

THEMATIC ARTICLE

The solidarity economy beyond the issue of labor

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Abstract

In this essay, we discuss the limitations of the orthodox approach of labor regarding solidarity economy, adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO), and by the classical view of the sociology of work. Initially, we show that solidarity economy has been analyzed by the traditional sociology of work, both in Brazil and France, as an illusion of which participants are victims. ILO, although adopting lately a contrasting perspective, is restricted to a conception of decent work in solidarity economy that also keeps a common reference framework with the conservative perspective of the sociology of work. In the second part, we present two practices that show that solidarity economy cannot be reduced to the economic dimension of the production mode and labor relations, and that there is an inherent emancipatory political dimension- the cases of *Conjunto Palmeiras* (Brazil) and the *Régies de quartier movement* (France). From these cases, in the third section we identify the theoretical frameworks that not only understand the modes of work implementation in solidarity economy, but allow a wider integration of solidarity economy multiple dimensions. Therefore, we present three theoretical approaches: the Epistemologies of the South, the approach of substantive economic action, and the deliberative democracy perspective. At the end, we open up the reflection on the direction in which the sociology of work and the ILO can develop and reconfigure their reference approaches to work in an expanded, substantive and heterodox understanding of the solidarity economy.

**Keywords:** Solidarity economy. Epistemology of the South. Sociology of emergences. Substantive economy. Deliberative democracy.

*A economia solidária além da questão do trabalho*

Resumo

Neste ensaio, propomos discutir as limitações da abordagem ortodoxa de trabalho em relação à economia solidária adotada pela Organização Internacional do Trabalho (OIT) e pela visão clássica da sociologia do trabalho. Para iniciar a argumentação, mostramos que a economia solidária foi analisada pela sociologia do trabalho tradicional, tanto no Brasil quanto na França, como uma ilusão da qual os atores são vítimas. Já a OIT, ainda que apresente ultimamente uma perspectiva em contraste, se encarcera numa noção de trabalho decente na economia solidária que mantém um quadro de referência comum com a perspectiva conservadora da sociologia do trabalho. Na segunda parte, apresentamos 2 práticas que expõem quanto a economia solidária não pode ser reduzida à dimensão econômica de modo de produção e das relações de trabalho, bem como que existe uma dimensão política emancipadora inerente a ela, nos casos do Conjunto Palmeiras (Brasil) e do movimento das *Régies de quartier* (França). Com base nessas emergências práticas, na terceira seção, buscamos especificar as estruturas teóricas que não se limitam a compreender as modalidades de implementação do trabalho na economia solidária, permitindo uma integração mais ampla das múltiplas dimensões. Desse modo, 3 enfoques teóricos são relacionados: as epistemologias do Sul, a abordagem substantiva da ação econômica e a noção de democracia deliberativa. Ao fim, abre-se a reflexão para que a sociologia do trabalho e a OIT avancem e reconfigurem suas abordagens de referência sobre o trabalho e a economia solidária para uma concepção ampliada, substantiva e heterodoxa.

**Palavras-chave:** Economia solidária. Epistemologias do Sul. Sociologia das emergências. Economia substantiva. Democracia deliberativa.

*La economía solidaria más allá de la cuestión laboral*

Resumen

En este ensayo nos proponemos discutir las limitaciones del enfoque ortodoxo del trabajo en la economía solidaria adoptado por la Organización Internacional del Trabajo (OIT) y la visión clásica de la sociología del trabajo. Inicialmente, mostramos que la economía solidaria ha sido analizada por la sociología tradicional del trabajo, en Brasil y en Francia, como una ilusión de la que los actores son víctimas. La OIT, aunque últimamente presente una perspectiva opuesta, se encierra en una noción de trabajo decente en la economía solidaria que mantiene un marco de referencia común con la perspectiva conservadora de la sociología del trabajo. En la segunda parte, presentamos 2 prácticas – los casos del *Conjunto Palmeiras* (Brasil) y de las *Régies de quartier* (Francia) – que exponen cómo la economía solidaria no puede reducirse a la dimensión económica del modo de producción y de las relaciones laborales y que ella tiene una dimensión política emancipadora inherente. A partir de estas emergencias prácticas, en la tercera sección tratamos de precisar los marcos teóricos que no se limitan a comprender las modalidades de implementación del trabajo en la economía solidaria, sino que permiten una integración más amplia de múltiples dimensiones. Así, se relacionan 3 enfoques teóricos: las Epistemologías del Sur, el enfoque sustantivo de la acción económica y la concepción de la democracia deliberativa. Al final, tenemos la reflexión para que la sociología del trabajo y la OIT avancen y reformulen sus referencias sobre el trabajo y la economía solidaria hacia una concepción ampliada, sustantiva y heterodoxa.

**Palabras clave:** Economía solidaria. Epistemologías del sur. Sociología de las emergencias. Economía sustantiva. Democracia deliberativa.

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## INTRODUCTION

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This essay proposes a critical review of the classic theoretical basis for the solidarity economy's analysis by the sociology of work and presents a reflection on the limitations of the orthodox perspective of work regarding solidarity economy<sup>1</sup> adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO). As a point that we explore throughout this essay, we analyze that the sociology of work and the ILO need to move forward and reconfigure their classical reference approaches on labor and solidarity economy, aiming for an expanded, substantive and heterodox new conception.

