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Rethinking the Social and Solidarity Economy in Light of Community Practice

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ABSTRACT:

Building social alternatives is necessary to resist the destructive impacts of the capitalist organization on the quality of life, social organization, and the planet. This paper offers an analysis of the ways in which peoples are mobilizing to build organizations and to define social movements to move beyond current crises. The lines for constructing an ecologically sound and social-solidarity economy require mechanisms for mutual cooperation based on alternative systems of decision making as well as for doing work and assuring well-being to every member of the community. These depend on forging a process of solidarity among the members of a society as well as building alliances among communities; to assure the satisfaction of basic needs while also attending the most pressing requirements for physical, social and environmental infrastructure and to assure the conservation and rehabilitation of their ecosystems.

When the accumulation of wealth is no longer of high social importance, there will be great changes in the code of morals... The love of money as a possession...will be recognised for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semicriminal, semipathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease... I look forward, therefore, in days not so very remote, to the greatest change which has ever occurred in the material environment of life for human beings ... the nature of one's duty to one's neighbour is changed. For it will remain reasonable to be economically purposive for others after it has ceased to be reasonable for oneself.

J. M. Keynes, *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*, (1930)

Introduction:

This prediction about society's future, as Keynes' envisioned it, reflects a profound misunderstanding of the institutional context in which he lived (and in which we continue to live), a telling naiveté grounded in an unbounded optimism of the power of technological advance and private accumulation that would fuel a process of compound economic growth.¹ Clearly we have reached the state of overall abundance that he foresaw, an economy that has the productive potential to satisfy all of our basic needs –“those needs which are absolute in the sense that we feel them whatever the situation of our fellow human beings”– and yet poverty is a greater scourge than perhaps at any time in modern history. Unequal development deepens, as much on a global scale as locally, creating islands of wealth in a sea of poverty; an extraordinary waste of human and material potential accompanies devastating processes of ecological destruction. Today's triple crisis –economic, social, environmental– is the most recent manifestation of our collective inability to meet the challenges that Keynes thought could be readily met. Thus, society continues to be incapable of finding solutions that do more than heighten the contradictions and further deepen the crisis.² Unfortunately, the various explanations and policy solutions offered by heterodox scholars are not being given serious consideration and the orthodox 'solutions' continue to prolong and further deepen the crises.

In contrast, numerous peoples around the world are finding alternatives that offer them more opportunities and a better quality of life, while also contributing to environmental preservation. Their communities are realizing that alternatives are necessary to create space -- political, economic, and social, as well as geographic – in which they can effectively resist the destructive impacts of the spread of capitalist organization of production on the quality of life, social organization, and the planet. This process is of great significance globally, as communities are

¹ In the first part of this essay written in 1930, he foresaw: “...*mankind is solving ... the economic problem ...* within a hundred years.”

² The literature explaining society's inability to surmount the obstacles to sharing this wealth abounds, although important paradigmatic conflicts reflect political and philosophical differences. Most analysts even ignore the intertwining of socio-economic and environmental problems, choosing to focus, instead, on present-day superficial financial dynamics. For contrasting critical analyses see, for example, Galbraith (2012) and Foster, *et al.*, (2010).

collectively searching for means to: 1) appreciate the significance of diversity within and among themselves; 2) accept the necessity of coordination and cooperation emerging within the diversity that their projects offer; 3) develop new means for concerted political action for socio-economic and environmental governance on a supranational scale; 4) recognize the need to compensate for the asymmetries that exist on a global scale, accepting responsibilities for assuring the well-being of those unable to undertake significant initiatives on their own; and finally, 5) (re)construct their own sense of identity;.

