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A Radical Journal of Geography

Vishwas Satgar (ed), *The Solidarity Economy Alternative: Emerging Theory and Practice*, Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2014. ISBN: 9781869142575 (paper)

Despite some presence in Left political thought and practice since at least the Spanish Civil War (as *economía solidaria*), the term “solidarity economy” has only begun to circulate in English within the past ten years. This collection of essays is a welcome addition to a small but growing body of literature that explores the theory and practice of solidarity economy organizing.¹ “Solidarity economy” (SE) is a complex term that dances between multiple valences. It is, at once, a description of actually-existing cooperative economic practices; an articulation of shared values and transformative aspirations; a rallying point for connection between diverse activist efforts; a vision for what might emerge from such collaboration; and a loose theory of change that eschews singular, totalistic revolutionary models in favor of a more decentralized, experimental, emergent and plural approach. *The Solidarity Economy Alternative* touches on all of these dimensions, providing both an engaging introduction to solidarity economy organizing for those unfamiliar with the terrain, and a more detailed set of reflections and case studies that can usefully inform the work of on-the-ground SE organizers.

While the essays in the book are written in a scholarly mode, this is not primarily an “academic” text. It is intended, quite overtly, as a practical yet conceptually-savvy exploration of the challenges and possibilities of solidarity economy organizing as a means to transform widespread relations of exploitation and oppression, overcome capitalism, and constitute a new paradigm of liberatory economic and social organization. The essays emerge out of a 2011 conference organized by the [Co-operative and Policy Alternative Center](#) (COPAC) in Johannesburg, South Africa, and the book’s contents reflect this context.

The collection is built around a clearly shared set of concerns, well articulated by the editor, Vishwas Satgar, in his introductory chapter: in the context of global economic crisis, as more and more

¹ See, for example: Allard et al. (2008); Arruda (2008); Dacheux and Goujon (2011); Esteves (2014); Fonteneau et al. (2011); Kawano et al. (2009); Lewis and Swinney (2008); Miller (2013); and Safri (2014).

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people are excluded from the spoils of capitalist accumulation and subjected to its multiple violences, new spaces are opening in which communities can begin to take control of their own livelihoods, construct cooperative forms of production and exchange, and connect this work with others through transformative social movements. What *are* these spaces of possibility? How might this “activist current coursing its way through various grassroots practices” (p.26) be convened and strengthened? What forms of organizing and organization are needed to help solidarity economy projects thrive? What challenges and dangers do these initiatives face, and how might these be overcome? What might truly synergistic connections between SE initiatives look like, and how can these connections constitute a robust, transformative social movement? These questions are variously engaged throughout the book. What all authors share in posing their tentative answers is an understanding of the solidarity economy as an open, experimental process of political construction and struggle. Neither a structural blueprint for an alternative system nor a rigid dogma to be adopted or imposed, a solidarity economy is “a series of experiments, becomings, emergent possibilities and prefigurative practices” (Michelle Williams, p.51). This common perspective, along with good editorial work, makes for a collection that hangs together with unusual coherence for an edited volume.

Core conceptual developments can be found in the first two parts of the book. The opening essays by Vishwas Satgar (chapter 1) and Michelle Williams (chapter 2) are concerned, in particular, with articulating a notion of solidarity economy as a “counter-hegemonic political economy” (p.4) that stands in direct opposition to capitalist power formations. Both authors elaborate strong distinctions between solidarity economy approaches and those of the “social economy” that have been widely adopted at a policy level in Canada, Europe and South Africa, often aimed at the social inclusion of marginalized communities. Social economy approaches, they argue, merely attempt to include people more equitably *within* an ultimately unchallenged capitalist power structure, while solidarity economy organizing is aimed at challenging and undoing that very structure. This is a strong distinction that not all versions of solidarity economy organizing emphasize. There may, in fact, be a significant tension between the authors’ desire to draw such a line and their simultaneous commitment to an open process of “becoming”.

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When does an attempt to articulate shared values and commitments cross over into the dangerous territory of a politics of purity and exclusion? How might attempts to draw these lines close off possibilities for seeing revolutionary dimensions in surprising places? These are questions that haunt all solidarity economy efforts.

Chapters 3 and 4 both suggest a much “messier” conception of where revolutionary struggle might be cultivated, each seeking to rethink a core concept that has animated conventional social thought. Hilary Wainwright (chapter 3) outlines a notion of human labor as a commons, a collective “capacity to create” (p.65). Traditional Left movements, she argues, have often devalued the creative power of labor and thus resorted to vanguardist or managerial approaches to economic reform. To truly embrace a notion of “labor as applied creativity in practice” (p.87) is to recognize multiple spaces of political potentiality and to reclaim social labor in all of its diverse forms as a site for decommodification and the reconfiguration of markets and enterprises along noncapitalist lines. One cannot so easily distinguish a “social” from a “solidarity” economy in this formulation. Marco Berlinguer (chapter 4) similarly scrambles distinctions and argues for a “new ecology of forms of production and reproduction” (p.103) that would enable and strengthen the viability of new modes of non-profit and even non-monetary value creation. This requires that we “expand our notion of ‘economy’” (p.103) by rethinking competition, developing new ways of measuring diverse economic activity, and rendering autonomous grassroots economic initiatives more visible and viable through networking and association (p.118-120). Both authors are intent on supporting efforts that overcome capitalist relations, yet their strategies avoid clear lines between who is “in” and who is “out” of a solidarity economy movement, and instead seek possibilities wherever they might emerge. Such an approach resonates strongly with work by J.K. Gibson-Graham and associates on the ethical construction of “community economies” (Gibson-Graham 2006; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013).