In the first part of this essay, we mention that solidarity economy has been analyzed by the traditional sociology of work, both in Brazil and France, as an illusion of which the actors are victims. In other words, in the classical view of this sociology branch, the actors of solidarity economy are, in fact, serving the dominant system, even if they are convinced of acting for social change. This analysis is now questioned by an ILO report (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022), which values the solidarity economy by providing decent work.

The purpose of this essay is not choosing between one of these contradictory interpretations, but to highlight the epistemological incompleteness of these 2 approaches in relation to the reductionist perspective of discussing solidarity economy within the labor dimension. Hence, in the second part of this essay, we present 2 emblematic experiences of solidarity economy in low-income neighborhoods in France and Brazil: the case of *Conjunto Palmeiras*, in the Brazilian city of Fortaleza; and the *Régies de quartier* movement, from its emergence to its expansion in low-income neighborhoods in France. The actions carried out through solidarity economy practices in these 2 experiences show how it cannot be reduced to the economic dimension of initiatives of the mode and labor relations, and that there is an emancipatory political dimension inherent in it.

From these realities, in the third part of the essay we specified the appropriate theoretical approaches for understanding what goes beyond work in solidarity economy. In our view, it is necessary to apply a sociology of emergences, as recommended by the epistemologies of the South, and to associate an expanded substantive approach to the repertoires of economic action and the democratic dimension of solidarity economy.

## THE ORTHODOX SOCIOLOGY AND THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION: OPPOSITE ANALYSES, BUT A COMMON REFERENCE FRAMEWORK

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Solidarity economy has been analyzed by post-Bourdiesian sociology (Hély, 2009; Hély & Moulévrier, 2013). In these analyses, solidarity economy is generally considered an illusion for workers, who think they are doing an emancipatory work and do not realize the extent of their participation in untying the State. According to this positioning, far from being an alternative, solidarity economy confirms the precarization of work and contributes to public services' withdrawal. Therefore, functions previously done by civil servants are assigned to members of solidarity economy organizations, which are much less protected and whose jobs are precarious. This perspective of analysis also states that workers and volunteers in these organizations are unconsciously subject to the neoliberal logic they think they are fighting, as well as forming the new reserve army for the labor market.

In Brazil, some criticisms to solidarity economy have this same content based on Marxist references. For example, in Wellen (2008, 2012)<sup>2</sup>, 2 critiques stand out: (i) solidarity economy would play a part in the productive restructuring of capital, in outsourcing processes, and in the precarization of labor relations; and (ii) solidarity economy would generate jobs and income for workers, but would not build a project for political or human emancipation. There are other critical analyses to solidarity economy by Wellen (2008, p. 109): (i) one contests the contribution of solidarity economy to emancipation,

<sup>1</sup>Although the approach of ILO documents and the most cited studies on classical sociology of work adopt the terminology "social and solidarity economy", we prefer to conduct the essay with the term "solidarity economy", which has a stronger and more eloquent tradition in Brazil (França Filho et al., 2005; Silva, 2018), as well as a long history of use, practice and research in France (Combes et al., 2022; Hersent & Torres, 2014), and internationally (Laville, 2009, 2023a; Silva Junior, 2022).

<sup>2</sup>Our intention is not to focus the essay on deconstructing the analyses of a specific author. However, we search to present a model of critique to solidarity economy in Brazil that symbolizes part of our argument accurately. We chose Wellen, who gathers – in his articles – the completeness of the limitations of the analyses that we have exposed and will still examine. The focus is not on him and his work, but rather on the epistemological bases that he and others have chosen as referential options.

from relationships built on the bases of solidarity, reciprocity, and community association, local or territorial; and, (ii) another condemns the ability of solidarity economy to support and structure a rational order, distinct from the rationality determined by the market.

In Laville and Frère (2023), we find reasonable arguments that refute and contradict these analyses. From a genealogy of critical theory, on the weaknesses of past theses and the challenges for measuring the future, these authors show how a renewed critical theory should reflect emancipation. To do that, they point out that solidarity economy is precisely one of the practical ways of achieving emancipation, when it articulates dimensions other than the economic, in regulation principles other than those of the market, in addition to having its basis in a rationality built on communicative action and operating in the expanded public sphere.

For the critics of the orthodox sociology of work, the actions of solidarity economy are not sufficient to break the order of capital and are vectors for labor precarization. Moreover, solidarity economy organizations, according to this critical perspective, do not generate sufficient economic results to solve local or territorial economic problems. Hence, critics argue that the resources spent on implementing solidarity economy actions and public policies could be invested by governments in more direct actions to generate income and strengthen the economy.

In parallel, the ILO (2022) provides a contrasting view, defining solidarity economy as the sum of

companies, organizations, and other entities committed to economic, social, and environmental activities, to serve the collective or general interest, based on the principles of voluntary cooperation and mutual aid, democratic or participatory governance, autonomy and independence, and the primacy of people and social purpose over capital in the distribution and use of goods, surpluses, and profits. Solidarity economy organizations seek long-term feasibility and sustainability, as well as transition from informal to formal economy, and are active in all sectors of the economy. [...] Depending on national contexts, solidarity economy comprises cooperatives, associations, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises, solidarity groups, and other organizations that operate according to its values and principles.

