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**Towards “Qualitative growth”-
oriented Collective Action
Frameworks: Articulating
Commons and Solidarity Economy**

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Towards “Qualitative growth”-oriented Collective Action Frameworks: Articulating Commons and Solidarity Economy

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1. Introduction

Under what form would a convergence between the Commons and Solidarity Economy movements promote “qualitative growth” (Capra and Henderson 2014) in a way that also ensures equity, justice and participatory democracy in access to resources? What aspects in the predominant organizational forms emerging from these movements need to be addressed in order to make such convergence possible?

This paper is based on an inductive comparative analysis of three major types of commons-based peer production (CBPP): An ecovillage, an “integral cooperative” and a self-identified commercialization-based solidarity economy network. Benkler (2006) defines CBPP as a modular form of socioeconomic production in which large numbers of people work cooperatively over any type of commons. The case studies were chosen due to the fact of being leading agents whose practices are reproduced within three of the largest and most significant international social movement networks operating in the fields of the Commons and Social Solidarity Economy. They also represent three infrastructure types¹ of “new commons”:

- a) *Tamera*, an ecovillage founded in 1995 in southwestern Portugal, which applies regenerative ecology and community-building to the development of a “foundational economy” (Conaty 2015), meaning the infrastructures that sustain everyday life (i.e. food, water, energy, housing);
- b) *Cooperativa Integral Catalana*, an “integral cooperative” founded in 2010 in Catalonia. It defines itself a governance system that combines information technologies and face-to-face assemblies in the promotion of a network management system for economic activities;
- c) *Esperança-Coesperança*, an urban commons-based commercialization network based on Solidarity Economy principles and goals, based in the town of Santa Maria, in the heartland of the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. It was founded in 1985 with the support of pre-existing Ecclesial Base Communities, as well as Caritas Brazil.

These case studies also represent attempts at developing respectively an alternative political ecology, an alternative political institutionality and an alternative political economy. Each of them was the object of four months of fieldwork, carried out between 2015 and 2017.

¹ http://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Infrastructure_Commons (last consulted on 05/04/2018)

2. “Qualitative growth”: The importance of symbiotic organizations and practices

Capra and Henderson (2014) claim that a sustainable economy cannot be conceived without growth, since it is an essential dimension of the sustainability of biological and social organisms. From the authors’ analysis, one may distinguish between two forms of growth: a) Predatory, which is promoted by the dynamics of extraction and accumulation of value from living entities that support capitalism and is conceptually represented by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This paradigm of growth externalizes its social and environmental costs to “taxpayers, the environment and future generations” (Op. cit.: 4). The growth of an entity is measured by the amount of value it has accumulated; b) Symbiotic, which is promoted in a way in which the growth of one entity potentializes and happens in a homeostatic manner with the growth process of the other entities in its environment, resulting from synergetic exchanges between them. Such form of growth, in order to be sustainable, implies a collective process of self-regulation from the part of each entity, based on the internalization of the social and environmental costs of growth to the system and, as a result, self-limitation for the sake of the attainment of collective goals of environmental sustainability, as well as social cohesion, equity and justice. In order for such goals to be attained without the resource to authoritarian state mechanisms, it is necessary to promote organizational forms based on the commons, as well as on economic practices based on participatory democracy which promote equity and justice in the access to livelihoods.

2.1 Commons and Solidarity Economy as social movements: A Polanyian approach

The emergence of the Commons and Solidarity Economy as social movements is a result of the convergence of forms of collective action whose goal is to provide stability, as well as predictability, to collective practices of grassroots organization aiming to protect livelihoods from the neoliberal logic of the self-regulating market. This is the case of rival, non-excludable goods which constitute “fictitious commodities”, such as labour, land and money (Maucourant and Plociniak 2013), as well as other type of goods, which as a result of a political process may become object of a process of “commoning” (de Angelis, 2014; 2017). The process of institutionalization from which emerged the Commons and Solidarity Economy movements has so far been understood mainly as a process of cultural codification, aimed at providing stability to the fluidity inherent in economic exchanges (Maucourant and Plociniak 2013: 514), in order to re-embedd them on reciprocity and redistribution across personal and communal relationships. This understanding corresponds to a conception of the economy as a social-natural process as a one-sided relationship of dependence of human beings upon nature, the major elements of which are “human needs”, “human work and effort” and “means of production” (Polanyi-Levitt 1994). What is missing to this approach is an integrated perspective of how Commons and Solidarity Economy institutions, practices and goals are influenced by feedback loops between human activity and ecosystems, the political system and the balance of power within political economies.