But how, exactly, might radical transformation unfold in practice without a singular ideological bloc marching arm-in-arm toward the revolution? Euclides Mance’s essay on the Brazilian solidarity economy movement (chapter 6) constitutes an important, though only suggestive, contribution in this direction. For Mance, solidarity economy organizing is a process of constructing concrete, broad and

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inclusive networks for the cooperative provision of livelihoods. He sketches a framework for assessing local and regional needs, conceptualizing diverse economic flows, and identifying opportunities for the construction of “solidarity economy-based circuits” (p.166) that might progressively transform the ecosystem of viability for a “liberation economy” (p.163) beyond capitalism. This is the closest that we come in *The Solidarity Economy Alternative* to an elaborated theory of capitalism’s supersession and a potential “roadmap” for the kinds of organizing that would constitute such a broadly transformative dynamic. Mance’s essay suggests a whole array of challenging work yet to be done around the relation of solidarity economy theory to broader currents in radical political economy and social theory, particularly around questions of power, material dependency, affective investment, complex emergence, and scalar network dynamics. Can noncapitalist processes actually outcompete capitalist enterprises? Or does this theory of change still rely on the conventional Marxian hope that capitalism will effectively defeat itself? Is there some other way that we need to think about evolutionary process that would bypass either a vision of a gradualist replacement or a total revolution? Solidarity economy struggles often emphasize consciously-shared values as a point of connection, but what *is* the role of intentionality in radical social change? What if capitalism might be ultimately overcome by complex convergences of precisely those forces that never appear as its self-professed enemies? These are questions that neither Mance nor others in this volume raise, but that future solidarity economy scholarship must in some way engage.

Moving from such theoretical work into the realm of on-the-ground practice, of course, is no small challenge, and this collection looks unflinchingly at both the possibilities and pitfalls facing specific marginalized communities as they struggle for more liberatory forms of livelihood. The remaining six chapters of the book focus, in various ways, on place-specific practices of economic organizing. Ana Margarida Esteves’ study (chapter 5) of the [US Solidarity Economy Network](#) (USSEN) is perhaps the least satisfying of these case studies, as its focus on the aspirations a relatively new national organization seem quite speculative and may come at the expense of a more concrete engagement with some of the innovative grassroots solidarity economy organizing emerging around the United States.² In contrast,

² [SolidarityNYC](#) is an excellent example of this organizing, where a very systematic process of grassroots research, dialogue,

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Esteves' second essay (chapter 7) on the Brazilian solidarity economy forums and their associated political dynamics provides a nuanced look at the complexities of local, regional and national politics in solidarity economy organizing. Offering important cautions for solidarity economy organizers everywhere, she observes how the relatively horizontal "open spaces" (p.178) of early state-level solidarity economy organizing in Brazil were increasingly hierarchized and bureaucratized through their integration with national organizations and policy structures. Thus another key question: how should SE engage (or not engage) the state?

The final section of the book opens a series of sustained reflections on the South African context. Satgar (chapter 8) provides an overview of the political context in which the solidarity economy seeks to intervene; Mazibuko Jara (chapter 9) critiques South Africa's neoliberal agrarian regimes and calls for a mass movement of smallhold farmers; Andrew Bennie (chapter 10) offers case studies of the development of a local solidarity economy network and an agricultural worker cooperative in two rural townships; and the volume concludes with Athish Kirun Satgoor's exploration (chapter 11) of the complex dynamics of a worker-led factory occupation in the south of Johannesburg. What stands out in all of these essays is both the power of a solidarity economy perspective to convene the creative passions and urgent necessities of communities-in-struggle, and magnitude of the challenges posed by concrete attempts to construct stable forms of solidarity-based livelihood in the face of inequality and oppression. The nascent South African solidarity economy movement appears here as a beautiful and fragile hope, something which presents no guarantees and is built only through courageous, persistent, and detailed work. It is the linkage of this work across multiple spaces and places—something this collection of essays itself embodies—on which a solidarity economy approach hangs its transformative hope.

The Solidarity Economy Alternative, in many ways, reflects the wider state of solidarity economy work around the world. It is a complex tapestry woven of deep commitments to radically-democratic organizing practice; a yearning for a world beyond capitalist exploitation and oppression; a set of

and coalition-building has been identifying needs and strengths, developing shared visions for collaboration, and constructing an organizational infrastructure to begin implementing core solidarity economy visions.

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propositions and strategies that are at once inspiring and speculative; a deep ambivalence about questions of “who’s in and who’s out” and whether or how to draw such lines; a variety of “theories of change” that remain only tentatively explored; and a messy yet powerful mix of specific projects and examples in which people are already trying to do in practice what we have yet to more fully elaborate in theory. Like the movement out of which it emerges, this book raises more questions than it answers. At the same time, it constitutes a substantial space of engagement within which such questions can become sites for action, connection and learning. I would, in summary, encourage anyone interested in the construction of liberatory alternatives to capitalism to dig into this book—and then to go beyond it.

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June 2014