This is the broader context within which “social and solidarity economies” (SSE) are emerging locally. Underlying this dynamic is an understanding —often-times implicit— that their full insertion into the world market is a mechanism of impoverishment. Their experiences in the market economy —be it as wage laborers, as independent workers, or even as small business people— have clearly demonstrated the difficulty of assuring a reasonable income to support their families, much less improve their lot, create opportunities for the future, and attend the needs of the planet. In this framework, it is clear that the search for SSE involves more than attempts to produce goods; that is, moving beyond the market dynamics that depends on private accumulation and generates profound inequalities. The point of departure for a SSE must be a commitment to the ethical organization of society and all of its activities: ethical in the sense that the needs of all people in the community are attended to, while also making provision for the well-being of future generations.

The principles of social and solidarity economics

One of the crucial elements in the construction of a SSE is the joining of the components of social responsibility with those of environmental accountability; without an integral connection between these dimensions, any program would fall short of its ambitions. This process involves exploring the ways in which five fundamental principles are incorporated into social and political organization. These principles are: 1) autonomy in governance, including self-management; 2) solidarity among community members and with other communities cooperating in a similar process; 3) self-sufficiency in so far as it is feasible, given the resource endowment and ecological conditions; 4) productive diversification for trade with other communities and in the market; and finally, 5) sustainable management of regional resources. These principles are so important that they merit a careful explanation:

- a) **Autonomy** encompasses the capacity of self-governance or self-management within the communities, although it cannot be restricted to this realm, since it must extend to forging alliances among communities and negotiating with authorities in the various levels of government, many of whom perceive the local autonomy movements to be a threat. This facet of community consolidation involves an explicit recognition that in most cases the community itself is too small a body for effective operation, since the need for skills and goods is frequently greater and more diversified than the resources that it can muster from within. Self-governance also implies developing the knowledge and skills required for developing the capacity to evaluate proposals for further development, for incorporating new technologies when needed and defending inherited traditions and

productive systems as part of the process of determining the best ways to improve the quality of life and protect the region's ecosystems.

- b) The second principle, **social solidarity**, is a logical derivation of the first one. This involves a rethinking of the dominant patterns of entrepreneurial organization of community life, to encourage and facilitate broad participation in all aspects, including productive and social activities. Social solidarity requires a new conception of decision making, since the dominant approach in the nation state is based on electoral processes of representative democracy that are widely discredited, because of their capture by wealthy or powerful groups that frequently betray broader community interests. In place of this structure of indirect governance, the principle of solidarity would call for more direct forms of democratic participation that involve a different concept of political responsibility of the local people in decision-making and participation in the various administrative posts required by self-governance; not coincidentally, it also includes the possibility of revoking the mandates of leaders if they do not fulfill their obligations. In this context, solidarity cannot be limited to interactions among people, since the alternative model also takes into account the needs of the ecosystems on which the society depends for its very survival. As we will see below, solidarity is not a simple declaration of good intentions, but rather involves assuming the risks created by supporting people and movements challenging the institutional nexus generated in the globalized market economy, a risk associated with creating societies that inherently offer an alternative response to ever-intensifying crises.
- c) **Self-sufficiency** must be an essential part of the program, not a simple declaration of good intentions, but rather a profound reorganization of the structures of production and consumption to satisfy its own needs with a rising standard of living and attention to the cultural and nutritional needs of society. Local provision, however, is not limited to foodstuffs, but rather extends to all aspects of community life, including construction, infrastructure, clothing, and collective health and social services. This requires a concerted effort to prepare people with new skills and to create new capacities for producing and distributing goods.
- d) **Productive diversification** is another essential factor for creating the social economy. If the participating communities are to depend exclusively on the goods they could produce themselves, they would be condemned to a form of subsistence that would offer their members little prospects for a rising standard of living or a better quality of life. Limiting people's consumption or a community's activities to those that depend on the resources and goods at hand would inevitably threaten the viability of the project, since the pressures to abandon the strict limitations that this imposes would induce people to leave, as we have seen in many intentional communities³ throughout the world. Productive diversification also requires developing local markets for barter and exchange as well as for exploring other means of exchange, such as fair trade and solidarity markets regionally and internationally
- e) Of course, this set of principles would not be complete without including explicit consideration of **sustainable regional resource management**, since the organizational and productive activities of a SSE must also contribute to environmental balance. In this