The common denominator between the Commons and Solidarity Economy movements is an eagerness to promote collective forms of production, commercialization and consumption outside of conventional markets and the state (Bollier and Weston 2014). What distinguishes

the two movements is how they approach the process. The Commons movement has an approach which focuses more on the development of alternative political ecologies and political institutionalities, focusing on the development of practices, organizations and technologies that support the development of synergies between commoners and promote autonomous collective co-creation and management. The Solidarity Economy movement, while including the dimension promoted by the Commons movement, has an approach based on the development of an alternative political economy, which focuses on the promotion of justice, equity and democracy in the co-production and governance of resources. According to Laville (2010), such approach has a “(Socio)economic dimension”, pertaining to an impulse for the promotion of egalitarianism and inclusion in the access to resources, through the development of hybrid forms of economic activity that integrate the market, mercantile and monetary dimensions with reciprocity and redistribution. It also has a “(Socio)political dimension, which regards such hybrid forms of economic activity as a strategy of promoting “voice” in the public sphere from the part of vulnerable groups in society. intrinsic part of civil society.

The Commons and Solidarity Economy movements do not fit what Laville (2010) refers to as the “political militancy”-oriented definitions of social movement, defined by collective action centered around an ideology or set of identity claims, with the purpose of building a policy agenda that fits the participants’ interests. Instead, they can be defined as movements oriented towards the construction of “alternatives” (Op. cit.), given their participants’ commitment to certain social practices and principles of self-governance, upon which they build political claims which may have the state and policy-making as their main target, or be focused on social transformation from the ground up in everyday life (Bollier and Weston 2014; Laville 2010). This approach, although not necessarily rejecting political action, focuses on the development of alternative practices in the everyday life and sees the state and public policy as an instrument to the achievement of that goal (Laville 2010). Although Commons and Solidarity Economy may be regarded as social movements with an identity, frames and goals of their own, they can also be regarded as interstitial spaces of construction of prefigurative practices by counterhegemonic social movements. Such spaces have the potential of becoming mechanisms of “integrative exchange” (Polanyi 1957: 255) which, besides promoting stability and predictability in counterhegemonic economic behavior, also support inter-movement dialogue and exchanges in ways which may lead to wider political alliances. In order for that to be possible, it is necessary for the Commons and Solidarity Economy movement to develop common institutional, ecological and political economy benchmarks for the regulation and institutionalization of alternative economic practices.

2.2 Institutionalizing “commoning” practices and bringing political economy back in

This paper is based on the presupposition that the convergence between the Commons and Solidarity Economy movements can promote forms of collective action which support the goals of environmental sustainability, equity and justice by combining “prepolitical” and “political” forms of economic activity, social relationships and counter-power (Amironesei and Bialecki 2017). Such combination brings political economy concerns into the governance of the commons. It allows for a framing of “recognition” and “resource allocation” politics (Op.cit.) as intrinsic and non-dissociable dimensions of the governance of the commons, while privileging non-essentialist “cultures of habitat” over practices and forms of association based on

essentialist presuppositions and arbitrary political boundaries (Snyder 1995; Nabhan 1997). Besides, it also makes explicit and creates opportunities for politicizing the way in which structural relations determine the extent to which, in a capitalist market society, individuals are able to access the commons, as well as actively participate and have their voices taken into account in decision-making (Harvey 2011). This includes the extent to which productive and reproductive labour is gendered and socially divided, and included in “commoning” discussions at all, allowing for a perception of the extent to which productive labour is appropriated as the “primary mechanism by which a collective interest and mutual bonds are created” (Federici 2012: 49) or the “commoning” process is also based on the social, cultural and emotional dimensions of community, networks and nature/human relationships (Bollier and Helfrich 2012, 2015; Habermann 2012; Meretz 2012). Converging the Commons and Solidarity Economy theoretical approaches and movements also promotes a rationale for the institutional recognition and development of structures which potentiate the cooperative and democratic dimension of emerging collective economic practices. One example is that of buildings bought by housing cooperatives to substract them from market pressure and real estate speculation (Einaud and Adrien 2017). Authors such as Bauwens (2010) and Einaud and Adrien (2017) claim that the democratic and inclusive practices that characterize solidarity economy (Laville 2011) are intrinsic to the governance of non-distorted commons. Studies on the so-called “new commons” show how such practices congeal into processes of “commoning” by developing new forms of usage for goods such as health, culture and urban infrastructure, which do not fit Ostrom’s category of “rival and non-exclusive” (Coriat 2015; de Angelis 2017).