It is surprising that these 2 interpretations do not question each other, since they are contradictory. As already stated, it is not our purpose to choose one or the other, but to highlight the epistemological inadequacy of these approaches.

However, despite opposite findings, both approaches refer to an epistemological matrix that has the same limitations. The first limitation is focusing on the enterprises. The results achieved are found only in enterprises that share certain organizational characteristics (for example, limiting profitability and the power of capital). Either to condemn solidarity economy – on the side of traditional sociology of work – or to highlight its contributions, on ILO side, the attributes presented are from solidarity economy collective enterprise. This does not enable incorporating the institutional dimension of the actions, referring to the meaning assigned collectively and not to the way production is carried out. Also, it does not refer to the interest for institutional changes that may be claimed by some initiative promoters.

The second limitation is that assessment is carried out solely regarding salaried work, either to report its degradation or to value its respect for decent work. Both limitations have a quantitative and objectivist orientation, through which actions are evaluated. The main criticisms regarding the results of solidarity economy organizations, in particular, and of the solidarity economy movement, in general, are based on quantitative analyses that generally consider the economic impacts excessively, such as the value of individual or family income, the rate of jobs created, the number and size of enterprises, etc. However, to assess solidarity economy organizations according to the same logic, the same scale, and the same indicators as for-profit companies is a methodological and conceptual error.

This orientation refers to an objectivism, by which an observer can get rid of the language of common conceptions and access an analysis through methods that apprehend solidarity economy by quantitative data, without granting the voice to its actors. From this point of view, the French and Brazilian sociology of work mentioned earlier is emblematic: it establishes correlations between a decrease in the number of civil servants and an increase in the number of jobs in solidarity economy organizations. Users of this method think they are proving their axiological neutrality and claim to be scientific, free from

disapproval, as they merely describe the “real”, which is inaccessible to ordinary people. Therefore, researcher’s lucidity is opposed to actor’s credulity. This argument has been well known ever since Engels referred to pioneering socialism as a utopia in order to qualify his socialism as scientific.

Since scientists can detect historical truth, they feel superior to all other analyses which, for them, are not serious even if they are wrapped in “a varnish of scientificism and respectability” (Hély & Moulévrier, 2013, p. 6). Once researchers have a monopoly on interpretation, why should they engage in democratic debate? The colleague who disagrees is quickly treated as a ‘militant intellectual’, a betrayer of the scientific cause. From such a position, which borrows more from Comte’s positivism than from Marx, solidarity economy is guilty because tainted by the impurity of those responsible for mixing academic analysis and programmatic speech, scientific project and political project.

## THE EMERGENCES THAT GO BEYOND THE USUAL ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

The epistemological incompleteness of the approaches mentioned in the previous section is, therefore, linked to a business and an organizational typical vision of the social economy, together with an analytical attitude inherited from classical science, which favors distant observation as a guarantee of objectivity. These assumptions are being challenged by practical emergences stemming from solidarity economy that rehabilitate the political dimension of its mobilization. As well as by the theoretical emergences coming from a science that is no longer done “on” the actors, assuming them as objects of knowledge, but “with” the actors, crossing academic knowledge with their more experiential expertise.

Let us begin by understanding the content of practical emergences, through one example from Brazil and one from France, before addressing theoretical emergences, in the third section. On the Brazilian side, we discuss the case of *Conjunto Palmeiras*, a district in the city of Fortaleza, in the country’s Northeast region. It is an emblematic neighborhood of solidarity economy in Brazil, due to the achievements of the residents’ association; the development of public spaces for participation; and, the groundbreaking experience of a community bank and its local currency, which are references in the country for the public policies of the National secretariat of solidarity economy (Secretaria nacional de economia solidária – SENAES). On the French side, we present the *Régies de quartier* movement. Based on the pioneer case of the *Alma Gare* district in the northern French city of Roubaix, the *Régies de quartier* are recognized for their impact on local mobilization; urban restructuring; and, building a movement that fosters the engagement and active participation of citizens in the decisions and public actions of their interest.

### Conjunto Palmeiras in Brazil – from the “district of solidarity economy” to its contribution to national public policies

The *Conjunto Palmeiras* district is located in the outskirts of Fortaleza, the fifth most populous city in Brazil (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2021). When you arrive at this neighborhood, on the main street there is a wall where you read that *Conjunto Palmeiras* is ‘the district of solidarity economy’. On this same street, the headquarters of the neighborhood association (Asmoconp) is located. The Asmoconp gave birth in 1998 to an emblematic solidarity economy project: the *Banco Palmas*, the first community bank (BCD) in the country (Cheng & Silva Junior, 2023). On top of the façade of *Banco Palmas* headquarters is another striking phrase: ‘No one overcomes poverty alone’, attributed to economist Paul Singer<sup>3</sup>. These two phrases provide a hint of the leading role and empowerment of neighborhood’s residents, who have actively built their history by facing numerous challenges to improve their living conditions. The district was established in 1973, and, at the beginning, living conditions were unhealthy and residents had to mobilize for decades to urbanize it. Fifty years later, *Conjunto Palmeiras* is much better served by public services. There are schools, leisure centers, sporting venues, day care centers, a health center, and public transportation, among other services for the citizens.