³ "Intentional Community is an inclusive term for [ecovillages](#), [cohousing communities](#), residential land trusts, [communes](#), student co-ops, urban housing [cooperatives](#), intentional living, alternative communities, cooperative living, and other projects where people strive together with a common vision." Cf. <http://www.ic.org/>

conception, the word "regional" is crucial and requires that any strategy for environmental management involve collaboration among communities, since it is rare that the territory of one community encompasses a whole natural environmental unit, like a water shed (river basin), where upstream and downstream groups should collaborate to avoid contamination and resource depletion. Frequently, this requires a deliberate effort to rehabilitate deteriorated ecosystems that suffered from a devastating history of abuse as a result of colonial and/or capitalist exploitation. But even today, these efforts to create spaces for the SSE pose difficult issues due to intensifying pressures from international capital to take control of valuable mineral resources or agricultural lands, pushed by market pressures and international competition.

The components of the Solidarity Society

A solidarity society can only arise in communities that consider themselves part of the commons. For them, the commons is more than the air, waters, and other natural resources shared by all. It also encompasses the social and cultural components of collective life and involves a profound reconsideration of the significance and extent of private property among the participants; recently, the concept has been further extended to include many facets of intellectual creativity that are the object of privatization efforts by capital in the international market. The commons are not simply a set of things or resources; rather like many other aspects of the social and solidarity economy, their role in the SSE is central because the society creates formal social relations around them as well as commitments to ensure their conservation and even their enlargement. This relationship reflects a collective and enduring transformation of the way in which society conceives and manages itself while also developing the basis for collective and communal management (Bollier and Helfrich, 2012).⁴

Building a solidarity society is a complex and risky process. Complex, because it encompasses all aspects of social and biological existence. Risky, because it involves challenging the *de facto* powers⁵ and questioning the legitimacy of their 'rule of law'; this legal system has created a profoundly unjust society, exacerbating social disparities and accelerating environmental destruction. This dispute stems from a rejection of the philosophical underpinnings of the hegemonic order, based on the idea of a single "social contract" that presupposes the possibility of applying universal norms, like 'social justice', 'equality', or even 'democracy', impartially to attend to the needs of all social groups. For this reason, it also involves a *prima facie* repudiation of the legitimacy of national 'authorities' who assume their right to transfer community resources to others for whatever reason, without regard for the well-being of the people, local decisions, or historical and environmental considerations, as is common practice in mining, forestry, and water management, although it now extends to complex issues of bio- and nano-technology in many nations today. Thus, a society that advocates solidarity among diverse social groups calls for a political approach that requires each to extricate itself from the dominant social and political institutions that are incapable of attending their particular needs.

⁴ In this sense, the commons are much more the 'resources' governed collectively, generally involving a collective notion of private property; Ostrom's characterization of their importance to avoid the 'tragedy of the commons' (1990; see also, Hardin, 1968) avoided the complex problems created by the capitalist organization of society.

⁵ "Las fuerzas vivas" or "poderes fácticos", in the prevailing argot in Mexico.

But building the foundations of a solidarity society entails much more than undertaking specific activities or establishing appropriate institutions for governance or management. The solidarity society requires personal commitments from each member to assume responsibility for the well-being of others and for limiting individual claims for access to collective resources.⁶ To strengthen these foundations, it is essential to begin with a common vision of society as a whole whose point of departure is reversing the historical tendency for the personal enrichment of a few at the expense of the many; as such, they incorporate collective decisions to assure transparency and direct participation in decision-making and universal responsibility for administration or implementation of this dynamic. It challenges the presumption of the freedom of the individual within the group, obliging each member to carefully measure their impacts on others, and the whole, and be guided by reference to their impact on the collectivity in their decisions and actions. In historical terms, and specifically in light of practice in today's globalized society, it calls for a redefinition of peoples' relationship with their society, rejecting the notion that one person has the unfettered right to withdraw from or even oppose the commonweal after having participated in the process of arriving at a decision.

