Thus they are being viewed by experts, economists, politicians etc. as the only systems that are possible, real and “rational”. In this way third alternative organizational forms are being excluded as “utopian”, i.e. maybe desirable in a naïve way but completely impracticable and foolish.

The solidarity economy, as opposed to the imaginary of economism, goes well beyond the deterministic logic. It does not pretend that it knows what it should be done from tomorrow in terms of tight politico-economic program etc. That’s why it encompasses different economic forms, varying in certain aspects, but always sharing democratic and collaborative principles.

The solidarity economy can be viewed as a tool for experimenting in real time, rather than a strict economic model. Exactly because it does not rest on deterministic thinking, it experiments from today with different practices, that share some desirable principles, trying to discover their pros and cons, in order to develop them further or engage with new ones, that appear in the processes. The solidarity economy thus fits with the famous slogan, raised by the Zapatistas: *Asking we walk.*

From externalization to internalization of the economy

The final characteristic to which I'll pay attention in this chapter is the way economy is being viewed through the paradigm of solidarity economy. This question, of course is tightly connected with economism and determinism.

In mainstream economics nowadays economy is being viewed as something separated from society, a science that calculates the social dynamics and produces models that people should follow. This logic is a fertile soil for the emergence of technocratic elites of experts, which know what economy is, how it operates, and thus, should direct the rest of society -the great majority of it- which is "unenlightened" in the mysteries of economy. Thus the dominant nowadays hierarchical organizational structure of society is not only being maintained, but even deepened further.

The solidarity economy represents a radical break with this logic. By embedding the economic practices it encompasses, into the everyday life of the participant individuals and communities, it manages to internalize the economy into the whole of society, thus making the role of technocrats and experts obsolete, which feeds on its externalization. In a sense, it dissolves "the economy" into autonomous economic practices, which can be experimented with and changed separately, unlike "grandiose" models like capitalism or socialism.

Thus the solidarity economy gives the opportunity for different expression of popular anger and dissatisfaction with the status quo. Unlike the forms of resistance that have been dominating the revolutionary movements for centuries, like electing "radical" governments, fighting over the seats of power, or trying to destroy every last bit of the present system, and then start anew, the solidarity economy offers a different paradigm. It allows people to express it through creativity, by building from today new forms of production, consumption, relationships, based on fundamentally different core principles like direct democracy, trust, solidarity and dignity.

Solidarity economy as transformatory strategy

The public, the people, will find a way to create forms we cannot even imagine, forms that could solve problems that seem insuperable to us. So what is needed is this constant creative activity from the public, and that means mainly everybody's passion for public affairs.

Cornelius Castoriadis⁹

The solidarity economy, as I have already underlined earlier, is directly linked to direct democracy *per se*, since at its core are situated the direct participation and cooperation. But in order to move these principles from the margins of our collective life towards its center, is needed firstly to deeply democratize ourselves.

The implementation of direct democracy in larger scales is impossible without the wider self-empowerment of common people (those situated “below”). In the end who will realize in practice one system, based on popular participation, if not the public/society itself? Who will participate in the direct-democratic institutions we imagine, if not the people themselves?

This requires strategy for inclusive self-empowerment, or in other words – changing of the anthropological type of the modern human. Surely one such project will demand a lot of time and efforts, simultaneously on practical and theoretical level, which to allow to people to develop democratic habits and culture. This is something highly neglected by classic ideological movements.

It is important to note here that people will not start suddenly to cooperate, share and participate directly in the management of their collective life, like this is embedded in their DNA. In critical situations society does not have time to develop brand new solutions; on the contrary, it turns desperately towards already existing structures, even if they are established in small scale, and towards political proposals,

⁹ Cornelius Castoriadis in *The Problem of Democracy Today* (available online on: <http://www.athene.antenna.nl/ARCHIEF/NRO1-Athene/02-Probl.-e.html>)

that may have been hidden from the eye, but were never completely vanished. As Cornelius Castoriadis warns us about the moments of disappointment and social crisis, when the consciousness of society grows rapidly:

*But to be socially effective – this autonomous mass action cannot remain amorphous, fragmented and dispersed. It will find expression in patterns of action and forms of organization, in ways of doing things and ultimately in institutions which embody and reflect its purpose... If libertarian revolutionaries remain blissfully unaware of these problems and have not discussed or even envisaged them they can rest assured that others have.*¹⁰

Thus if we want one day to live in a non-hierarchical society, based on solidarity and direct democracy, we will have to create the necessary conditions for its existence.

In other words, if we want values like solidarity and self-management to take central place in our lives, we will need people who are embracing them deeply. And we will need lots of them. And since our contemporary culture does not have such priorities, it will be needed to find other ways of opening spaces, in which to plant the seeds, bearers of different culture. Good examples for such spaces are the autonomous zones, functioning all around the world inside urban areas, as well as ones with larger scale, like the Zapatistas and the Kurdish democratic communities.

Everything in the contemporary organization of our society obstructs such principles, inculcating instead submission and obedience towards authority, heteronomous acceptance of pre-determined truths etc. This is the situation in the modern family, state apparatus, corporate workplace, education etc.

We derive our education in class rooms, in which our attention is focused on the figure of the teacher, which is positioned “above” and horizontal interaction between students during class is being punished. From early age our imaginary is being framed and our creativity – dulled, by established norms, which sustain the existing hierarchical culture. We are being taught to “think” in a “correct” way, so we can

¹⁰ C. Castoriadis, “Sur le Contenu du Socialisme,” issue 22 “Socialisme ou Barbarie,” 1957.

“win” the school competition, by giving the “right” answers to the teacher’s questions. Simultaneously functions a whole set of punishments and sanctions for the students and teachers that dare to drift away from the norm.