<sup>3</sup> Brazilian (originally from Austria) professor and researcher, Paul Singer is one of the main academic references on solidarity economy in the country. He also contributed with his professional competence as secretary of SENAES in the Brazilian government, between 2003 and 2016. He died in 2018, and his large academic production is available at <http://paulsinger.com.br/>.

However, until 1976, the only school was located in a cattle barn. There were no paved streets, running water, electricity, sanitation, or public transportation. The houses were built with mud, cardboard, wood scraps, or other materials that residents could find at no cost. *Conjunto Palmeiras* was built near a river, so the district flooded easily. The abundance of carnauba palm trees contributed to name the place. Between 1973 and 1988, the mobilization of the population to solve their problems gained strength and visibility. In those years, through protests on the streets, occupations of public buildings, threats to invade government headquarters, and hunger strikes, the inhabitants called the attention of public authorities to district's problems. These struggles, pressure, and actions of the residents characterize the history of the district and would not happen without a considerable social organization. Some episodes highlight the local historical memory and are proudly spread by residents.

In 1981, they created the neighborhood' association. The process of establishing the Asmoconp gave impetus to residents' political struggles, to social movements in the district, and organized the community for their numerous claims. This was the case of the 1988 protests, which brought treated and piped water to their homes, and showed that, if organized, they could achieve what they needed to enhance the neighborhood.

In the 1990s, 26 other associations were created in the district, with different goals: collective production, assistance to children and teenagers, teaching and arts, among others. They joined in the associations and organized groups of *Conjunto Palmeiras'* network (União das associações e grupos organizados do conjunto palmeiras – Uagoconp) and from there they developed the guidelines for diagnosing and solving their common problems. Hence, the local solidarity economy organizations expanded their mission and acted for improving the general living conditions of *Conjunto Palmeiras*. Issues such as housing, health, social assistance, environment, culture, education, work, and employment were discussed and shared. Protests, demonstrations, and discussion seminars were held and led to new achievements, such as electric energy, public transportation, and sanitation. Groups and organizations, formal or informal, throughout the history of the neighborhood, were essential for conquering basic rights for the local population and the necessary improvements for living there. In the late 2010s, these associations of *Conjunto Palmeiras* created the Local Socio-Economic Forum (Fecol), a monthly forum for discussion where they shared problems, sought solutions, and defined responsibilities regarding local challenges.

In the case of *Conjunto Palmeiras*, this process of solidarity, cooperation, and local democracy was fundamental for the constitution and consolidation of organizations of solidarity economy in the district, strongly centered on democratic management, citizen engagement, and residents' political, economic, and social emancipation. One of these structures stands out – the BCD *Banco Palmas*. From this orientation, and with the concern of how to generate work and income in the district, the proposal for creating the *Banco Palmas* emerged in 1998. Therefore, this bank was the result of Asmoconp's action, which, in turn, was the consequence of the political and transforming engagement of the residents. The Asmoconp started a consultation process involving residents, traders, producers, and neighborhood leaders, to seek alternatives for strengthening the local economy and facilitate the circulation of income within *Conjunto Palmeiras*. Creating job opportunities for the residents was a focus, but not dissociated from the purpose of doing this by strengthening the relationship and subordination of the economic dimension (where work is included) to the social and, especially, political dimensions.

Regarding integrated territorial development, the *Banco Palmas* intended to use solidarity finance as a tool to build and strengthen local economic dynamics by investing in production and consumption activities, training, and political empowerment. As a solidarity economy organization, this BCD was created based on the democratic management of decisions and resources, emphasizing dialogue and horizontal relations, where the decision-making authority is shared among the participants of the action.

Rooted on these basic purposes, solidarity economy organizations of *Conjunto Palmeiras* have built a methodology of operation in the district that stimulates, creates, or recreates a series of actions for developing the territory, more or less lasting, depending on community demands. One aspect to highlight is that this is a multidimensional approach to development. Solidarity economy is a way to generate income and reorganize labor, but as an effect of a development action that puts social justice, democracy, and emancipation at the forefront (Silva Junior, 2023). An important example of this methodology of action in the neighborhood is the social currency, established and managed by *Banco Palmas*, as a form of currency complementary to the *Real* (BRL – Brazilian official national currency).

According to Rigo (2020), social currency, in this context, serves two basic purposes: as an instrument to encourage consumption, which becomes legitimate locally; and, ii) as a stimulant of a new type of relationship with money, since the intention is to reflect on a new type of organization of local economic life, different from those based on commercial exchanges and the sole



interest of personal and material satisfaction. Therefore, social currencies, besides distributing wealth, are mainly instruments of political and economic awareness and emancipation.