This point of departure has important implications for the way in which priorities are determined and activities are organized. Perhaps one of the most striking and demanding of these is the need to reverse the hierarchical organization of the workplace: of course, people should be paid for their work, but they should not have to submit to demeaning and authoritarian social relations to satisfy their basic needs. The existing proletarian organization of society is part of an underlying condition of the helplessness of the workers, unable even to survive without entering the labor force; the alternative under construction here starts from the presumption that all members of society enjoy the legitimate right to a socially determined standard of living, independently of their contributions to production or output. Their participation in collective activities becomes rooted in a sense of duty and belonging to the community.

Another priority for the solidarity society must be a thorough-going break with national and international markets and with systems of exchange based on the price structures that they determine. As in the case of work, the admonition is not to entirely avoid markets, something that would not be either possible or desirable, but rather to avoid allowing the community's welfare to depend on prices fixed in international markets where corporate power and wealth play an important role. This aspect of the solidarity society is central to strengthening the community's economy, according priority to supporting local development and assuring that the very process of production itself does not become a source of health problems for the producers and consumers, or contamination of the environment, problems that frequently occur when the competitive pressures force managers to sacrifice safety, intensify the rhythm of production, or ignore safeguards for environmental protection in a struggle to prevail in the market. These market pressures present difficult challenges for managers of community enterprises, since the need to adhere to collectively determined social and ecological standards obliges them to consider how to participate responsibly in the market, a feat that is only possible if customers also accept the objectives of contributing to the strengthening of the solidarity society by

⁶ MacPherson (2013) emphasizes the significance of the global cooperative movement to support "the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members" in each of the activities of all cooperatives.

agreeing to paying for the benefit of joining with the producers to assure a better quality of life and planetary integrity; in this way the solidarity society gradually extends itself.

By changing the nature and operation of their participation in the market, a reorganization of exchange relations on the basis of a mutual support of the participants also calls for new means of exchange, that is, monies. This poses yet another difficulty, since money itself is a source of State power as well as a means for imposing this power over all members of the society (and on all participants in the global marketplace to the extent that the currencies are freely exchangeable among themselves). Thus, a community that decides to supplant the “coin of the realm” for transactions within its limited space is, in fact, challenging this external power’s right to control crucial social relations within the community.⁷ The question of local currencies is the object of considerable controversy; some critiques arise because of the limited usefulness of the alternatives while others cite this quality as a source of their strength, channeling demands to production and trade in the local space and perhaps even altering personal decisions, stimulating local activity and intensifying social and economic relations among the participants, even extending this benefit to others who do not use the currencies.⁸

These fundamental components of a solidarity society have far-reaching implications for confronting central questions in community organization and in the very meaning of the concept of progress and well-being (Barkin and Lemus, 2013). Perhaps the most notable and unexpected of these is the virtual disappearance of the problems of poverty and unemployment. Once a society establishes its commitment to assure a basic package of consumption goods for all of its members, along with a program to acquire the products, and the mechanisms for their distribution, then the pressure to participate in community activities will be transformed from one of survival to one of ‘belonging’. In this new setting, the questions facing the community also change from how to create sufficient ‘productive’ employment, to how best to employ the members to improve the quality of life and upgrade the various infrastructures that can offer a more secure and comfortable existence for everyone as well as to provide responsibly for future generations.

This conceptualization of the task of community organization and social mobilization also offers an immediate contribution to confronting the contradictions posed by the imperative for growth in the capitalist economy. Since the competitive struggle to accumulate among the wealthy is at the center of the internal dynamic that drives growth and creates poverty, the assumption of collective control over surplus in the solidarity economy changes the focus of the crucial problem of its disposition and creates a basis for reducing the sharp inequalities that characterize capitalist society. The dynamic becomes transformed from one of a debilitating competitive

⁷ The reaction of numerous monetary authorities to the circulation of alternative currencies, as has occurred in the U.S., U.K., and Mexico, is testimony to this statement; a more brazen attack against the community currency was conducted by introducing counterfeit bills into the system by unidentified interests, assumed to be connected to the State, occurred in Argentina in 1992.

