

MUSINGS FROM THE TRENCHES

PART ONE

CONCEPTS AND CONTEXT

MIKE LEWIS

What are the key ideas that shape how you think about the world? Can you make these explicit? What assumptions do you hold about what makes societies tick, or not? Do you have particular beliefs about what are the most important drivers of change past, present, and future? How would you portray the contexts within which CED and the social economy are relevant, or not? Is the thrust of social or collective ownership of the means of production a strategy worth considering, or not? Why? How do you relate to the notion of community in a world where many think place (territory) is now secondary to the multiple “communities” that exist in cyberspace?

What we believe to be true about the context within which we are embedded plays a major role in how we live and act. Equally true, key concepts or assumptions we hold colour the way we define our context, its texture, what is deemed important, and what is not.

This first section of the book introduces key concepts, assumptions and ways of understanding the context within which CED and the social economy have evolved. While making no claim, this modest beginning represents some kind of definitive survey of concepts and contexts. The ideas probed in this section can be a useful source of clarification for practitioners and researchers alike. Its title - “Musings from the Trenches: Concepts, Strategies and Practices” - is deliberate. When one is in the trenches, in the heat of the action, so to speak, the assumptions that shape our thinking and our work can become hidden from ourselves. Having available key concepts for review and reflection is a way of removing oneself from the fray, of gaining perspective, of learning from one’s experience. Without an opportunity to move out of the everyday, we can lose sight of where we are going and why, and of what we are learning along the way.

This section also provokes us to think more deliberately about how concepts shape the strategies we choose and thus our practice in communities, whatever the role we play. How one cuts the conceptual cloth is crucial to the way we define the context we act within, the priorities for research, and action we set, the alliances we build, indeed, the very design and management of the organizations we construct to advance our work. Several of the contributions in this section provide reference points for exploring the relationship between concepts and actions ([Neamtan, 2004](#); [Lewis, 2006](#); [Ninacs and Moreland, 2001](#); [Lewis and Conaty, 2004](#); [Lewis, 2007](#)).

The design of this volume elevates certain assumptions and concepts I hold. One particularly important one is that “praxis” is vitally important to any social change effort. Praxis requires a respect for theory, principles, practice, learning, and analysis. To act without reflection on the values and concepts that motivate action and the actual domains upon which action is directed is, in a word, stupid, and unlikely to produce generative results. To reflect without then determining the implications for concrete action and then implementing them is, in social change terms, a hollow exercise. These contentions thus cast action and reflection as being intimately intertwined; they are parallel, interactive, and iterative. One feeds the other. However, there is a third component of praxis that is crucial. It is called synthesis. This is the analytical work that requires regularly standing back to probe the cumulative results of the action-reflection-action cycle and to try and bring all the pieces together in a synthesis that then shapes the character, direction, and focus of ongoing action, reflection, and then again, synthesis. In my view praxis is fundamental to building good theory and good practice.

In this book, starting with this section, one will find praxis at work. As you explore the wide range of practice represented in this volume, you will discover much honest inquiry and reflection emanating from successes and from failures of action. You will be exposed to how the results of praxis, for example the learning from exemplary practices that have yielded concrete progress, have led to replication, scaling up, and adaptation in different contexts. You will also be exposed to writers probing their own and others’ experiences to try and understand what is thwarting broader replication of success. And, if you read the entire volume and then return to this opening series of articles on concepts and context, you will have the opportunity to reflect on what you have learned and become part of the next phase of synthesis.

Of the seven BALTA research interests set out in the introduction, five are touched on by one or more of the contributions in this section.

1. **Re-inserting social goals into economic life:** to better understand and *critically analyze* the impact of inserting such social processes of reciprocity, solidarity, and sustainability into economic life, in practice and in theory.
2. **Relationship between territorial and enterprise approaches:** to better understand and *critically analyze* how territorial (CED) and social enterprise approaches can interact to enhance the overall potency of the social economy.
3. **Understand the social economy as it current exists:** to better understand and critically analyze the social economy as it exists.
4. **What are the central public policy and political factors:** to identify how key factors play themselves out in debates related to CED and social economy.
5. **What might be the future role and relevance of the social economy be:** to think about what contribution the social economy might make in a in a rapidly changing economic, political, social and environmental landscapes.

Enjoy the journey.