The community movement of citizen participation around solidarity economy at *Conjunto Palmeiras* influenced the process of building the Brazilian national public policy of solidarity finance, especially between 2005 and 2015. Recognizing the experience of this neighborhood and the methodology of BCD *Banco Palmas* in the territory guided the expansion of the experiment to several districts and cities in Brazil, funded by SENAES. In this process, several BCDs were established throughout the country, and organized around the Brazilian network of community banks (Rede brasileira de bancos comunitários – RBBC). This solidarity economy organization, which emerged from the dissemination of experiences such as the one originally developed in *Conjunto Palmeiras*, has 148 associated BCDs along the Brazilian territory (Pupo, 2022). Certainly, we can infer that the history of *Conjunto Palmeiras* teaches how solidarity economy and substantive democratic management contribute to broader processes of social emancipation.

### The *Régies de quartier* in France – from the *Alma Gare* district to building a national active citizenship movement in public action

At the end of the 1970s, the workers' self-management approach took hold in the academic field. Protests arose over the discrimination suffered by working classes, not only in companies but also in the places where they lived. In the *Alma Gare* district, in the city of Roubaix, in the metropolitan area of Lille, residents regrouped themselves to improve the neighborhood's maintenance and cleaning services, making them compatible with their demands and needs. The prospect of urban restructuring and renovation of buildings that were unhealthy fostered a local mobilization supported by members of the Union confederation for quality of life (*Confédération syndicale du cadre de vie* – CSCV) and by external contributions. The goal was to enable on-site resettlement in good housing conditions.

This first learning-generating battle stimulates reflection on what the city represents for citizens, the place they want to hold within it, and how they can contribute to its functioning. A Popular workshop of urbanism (*Atelier Populaire d'Urbanisme* – APU) was created by inhabitants' initiative with urban planners, technicians, and representatives of the city's public power, to intervene in the district's renovation. In 1980, emerged the initiative of a *régie*<sup>4</sup> *de quartier* to face the level of insalubrity that made it difficult to live in this set of buildings with 173 apartments.

For Bouzols (1999), by placing the inhabitants at the center, the project clearly showed its self-management roots, certified by the presence of CSCV, giving priority to meeting social demands from civil society. In addition, some actors proposed to experiment a new way of cleaning and maintaining the buildings, by dividing the cleaning tasks by entrance, and assigning a resident at each floor with the responsibility for cleaning the stairs and corridors. The results achieved were very convincing, as the high level of residents' participation in the daily cleaning and maintenance tasks provided the double advantage of a better quality of work and greater respect for this work by the other residents, improving the social climate and the neighborhood image significantly.

If the *régies de quartier* were not framed by a later public regulation, or if they were unsatisfied with a localism that restricted them, it was because the creation of the National committee of *Régies de Quartier* (*Comité national de liaison des Régies de Quartier* – CNLRQ), in 1988, formed a network, grouping the six pioneering *régies* “to distance themselves from the local and join a national movement” (Bouzols, 1999, p. 174). CNLRQ allowed a grouping that was not free of difficulties, since the *régies* – whose number was increasing at the time – were subject to instrumentalization attempts by public authorities. To resist, CNLRQ adopted a declaration on 1991, whose preamble stated: “The aim of this declaration is to propose a clear method of affiliation for the *régies de quartier*. It intends, in particular, through the commitment of these entities, awarding the *Régie de quartier* a collective brand kept by CNLRQ” (Assemblée générale du [CNLRQ], 1991). Therefore, a trademark was registered at the French patent office (*Institut national de la propriété industrielle* – INPI), and the possession of this collective identity was attested by passing the name from *régies* to *Régie*.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The word '*régie*' does not refer to a management system but borrows it from the vocabulary/lexicon of the technical environment of entertainment and show. If the district is a 'theater' of urban life, the inhabitants decided to be the 'actors', and *régie* is the environment or tool to ensure the 'stage play' of real life with technical quality (Bouzols, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> The adoption of the initial capital letter indicates that *Régies de quartier* are subject to a registered trademark, whose collective property belongs to the network *Le Mouvement des Régies*, the new name of CNLRQ after 2022.

Certification with a brand name is a deeply original approach, at a time when other organizations with economic insertion originating from civil society are included in the French labor code. Hence, CNLRQ has managed to create a different relationship with public policies, based on negotiating with an entire movement. Bouzols (1999, p. 174) observes that “certification seems to be a way for CNLRQ to protect itself against potential abuses in the constitution of entities and exercise a relative control over locally created *Régies*. Moreover, the novelty and exemplary nature of certification assign a new symbolic force”. This unusual approach aimed to avoid the expropriation of the idea and banalization of the purposes of establishing a *Régie de quartier*. According to Bavoux et al. (1994, p. 41), this procedure ‘initially disorients governments’. However, it also increases the will to contribute to a new generation of public action, which is no longer the prerogative of public power, but comes from a cooperation and conflict with citizenship movements.

Faced with quantitative pressure, there is a concern to favor the qualitative dimension of projects, refusing to model or even ‘clone’ them, and seeking instead to act towards unity around a national committee that guarantees the movement’s autonomy and diversity by respecting local realities. To this purpose, several instruments complement each other: a methodological guide produced by Acadie<sup>6</sup>, in collaboration with CNLRQ; an evaluation process by experts, to which about a dozen study offices were added; and, an ambitious program to strengthen actors in their capacity to make the system operate and to invest in it. It is not simply a matter of creating a *Régie de quartier* at any price, but, at the same time, qualifying the projects and their actors.