Another negative aspect, which grows out of this type of relations, is that the great majority today thinks only how to get a job, instead of how to live in a meaningful manner. By thinking in this narrow careerist paradigm, people begin to view all their life as a constant interaction between bosses and employees, without to see any alternatives. In one such mindset there is no (or very limited) space for principles like direct democracy, cooperation and solidarity. But in reality this paradigm dominates the imaginary of the majority of people working in every economic sector all around the world, with tiny exceptions.

But if the situation nowadays is such, what will happen with our principles and our desire to spread them across? In my opinion, to have any success in this direction, it will be needed the social movements in which we participate to generate cooperative and direct-democratic power. And this can happen mainly through common people that deeply value these principles. But how our horizontal movements will achieve this? What will lead to such change in the anthropological type, so to move beyond the imaginary of the passive consumer and to charge it with one protagonistic role in the public sphere?

Surely the answer of these questions is not an easy one. One strategy for this is the transformation to be taking place in small scale, on local level, simultaneously in coordination with other similar processes, taking place elsewhere. Here I will briefly sketch the strategy of the solidarity economy and a narrative, which can help us in this direction.

The solidarity economy as practice, vision and strategy is not something new and growing number of people are practicing it, especially after the beginning of the global financial crisis in 2008. At first sight it may not seem that difficult for implementation, but in fact it is quite a task: to develop new anthropological type, communities, local organizations and networks, that can turn solidarity economy into important and unavoidable part of the economic processes in society.

In order this to happen, we will have to such practice it to such degree and with such success, that common people to be able to recognize it

by its basic characteristics. Reaching larger scales depends on the collaboration between various initiatives from the solidarity economy, such as workers and consumers cooperatives, time banks, social currencies, housing co-ops etc. Their successfulness depends as much as on the collaboration between them, as well as on their inner organization - the maintenance of democratic procedures through various mechanisms like rotation of positions, distribution of profits amongst members according to effort and sacrifice etc.

There are disagreements and debates amongst the supporters of this vision about what is to be done for its practical realization. In my opinion, this project is unfeasible if we consider it only in terms of generations, neglecting our lives here and now. I'm saying this because many people are managing to bring certain autonomy in their's everyday life from today, in different parts of the world like Spain, Greece, Brazil, India etc. However, we shouldn't abandon the generational prism completely, since many struggles of the past have sown the seeds of ways of life, which are coming to life today. The achievement of this goal can be accomplished through a strategy for the development of culture, which to spread beyond narrow economic and social frames. By saying this we acknowledge that people are as economic and social beings, as well as sexual and, beyond all, political ones.

Thus amongst the main goals of the solidarity economy should be the constant connection of self-managed economic units across various economic sectors. In such a way could be sought the establishment of regional networks for sustainable long term development of relations of production and consumption. The culmination of this inclusiveness should be sought at the establishment of networks of solidarity economy across the world for the satisfaction of ever growing amount of human needs through autonomous and democratic means, challenging the very existence of statist and capitalist intermediaries.

For such a project to be completed however, it should overcome the limitations of economism. As I have shown earlier, in its essence, the solidarity economy is part of a wider direct-democratic political project and thus, should have to engage into close collaboration with social

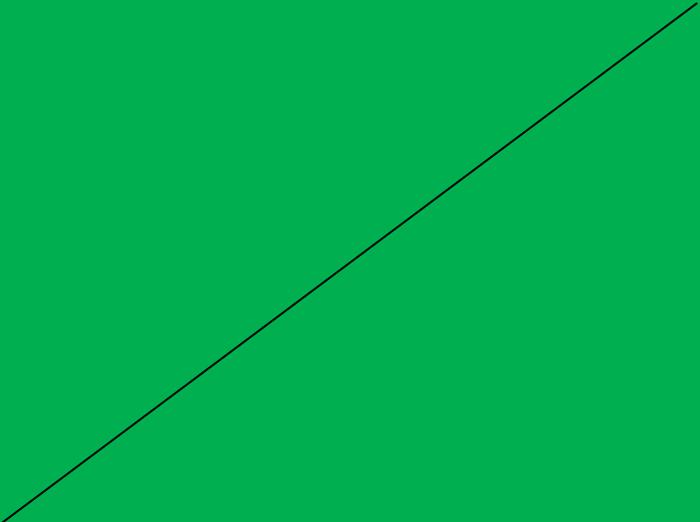
movements of different kinds. In this way the efforts at introduction of more autonomy in the economic relations in society will go along with similar efforts, directed at ecology, gender etc.

Thus we can say that the solidarity economy is focused on the creation of another type of culture from today, in the shell of the dominant system, without to depend on the state and the private sector. Through this process is being encouraged self-empowerment of the involved individuals and communities, and simultaneously are being offered practice examples for how solidarity and collaboration can become the basic significational frame of the economy.

In other words, the solidarity economy can serve as a tool for dealing with the cultural challenge, by teaching us how to create spaces, which could help us rethink our values, as they are today and are making us apathic consumers. Such step could open the possibility for people to become protagonists in their life, by deeply democratizing them and their environment, moving in this way principles like solidarity and direct participation out of the margins and towards the center of our collective and individual lives¹¹.

These new principles and values, stemming from the grassroots can replace the nowadays dominant consumerism and hierarchy. But the political manifests and ready blueprints for the future are not enough preconditions for this to happen. They have to begin penetrating every sphere of our life. The solidarity economy as transformational strategy can be very helpful in this by making us more independent from the contemporary dominant structures, allowing us to begin the creation of alternative, post-capitalist and non-statist future.

¹¹ http://www.co-intelligence.org/CIPol_democSocPwrAnal.html



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