3. Lessons from the field

The three case studies, Tamera, CIC and Esperança-Coesperança, have in common the goal of reembedding economic behaviour on reciprocity and redistribution across personal and communal relationships. Although all of them are constituted by alternative political ecologies, institutionalities and political economies, they differ in the priority and relevance given to each of these dimensions in their organizational model and practices. Such variation is also a reflection of the values and goals that underlie the design of each of these organizations.

The first two case studies fit the “New Communalist” model identified by Turner (2006) and are based on “prepolitical” forms of social relationships, economic activity and strategies of building counterpower, instead of collective action oriented toward the state and other public institutions, supported by class or identity group consciousness, based on shared interests instead of kinship. Such “prepolitical” forms are scaled up with the purpose of building commons-based alternatives to the social control mechanisms of the state and the market:

Tamera was founded in a rural area of the municipality of Odemira, southwestern Alentejo, Portugal, by an intentional community originating from the Central European middle and upper-middle class intellectual and countercultural milieu. It is a member of the Global Ecovillages Network (GEN), which promotes the cross-border diffusion of information, technologies and assessment mechanisms related to the whole systems approach to sustainability in human settlements through networking, communication and advocacy, institutional partnerships, education, training and project coordination. Testimonies from field

informants indicates that such practices and structures are supported by a strategy of regenerative ecology, which constructs a “circular” economy based on the collective participation in the natural, housing, agricultural and financial commons, in exchange for the responsibility of each individual to support the needs of the other members, as well as of the ecosystem, according to the possibilities granted by her/his skills, labour and private economy. Tamera’s strategy of building counterpower results from the tendency, attested by research, for self-selective homogeneity within ecovillages, both in terms of community members as well as visitors and supporters (LeVasseur 2013).

Tamera’s governance is based on “prepolitical” forms of economic activity and social relationships, institutionalized in the form of social technologies for community-building, supported by a “minimalist” governing body based on executive roles which rotate every year or semester among members of the community, which are chosen by consensus. Several community members said, during interviews as well as in public events, that the goal of this governance structure is to promote inclusiveness and participation and undermine the emergence of hierarchies. The centrality given to the Women’s Council and to care work is said to be a strategy aimed at “undermining patriarchy and empowering women” in the governance structure. It was not clear if such form of “empowerment” reinforces traditional gender roles of women as primarily responsible for care work, or if it expanded their options in terms of social roles and construction of their own subjectivity. The fact that the members of the Government are chosen among people who “enjoy the greatest amount of trust among the community” is also understood to be a strategy aimed at preventing the emergence of such hierarchies. It is noteworthy that, despite such claims, most community members who addressed this topic indicated that there is a correlation between the time people have been living at the community and the amount of “trust” that is ascribed to them. The Vision Council and the Carrier Circle are composed of the founding members of the community, as well as people who have been recognized by them to be “carriers of the vision of Tamera”. All these factors indicate the presence of an informal rank based on age, period of time lived in the community and recognition, by core community members, of identification between one’s values and behavior and the ideas of the founding members.

Tamera's trajectory also illustrates the exclusionary dynamics that may emerge when the envisioning of a commons-based alternative political ecology is not accompanied by an alternative political economy. The essential feature is that Tamera transplanted and developed an 'ideal type' Healing Biotope model, as well as a prefigurative process of "commoning" to rural southwestern Alentejo. Besides, while Tamera succeeded in using the natural commons and social technologies to build connectivity and empower members to control governance and economic infrastructures. However, it was affected by a tendency for social homogeneity, which estranged the project from the region (Esteves 2016, 2017). This created a *borderland* (Anzaldúa 1987) which spatially segregates, and at the same time creates a point of contact between two contrasting cultural, ecological and socio-economic realities. This did grant Tamera access to financial resources to guarantee its economic sustainability, as well as the development of its regenerative ecology strategy. It also promoted a prefigurative dynamic that granted Tamera enough political power to counter existing regional, national and supranational-level regulations, as well as (eventually) working with the municipal-level administration to develop a new regulatory framework. The fact that Tamera and its visitors

have a positive effect on the economy of the region contributed to this outcome. The efforts of cultural mediation that Tamera has been promoting with the support of the municipal and regional administration, as well as returnees to the region, helps cross the social borderlands to the local population, and increases the project's political capital (Esteves 2017).