⁸ There is an extensive literature on this subject, beginning with a lengthy analysis Marx provided in the *Grundrisse*, where he argued cogently that for money to be stripped of this power of domination, a transformation of social relations must have already occurred, a consideration that is not generally understood by many people advocating or actually promoting alternative currencies. Recent writings that consider the relationship between the currencies and the SSE initiatives that accompany them, include, for example, Douthwaite (1996); Greco (2009); Nelson and Timmerman (2011); North (2007).

battle among the powerful into a socially challenging problem of managing the surplus, determining its appropriate collective use to attend to the various social, material, and environmental priorities as well as to distribute some part of the resources to individuals for their own use. In this different context, growth is no longer the product of the imperative of producing ever more products for an apparently insatiable consuming population; instead, progress is redefined to track the satisfaction of a community's basic needs and its commitments to improving infrastructures and social capabilities (including attention to planetary concerns). This is only possible in a world in which the community itself assumes control over the fierce struggle among some groups of individuals that promotes invidious comparisons of their consumption patterns; that is, the growth imperative itself needs to be controlled not only by reigning in the endless drive for private accumulation, but also by the adoption of a broad consensus for a new 'frugal' life style, a change based on the acceptance of a common cosmology, or vision, that requires accepting membership in the community as primary.

The Paths to a Social and Solidarity Economy

The preceding text appears to outline conditions for building utopia, a society constructed on principles so unlike most existing societies as to seem absolutely unachievable and, perhaps for many even undesirable. As a result, many initiatives are proliferating to incorporate the "Third Sector" and the "popular economy"⁹ and even the "informal sector" as models for moving towards a SSE within the context of existing capitalist societies. These emerging opportunities are for people marginalized by the 'formal' economy, where new employment is limited and wages are often below the poverty line; unfortunately, many of the organizations creating alternative opportunities in the SSE often cannot offer better conditions for the people they are collaborating with because they depend on public funds or charity. Just as troublesome, the participating individuals are frequently not directly involved in the management of these new activities, nor are they creating processes for collaboration that reinforce the ability of the beneficiaries to improve the quality of their lives; even worse, frequently they are not cognizant of the terrible damage being done to the environment by the new activities, threatening the very survival of future generations. As a result, many are incorporating these laudable and creative efforts to counteract the terrible effects of globalization, without generating mechanisms to counteract the avarice and environmental degradation in these that still dominates, much as Keynes dreamt of a capitalist world without a love for money (Barkin, 2013).¹⁰

In contrast, many other communities around the world are embarking on more radical programs, starting from the premise that there is a need to escape from the bonds of proletarian organization and private accumulation. These myriad examples demonstrate some of the ways in which communities are creating their own models of a SSE, providing a rich and lengthy experience

⁹ For a discussion of the wide variety of activities in this burgeoning area of activity, see the materials on the web site for the International Society for Third Sector Research, <http://www.itsr.org>.

¹⁰ The issue of ameliorating social conditions and reversing environmental degradation within capitalist societies does not cease being important. In some limited circumstances some developed capitalist countries have been able to establish fiscal systems deliberately designed to reduce inequalities and finance a broad program of social welfare that assures many of the goals of a social and solidarity economy while also attending the problem of environmental balance. These "exceptions that prove the rule" do not vitiate the broad outlines of the critique of the globalization process offered in this text.

that offers critical lessons to others involved in defending their resources and their ways of life. The experiences range from isolated efforts to build cooperative enterprises from the ground up or to take over plants abandoned by their owners to complex undertakings that encompass the totality of the activities and dimensions of community existence. Now joining the list of these activities is the growing list of communities involved in resisting the global spread of corporate mining and forestry concessions along with land and water “grabbing” that has become particularly widespread; activists from these communities argue that the very process of organizing for resistance is creating alliances, mobilizing people, generating skills that are also moving them to reorganize to become part of the SSE; resistance itself is proving to be an engine for forging the determination and the skills for moving beyond historical patterns of opposition to developing processes of construction: the Venezuelan experience offers a case in point: “[T]he institutional resistance to workers’ control and the conflicts between state bureaucracy and workers have contributed to strengthening the movement for workers’ control, as well as creating and promoting class struggle where none existed before” (Azzellini, 2013; see also, Chavez, 2013).