A statement designed at the CNLRQ’s general assembly, in 1993, complemented the 1991 protesting against the negative images spread about the suburbs and mechanisms of exclusion, and trying to show and explain all that is positive and dynamic being built in these working-class districts. In this statement, the logic of the movement is exposed, from the *Régie de quartier*, as a living place mainly managed by the residents, whose participation takes place in 2 levels: as employees; and, by assuming functions at the various entity bodies. At the same time, the function of the *Régie de quartier* is also reaffirmed as a meeting point for institutional actors, and as a relevant body in local economic intervention (Assemblée générale du [CNLRQ], 1993).

Practical emergences do not just replicate what already exists. They are in part the result of an instituting praxis; that is, members of the collectives involved can enact their own rules. Instituting praxis is an ‘institution’s conscious activity’ and ‘self-production of a collective subject’, in the terms mentioned by Dardot and Laval (2014, pp. 440-445). This collective subject does both the activity that establishes a new system of rules and the activity that seeks to constantly revitalize this entity. Therefore, managing society by itself becomes the engine of institutionalization, of the “permanent reinvention of the institution, by which the group that created it can neutralize its inertia” (Dardot & Laval, 2014, p. 446). If we stick to a society that systematically determines the people, then institutionalization makes no sense. There is no point in acting if everything is decided in advance, and the meta-actors (society, capitalism) determine how dice will fall before they are thrown. This determinism must be abandoned. The negative criticism of a society already established is no longer enough. We should follow actors in their practice and not just condemn the violence inflicted on them by pre-established institutional structures.

<sup>6</sup> Acadie is a French cooperative founded in 1978 that gathers professionals specialized in planning and monitoring territorial public policies: geographers, urban planners, sociologists and political scientists.

## EPISTEMOLOGIES THAT ARE RELEVANT BECAUSE THEY ARE SENSITIVE TO EMERGENCES

In referring to the 2 cases, the procedures that assess solidarity economy based on paid work in organizations hide 3 significant levels to be considered:

1. The political struggles whose role is to recognize the people involved: their bond cannot be confused with unpaid work, which is synonymous of exploitation.
2. Territorial development, which involves going beyond the framework of isolated organizations to incorporate an integrated dynamic of networks of organizations in space.
3. The institutional change generated, which refers to a dynamic in time: the creation of 2 models of action, such as community banks and the *Régies de quartier*, requires several decades of mobilization, articulation, and negotiation with the public power, in a relationship of conflict and cooperation.

Hence, in order to describe practical emergences, it is necessary to resort to theoretical frameworks that are not limited to understanding the ways in which work is implemented in solidarity economy but allow a broader integration of the multiple dimensions of the experiences exposed. Thus, 3 sources of theoretical inspiration can be mentioned: the epistemologies of the South, which recommend surveillance regarding absences or parts of the reality that have been historically made invisible, in order to consider emergences in a different way. We should not focus on their deficiencies or insufficiencies, as Western critical thought often does, but consider their ambivalences, the ambiguities that are inherent to them, and also the potentialities they carry; the theoretical framework of substantive economy, which puts work within a broader reflection on the plurality of economic principles; and, the framework of substantive democracy, which details the register of common political action.

### The epistemologies of the South

The analytical frameworks proposed by orthodox sociology or ILO are part of an epistemology of the North, since realities are displaced and objectified. That is why we should prefer another epistemology that integrates actors into the investigation process as contributors to a collective reflection. This pragmatic approach is supported by the epistemologies of the South, which stand against the universalistic purpose of a dominant knowledge and seek to find ways to respect the world's diversity.

The epistemologies of the South do not reflect a claim towards any region of the world. Here it is essential to clarify a misunderstanding: the South is not a geographical entity or space. Rather, it is a metaphor for the human suffering caused by the dominant world order, and a valuation of the resistance it generates. It is true that the populations that have been and still are most affected by inequalities and discriminations caused by capitalism and colonialism live in the Southern hemisphere. But the South also exists in the North, just as in the countries of the South oligarchies benefit from the dominant order. Rethinking global justice is a necessary task that should be carried out in the whole planet and cannot consist of defending a single path or a counter-project symmetrical to what neoliberalism would like to be today. It is a matter of starting a dialogue on intercultural translation. The goal, as *Zapatistas* say, is 'a world where there is room for many people'. Taking plurality into account is part of the process. It is not about pointing a way to follow, or mapping resistances at work, but being open to diversity. If Western theory is running out, it is not only because of capitalism tricks, but because of its limits, inherent to its standardizing purpose.

Moving away from this consensual attitude, the sociology of emergences advocated by the epistemologies of the South indicates the study of the emancipatory potential of a large diversity of alternative practices that emerge in a mostly capitalist system, in the terms of Mauss (1987). Even if they are constantly threatened by marginalization, they testify that not only "another world is possible" – to quote the famous formulation of the World Social Forum, but also that it already exists in a multiplicity of experiences, sometimes fragile, but also real. It is about going beyond the hermeneutics of skepticism, and no longer despising initiatives that fight capitalist hegemony, affirming – amidst difficulties – the logic of reciprocity, equality, and solidarity.