Cooperativa Integral Catalana (CIC) is an “integral cooperative” founded in 2010 in Catalonia by a group of activists with strong links to the alterglobalization and hacker movement. The emergence of CIC was supported by The Foundation for Peer to Peer Alternatives (P2P Foundation), which supports a global network dedicated to advocacy, research and networking on CBPP. It has three streams of activity: intersectional inclusivity in the commons; emancipation of labour and care work; sustainable CBPP and ethical markets.

The predominant dimension in CIC is that of an alternative institutionality, with a deficit in political ecology and political economy. Its founders define “integral cooperative” as a network management model aimed at creating a grassroots counterpower, based on self-management, self-organization and direct democracy, and one that would help overcome the actual state of dependency on the economic and political structures of the system. The purpose of CIC is to build, from the grassroots up, with the support of information technology governance, a post-capitalist society based on the autonomous and cooperative-based production of a “foundational economy” (Conaty 2015), covering basic necessities such as housing, education, food and health, mediated by its own basket of social and cryptocurrencies, as well as system of credit. This would serve as an economic base for activism and the creation of a commons-based public sphere, based on the reestablishment of relationships of trust, personal empowerment and the elimination of external intermediaries in the economic and political spheres, instead of bureaucracy and coercion, as in the state, with the purpose of promoting direct democracy. Since its foundation, the network management model promoted by CIC has been reproduced by grassroots organizations in different regions of the Spanish state, as well as in other southern European countries, namely France and Greece. In 2014, the Spanish “integral cooperatives” founded the *Red de Cooperativas Integrales*.²

The ideological principles of CIC are based on the theory of “integral revolution”, which is explained in a manifesto, drafted by the founders of the project, which appeals to the development of an international public spaces based on principles of self-management, cooperation, trust, reciprocity, empowerment and autonomy from the structures, practices and institutions of the capitalist state and economy (<http://integrarevolucio.net/en/integral-revolution/ideological-bases-of-the-call/>). CIC's strategy of building counterpower is based on two dimensions:

- An internal one, based on the use of information technology and alternative technologies as a tool to build a “circular economy” by “closing” the economic cycles (production, exchange, consumption) and building the material basis of the commons. The legal model of cooperative is used as an institutional instrument to give legal personality to the economic activities of participants, decrease the amount of taxes and

² <https://cooperativa.cat/en/territorial-network/other-iniciatives-of-the-integral-cooperatives/> (last consulted on 05/04/2018)

social security contributions they have to pay to the state and allow them to trade with the mainstream economy;

- An external one, based on a financial, legal and technological “hacking strategy”, which promotes open source technology and uses loopholes in the existing legislation to create and sustain organizations and practices that go against the mainstream. The functioning of CIC is based on alternative currencies and “technological nodes” which turn the knowledge on the financial and technological basis of the economic system into a decommodified common good. The founders’ knowledge of information technology and finance was used to gather seed capital for the project, namely through what Eric Duran called “estafa solidaria”, a Ponzi scheme of bank loans, and later Bitcoin speculation.

Like Tamera, CIC experiences tendencies on “de” facto concentration of decision-making power in the hands of an “inner circle of trust”, based on the presence of an informal rank based on the period of time in the project and recognition, by core members, of identification between one’s values and behavior and the ideas of the founding members. This confirms Turner’s (2006) and Schor et al’s (2016) argument that, in the absence of internal or external rules that make power dynamics explicit, CBPP promotes micro-level interactions guided by shared, but unspoken perceptions of power that derive from structural forces. According to Turner,

When you take away bureaucracy and hierarchy and politics, you take away the ability to negotiate the distribution of resources on explicit terms. And you replace it with charisma, with cool, with shared but unspoken perceptions of power. You replace it with the cultural forces that guide our behaviour in the absence of rules (Logic Magazine 2017).

CIC also experiences a tendency for internal homogeneity, with the predominance of members issuing from impoverished sector of the middle class who have skills that allow them to work autonomously, such as holistic healing arts, food and cosmetics manufacture, organic agriculture, as well as translation, computer programming and other “white collar” services”. Many of them became affiliated with CIC in order to gain a legal identity which could allow them to sell goods and services in the wider market, while paying less taxes than they would as independent professionals. Despite the circulation of many ideas about alternative political ecologies based on permaculture, CIC lacks an integrated regenerative ecology strategy which could connect participants in supply chains based on horizontal, unmediated exchanges. As a result, participants remained to a large extent dependent upon suppliers in the market in order to access the materials necessary to produce their goods and services. Besides, the overreliance on information technology for coordination led to a disconnection between planning and execution among the different nodes of the project, especially between “free technology” production nodes and the rest of the system, which prevented the emergence of a functioning, integrated supply chain based on feedback loops.