The best known of the groups involved in constructing SSE are indigenous. These communities generally share common forms of organization, of cosmology, and even of goals. It is remarkable that throughout the Americas they are strengthening their resolve to live autonomously, separately from the national and globalized cultures in which they are inserted. Although each ethnic group maintains its own identity, shaped by inherited cosmologies, traditions, and a history of negotiations with their colonized past, they are also engaged in complex negotiations to learn from each other and to form alliances within and across countries. They are reinforcing their abilities to resist and prevail over the ever intensifying pressures attempting to limit and even sequester these territories of difference. In these spaces, cohesive communitarian social organizations are emerging to shape unique productive strategies that allow them to recover and enrich their cultural heritages, supply their own needs, and care for their ecosystems while improving their quality of life. The variety of approaches and vigor with which communities are asserting their rights to create self-administered territories is being recognized and applauded by the international community because of their significant involvement in the preservation and recuperation of diversity, not only biological but also ethnic, with important implications for the challenges facing humanity in this period of multiplying crises.¹¹

Similarly, peasant communities around the world are recognizing the importance of forging their own SSE. There has been systematic attack on small-scale farmers that is increasingly being met by effective social movements like the MST in Brazil and Via Campesina world-wide.¹² These

¹¹ The international network to consolidate the program of Indigenous Community Conservation Areas is perhaps the most ambitious of these initiatives ([http:// www.iccaconsortium.org](http://www.iccaconsortium.org)); in addition, there is the Canadian movement of first nations, which recently took the name of “Idle No More”, the Ecuadorian confederation of indigenous peoples, Conaie; and similar groups of indigenous peoples in Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, and Chile, each one asserting its rights to protect their resources and advance in their programs for local self-government on the basis of inherited cosmologies

¹² Neoliberal economic policies cap prices and reduce credit availability are exacerbated by the recent speculative incursion of finance capital into food markets, raising prices for consumers without any corresponding benefits to producers; further aggravating the problem of corporate control of farming in wealthier countries is the spread of direct investment by corporate capital in farming to countries in the global south as well as the avalanche of land

communities are promoting projects for implementing agro-ecological approaches for increasing production to better satisfy local needs. The scope of this activity is growing as the groups engage in people-to-people collaboration and training. Their experience is particularly valuable because it goes beyond the productivist orientation of many such initiatives to include a holistic approach to social and political organization, accompanying the need to increase and diversify output (Martinez Torres and Rosset, 2010; Gonzalez de Molina, 2011).

(NOTE: A BOX WILL BE ADDED TO REVIEW SOME OF THE NOTABLE EXAMPLES AND ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE INCLUDED IN THIS EFFORT)

There have been numerous takeovers of workplaces abandoned by the owners as a result of economic and/or political crises. The most significant of these experiences occurred in Argentina at the end of the XX century. The movement expanded from its beginnings in the graphic arts to encompass several hundred firms in many sectors and parts of the country. In other countries, similar actions have also occurred; more than 100 in Brazil, 20 in Uruguay and two that have been able to survive in Mexico as well as numerous examples in all parts of the Venezuelan economy.¹³ Elsewhere, workers cooperatives of different sizes are also being established in all productive sectors (and in some cases in public services like urban water management in Argentina), with the most important examples occurring in Cuba as a result of the economic reforms implanted during the past few years (Piñero, 2012).¹⁴ While the workers focus almost exclusively on solving production problems in the workplace, most of these experiences lead the participants to get involved in many issues related to solidarity with other groups involved in similar struggles and in mobilizations against the onslaught to implement economic policies that will directly impact their incomes and living standards.¹⁵