The sociology of emergences is attentive to these actions, which are studied through practical cases from several countries in South America, Asia, and Europe (Santos, 2006). These cases led to theses that emphasize, from an economic standpoint, that these initiatives should be carried out inside and outside the State and the market. Their sustainability and success depend largely on their insertion in networks of cooperation and mutual support. Moreover, their economic dimension is inseparable from a political dimension. The radicalization of economic democracy goes hand in hand with the radicalization of participatory democracy, and the future of economic transformation processes is linked to their relationship with political, cultural, and social dynamics.

Therefore, what arises is the heuristic scope of this sociology of emergences. There was a tradition of non-capitalist enterprises, whose theorization in the North corresponded to social economy. The joint emergence in South America and Europe of a so-called solidarity economy (França Filho et al., 2005) provides the opportunity for a co-elaboration that can considerably renew the approaches on “both sides of the Atlantic”. The epistemologies of the South thus enable deepening an intercultural dialogue already started, through the analyses of the substantive economy and substantive democracy by authors from both continents.

### A substantive economy based on work and *buen vivir*<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the economy, the orthodox approach can be described as formal. It places shortage at the center of analysis, and makes material gain the basis of individual choices. This approach also contains an economic fallacy that confuses the economy with market mechanisms, which is why solidarity economy cannot be included. In contrast, solidarity economy claims a substantive approach where economy is based on several principles of economic behavior: market exchange, but also redistribution, reciprocity, householding. Polanyi (2008, 2011) highlighted the differences between the 2 approaches, as well as synthesized anthropological observations that helped consolidate the heterodox proposal of a substantive economy. However, focusing on the critique of modernity as a market society, Karl Polanyi did not mobilize this pluralistic analytical framework for understanding contemporary economies.

The contribution of South American authors is crucial in this regard, especially their studies on popular economy conceived as a labor economy, which formed one of the essential bases for the genesis of solidarity economy (Coraggio, 2011; Quijano, 2008; Razeto, 1993). In addition, innovative institutional practices, such as the Bolivian and Ecuadorian constitutions, provide important elements for the legal concretization of a solidarity economy integrated into a plural economy, and seen as a means to achieve *buen vivir* (Acosta, 2016). Acknowledged through this reference to *buen vivir*, Andean philosophies of life – such as *suma qamaña* (an expression similar to *buen vivir* in the language of the Aymara ethnic group) or *sumak kawsay* (an expression similar to *buen vivir* in *Quechua*, language of the native people of Andean America) – converge to the idea of subsistence expressed by Polanyi (2011), associating the concern for life reproduction with attention to “happiness” in the sense given by Aristotle (2021).

Feminist studies also opened the debates. Studies on provisioning and care – activities necessary to life preservation – advocate the link between production (which is the object of study in orthodox economics) and reproduction, which becomes visible in a substantive economy structured by gender relations (Hillenkamp et al., 2014). Decoding the empirically observable combinations between principles of economic integration can help reconcile emancipation and protection, by detailing the ambivalences of the economic principle of householding and the effects of a change towards reciprocity; that is, from confinement in private premises to openness for collectively recognized activities of caring for others.

Therefore, the framework of analysis of the substantive economy enables situating economic originality beyond labor, in the hybridization of economic principles, by resorting to householding, reciprocity, and redistribution.

<sup>7</sup> *Buen vivir* (Good living) is a conception of life conflicted in the crystallization of a questioning alternative to the contemporary mode of production and consumption, to the managerial operation of the State, and mainly to the conventional speech of sustainable development, as a belief that the binomial development-progress will be able to face the global social, environmental, and economic challenges (Acosta & Abarca, 2018).

## A substantive democracy, based on deliberation and intersubjectivity

Regarding politics, a first traditional thought refers it to public power. In a democratic society, there should be a ‘monopoly of legitimate violence’, according to Weber (2021), where a coordinating body (the State) must ensure that society is not a war of all against all, and rules of community life are respected. However, a second tradition of political thought insists that the public sphere is a place where people gather to try defining rules of a common world. The relevance given to the public sphere characterizes the writings of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas. This orientation breaks an aggregating paradigm based on expressing individual preferences, and understands democracy formally, through selecting among several options authorized by the vote. This perspective extends the political process to forums and councils that are part of a deliberative paradigm and emphasizes intersubjectivity in shaping opinions and decisions (Silva Junior, 2023).

To Habermas (1997a, 1997c), the pluralization of politics has a double meaning. Both Habermas and Arendt (1958) showed that democracy implies common action and dialogue about the *polis*, thus presuming a public sphere that is not to be confused with public power. As of the 1990s, Habermas observed that diversity exists within a public space divided into several components.<sup>8</sup> In this new theoretical framework, society is full of public spaces that are continuously formed from daily problems. The author emphasized the potential for deliberative democracy of these public spaces. Next to the public sphere, which is invaded by and intertwined with systemic imperatives, there is an autonomous public sphere in continuous formation. The philosopher, according to Claus Offe, insists on ‘association relationships’, around which “autonomous public spaces can crystallize” (Habermas, 1997b, p. 394). Through this notion of association relationship, cited without definition, Habermas recognizes the importance of these voluntary collective actions that can promote communicative exchanges, because they are based on the principles of free association and equality among the founders. Therefore, by associations he does not refer only to those recognized by law, but to all groups – informal or formal – that allow the exercise of positive freedom.