Like Tamera, CIC confirms Turner’s (2006), as well as Schor et al’s (2006) theory about the tendency for social homogeneity experienced by “New Communalist organizations”. Turner (2006) argues that such tendencies are a result of the fact that the whole-system approach inherent to “New Communalism” implicitly tends to regard their internal consolidation of

prefigurative “micro-worlds” as an end in itself, ignoring how such process interacts and is integrated in wider social systems.

The third case study, “Esperança-Coesperança”, is a Solidarity Economy-based network located in the municipality of Santa Maria, in the heartland of the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. It fits what Turner (2006) calls the “New Left” model, since in its organizational design and social relations there is a clear predominance of an alternative political economy that is working class-based and oriented towards Left wing electoral politics. Such political economy is manifested in “political” forms of social relationships, economic activity and strategies of building counterpower in which market, state and civil society are articulated in forms of collective action oriented towards the state and participation in electoral competition. The leadership of “Esperança/Coesperança” directly influenced the development of national-level policies for the sector, which in their turn also benefitted the project. However, the insertion into a state-oriented strategy for an alternative political economy was not matched by the development of an internal alternative political ecology and institutionality, which could lead to the development of Esperança/Coesperança into an autonomous economic and political public spaces.

The activities of “Esperança-Coesperança” focus on the use of urban commons for the commercialization of agricultural and manufactured products by small and medium family-based production units in the region. It was founded in 1985, with the purpose of providing a livelihood to small and medium farmers who were driven out of the market and into debt by market liberalization, the promotion of an export oriented agricultural policy by the Brazilian state and the entrance into the internal market of large supermarkets, connected with industrial-scale producers and global supply chains. “Esperança-Coesperança” originates from pre-existing Ecclesial Base Communities (EBCs) and their dynamics of resistance against the military regime. In the early and mid-1980’s, with the support of Caritas Brazil, as well as international NGOs connected with progressive sectors of the Catholic Church allied with pro-democracy movements in Brazil, the EBCs created a system of community-managed rotational microcredit funds, known as “Projetos Alternativos Comunitários” (PACs), which decreased poverty and provided an economic base for political resistance and mobilization among the urban, as well as rural, working and lower middle classes in the region. The project builds counter-power through three mechanisms:

- 1) The use of Paulo Freire’s “conscientization” method for the development of technical skills, trainings on Solidarity Economy and cooperative management, and political debate and education;
- 2) The mobilization of public and philanthropic funds, at the national and international level, to support production and commercialization projects in the region;
- 3) Grassroots mobilization for support to the Workers’ Party (PT) and electoral competition.

Esperança/Coesperança is regarded as a source of best practices in commercialization by the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS), which supports the promotion of solidarity economy globally through capability training for food security, gender equality and public policies for the sector. However, the project neglected the

promotion of horizontal supply chains based on unmediated peer to peer production and commercialization among participating producers, as well as their empowerment to control shared governance mechanisms. As a result, the project was co-opted by an extraneous logic of mobilization for electoral and NGO funding purposes. Therefore, it failed to fulfil its main goal, which was to become a critical public space where participants could self-organize as economic and political subjects (Laville 2011).

Conclusions

By analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of these case studies individually, one can inductively conclude that, in order to promote “qualitative growth” in a way that supports equity, inclusiveness and participatory democracy, commons-based organizations must promote a convergence and scaling up of practices which bring the following two dimensions together:

- a) Social structures (institutional, ecological, psychosocial, sociocultural) which support decapitalization by promoting a shift in value creation from energy extracted from biophysical entities and turned into commodities to value as energy exchanged between biophysical entities in living systems.
- b) Building linkages between “conceptual spaces” (Hess 2015) in the public, private and third sector, as well as self-organizing practices at the grassroots level, which promote “public spaces of proximity” (Laville 2011) in which organizational action is oriented towards the expansion of social and economic rights.

In order to be sustainable, such convergences and practices must be integrated in more encompassing political projects, which contain and regulate capital and promote the availability, as collectively managed public goods, of the basic infrastructures and necessities that are necessary for the maintenance of life and fulfillment of the potential of each individual.

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