The evolution of the SSE also requires critical evaluations of numerous other cooperative movements, many of which are proliferating to provide credit and organize consumers. While careful consideration is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that within the guidelines offered above for this kind of society, most of these organizations would not qualify nor could they be considered as intermediate organizations moving their members in the direction of creating SSE, since rather than encouraging mutually supportive social relations among the participants, they generally reinforce the mercantile and individualistic character of participation in the market economy, be it local or international. Perhaps the most telling evidence to support this claim is that a large proportion of the credit is granted to support small commercial endeavors for consumer goods that are not produced within the community.¹⁶

acquisitions in some of the poorest countries in the world that redirects food production away from peasant societies in poor countries (cf. Borras, *et al.*, 2012).

¹³ For a critical insider's account of developments in Venezuela see Azzellini (2010, 2013).

¹⁴ Piñero is sanguine about the ability of the Cuban movement to escape the dilemmas identified in one of the most famous examples of industrial cooperatives under workers' control, the problem that in spite of collective ownership and strong institutional support for democratic processes and participation, in Mondragon the workers still complain about the hierarchical and authoritarian character of the enterprises (Kasmir, 1996).

¹⁵ A contemporary introduction to this phenomenon with a wealth of descriptive materials is in Ness and Azzellini (2011).

¹⁶ A notable exception to this process may be the Mexican Association of Social Sector Credit Unions (AMUCSS) which facilitates production for the members of its 22,000 affiliates (<http://www.amucss.org>). (cf. Delalande, Paquette, 2007).

What can we Learn? How to Move Ahead

This brief outline of the SSE points to the proliferation of a wide variety of experiences involving broad segments of the population in many parts of the Americas. From an institutional perspective, the most important experience in the hemisphere was the creation of the National Secretary of the Solidarity Economy in Brazil under the presidency of Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva; this development was a logical continuation of the long history of grassroots efforts to create cooperative enterprises, facilitate worker takeovers of abandoned factories, and strengthen the small-scale landless movement known as MST (Singer, 2006). Rather than tracing the development of these movements here, we emphasize the unique character of the SSE and the importance of its contribution to creating a path towards a post-capitalist society, able to point to ways to improve the quality of life for participants while also protecting the environment, assuring a continuity of the results for future generations.

The SSE represents a profound challenge to society as most people think of it in our world today. Perhaps the most important is the structure of social relations, based on a cooperative organization capable of guiding the community's development as well as its relations with other communities and the State of which it is a part; the SSE also requires commitments for solidarity among all of its members, a process that we stressed involves considerable risk for all participants. A second, fundamental feature of the SSE is its assumption of responsibility to move towards more appropriate production and consumption structures, consistent with long-term equilibrium between society and the planet; for this to be possible the SSE must consist in a thorough-going institutional change to break with inherited patterns of social behavior that inevitably deepen the social and ecological contradictions we presently face.¹⁷ This institutional change will lead to radically different life styles and relations among people, changes that are only possible if we move beyond the pressures of 'more', so engrained in the ideology of growth that dominates our present world.¹⁸

¹⁷ This analysis was at the center of Nicolas Georgescu-Rögen's theory of "bioeconomics" that offers important insights into why formulations of the "steady-state economy" and sustainable development cannot be effective responses to the multidimensional crisis facing us today (Bonaiuti, 2011).

¹⁸ This conception of the SSE differs dramatically from the considerable efforts by policy makers and some analysts to expand the notion of the SSE to encompass their myriad efforts to define the charitable initiatives to ameliorate conditions for marginalized (or informal) social groups (by the State or the NGO-Third Sector) or the diverse forms of family and/or neighborhood groups responding creatively to their desperate situations (often characterized as 'popular economy').

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