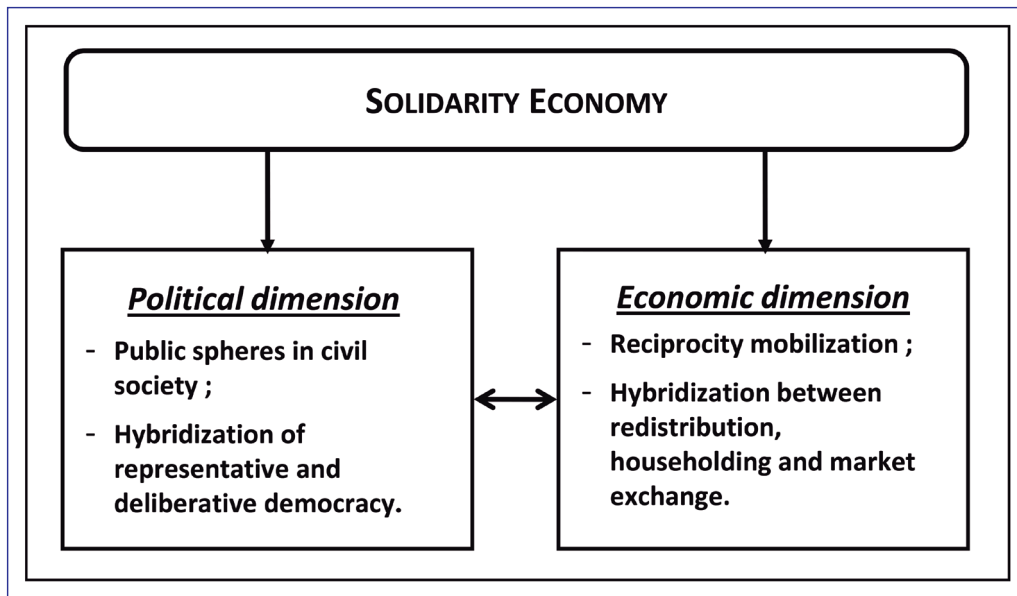
In addition, the unique contribution of South American authors in this field (Cançado et al., 2019; França Filho & Boullosa, 2015; J. T. Silva, 2023; Tenório & Araújo, 2020) is their ability to overcome the boundaries between political and economic dimensions, often raised by conceptions influenced by Arendt (1958) and Habermas (1997a, 1997b, 1997c), which favor the autonomy of the political side and distrust its distortion by the economic. By extending Fraser’s (2005) observation, that popular public spheres necessarily address socio-economic issues, the epistemologies of the South deepen the processes of delegitimization that face initiatives that seek to improve daily life through democratic dynamics. Women’s initiatives and projects, for example, can be spaces of production, but also places of socialization, and even a public sphere, with the specifics of combining – to a greater or lesser degree – economic activity, social justice, and political action (Cheng & Silva Junior, 2023; Guérin et al., 2011).

<sup>8</sup>Habermas’s texts on public sphere, communicative acting, and deliberative democracy, used for this essay, are more deeply detailed, analyzed, and discussed in Chapter 2 of Laville and Frère (2023).

## CONCLUSION

The sociology of labor presents the solidarity economy as dependent on neoliberalism, while ILO considers it as resisting to it. We agree that the solidarity economy cannot be seen outside this relationship with neoliberalism, but for this to occur, an expanded framework of analysis is necessary, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
The dual dimension of the solidarity economy



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Laville (2023b).

Solidarity economy testifies actions in favor of diversity. In the current balance of power, each continent's specific initiatives can only be strengthened by integrating actors from various continents, including Latin America and Europe. The seriousness of the situation also demands that researchers establish cooperative relations with these actors, to avoid both acclamations – through a rhetoric that just resumes the “militant” word – and complaints, through a report that would merely identify experiences' gaps. In fact, while global North approaches tend to despise these initiatives, global South approaches would lose all relevance if adopted a maximalist view that idealize them, as Wanderley (2015) states. In view of these 2 symmetrical traps, elucidating the ambivalences inherent to solidarity economy organizations, carried out together by actors and researchers, is capable of considering the complexity of reality, while remaining lucid about the modesty of the changes made, without condemning the initiatives to impotence.

A atenção dada às emergências muda a maneira como olhamos para as realidades atuais e leva a uma renovação dos debates, tornando visível o que foi deixado de fora da história oficial, como no caso da economia solidária. Nesses termos, é essencial evitar a visão preconceituosa, pois ela se concentra no assalariado, que emana tanto da sociologia do trabalho quanto da OIT, mesmo que ela leve a conclusões diferentes.

The attention paid to emergencies changes the way we look at current realities, and leads to a renewal of debates, making visible what has been left out of official history, as in the case of the solidarity economy. Therefore, it is essential to avoid the biased view that focuses on the wage earner, which stems from both the sociology of work and ILO, even if achieving different conclusions.

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The entire dataset supporting the results of this study was published in the article itself.

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