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Notes for a sociology of economies based on self-management, solidarity and work in Latin America

Nicolás Gómez Núñez

The construction of economies invites us to reflect on the way people experience being owners and workers of their organizations, and how these communities make decisions and implement modes of production and distribution to satisfy their needs. Economic sociology deals with these matters.

This approach incorporates the strength of evidence, thanks to which it avoids the biases that other inquiries have already anticipated. In the practical field of economics, however, the narrative of orthodox economic discipline produces a rhetoric whose performative capacity becomes a production force (Latour and Lépinay 2009). In the exercise of demarcations, economic sociology has included the diversity of empirical referents, conceptual repertoires, and epistemic-methodological scaffolding to prevent scientific experience from being tied exclusively to the study of a market that has the capacity to transform values into prices.

Here lie the inquiries into alternative economies. Concepts such as *solidarity*, *social* or *popular economy* reflect an interest in understanding how women and men cope with exclusion from labor markets, which prevents them from pursuing life projects or meeting their needs.

The notion of *social economy* covers a wide range of economic qualities that interest us in this document; it indicates a productive sector and an area of study that has progressed since the mid-nineteenth century in Europe and Canada. One of its assumptions is the plurality of principles that guide the conduct of *homo faber* and exchange. This position recognizes that there are several biases when studying economic phenomena: for instance, the belief that there are “experts” who can anticipate the performance of economic organizations without resorting to the variables that constitute their framework of action; or the lack of consanguineous relations that forge the communitarian social capital of the families that create monopolies.

The *social economy* perspective shows that market economies are not based exclusively on the “for-profit” business model, but rather on a variety of property and organizational modalities.

In Latin America, the term *solidarity economy* was coined to name the strategies that women and men created to solve the problems derived from changes in labor markets, lack of housing, poverty, and the deterioration of the environment that results from the depletion of biodiversity and the privatization of common goods. Undoubtedly, the history of these collective experiences of economic organization and the investigations that address them are related to the development of various dictatorships, such as that of General Stroessner (1954–1989) in Paraguay; the “bureaucratic and developmentalists” in Argentina (1966–1970) and Brazil (1964–1985); the “nationalists and reformers” such as General Torres in Bolivia (1970–1971) and Velazco Alvarado in Peru (1968–1975); and the “terrorists and neoliberals” in Argentina (1976–1983), Bolivia (1971–1978), Chile (1973–1988), and Uruguay (1973–1988) (Paredes 2004).

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Researchers at that time wanted to describe the way marginalized, excluded and subordinated individuals developed solidarity within different types of organizations. To this end, they focused in their work on four areas: the social management of production, socio-environmental rationality, cooperative work, and the practices of reciprocity.

Researchers use different labels to make sense of this reality. Social economy, solidarity economy, popular economy, and “good living” all seek to describe

historical modes of consumption, production, or distribution with unique qualities that are reproduced in coexistence economies. Despite the variety of labels, however, one can list at least six emerging topics within this flourishing scientific community.

1. We have learned that the organizations of the popular economy blur the separation between an informal and formal economic sector (Lomnitz 2003, Weller 2000). We also know that these organizations are work-intensive (Nyssens 1998, Ferreira 2006, Gaiger 2006), and that they produce unconventional resources that allow them to depend on community participation. These resources include commensality, reciprocity, solidarity, accumulation of values, social awareness, organizational culture, management skills, and popular creativity (Razeto 1984, Max-Neeff, Elizalde and Hoppenhayn 1993).

Documentation of these new productive factors required a different denomination: Factor C. This category was first used by Razeto (1987), who sought to organize the dimensions of the productive processes of popular economic organizations that did not fit the classic productive factors: capital, land, and labor. Factor C rather brought together variables as different as companionship, commensality, sharing, communion, community, charisma, or communication, thanks to which a novel area could be recognized to guide reflection on the economy. At the same time, however, the concept of Factor C did not help with understanding the phenomena that derived from these interactions, such as the collective identities that accompanied popular economic organizations when they fought for their social rights. This aspect was very important because it suggested that the associative capacities of the productive units could change the rules of the neoliberal model that had first been installed in the Chilean productive matrix.

In the last writings of Razeto (2015) and in the studies carried out during the first ten years of the new century, Factor C refers to the technical cohesion of a working group. This made the concept more specific, and technical cohesion can be differentiated from meetings where people eat, drink, or smoke together, or commensality, and from social technologies.

These unconventional economic resources would contribute to unfolding socialization processes where one or several labor identities are built (Hardy 1985), which are linked through the milestones of an organization's trajectory (Borges, Scholz and de Fátima 2014, Ferreira 2016).

2. The transformation of subjectivity in these conditions is experienced as an "inflection," a turning point, especially among people who have been socialized in the relationship of sale and purchase. For example, in the sale of its labor force, this inflection

modifies the labor culture of the owner of the factory and leads towards de-proletarianization; a similar situation occurs with people who have been socialized in trade, as they experience contradictions between buying at a low price to sell at a high price, or participating in short chains based on fair treatment.

In reviewing the various cases that are being reported by colleagues in the field of solidarity economy, I have no doubt that the most relevant inflection is that experienced by socialized individuals from an early age to sell their capacity for work and to be defined in the salaried workplace. Regrettably, the model of "import substitution" that protects this process in Latin America felt the consequences of the dependency on international capital and of the alliances of the privileged sectors with the capitalist transactional groups. Hence, in the last thirty years, joint ventures and state-owned companies have been under privatization and others have had to compete with merchandise produced on the basis of dumping, the prices of which are obtained when the labor force is in a situation of slavery or people cannot defend their rights.

In this context, the closure of national and workers' factories (*fábricas populares*) became the norm, inviting us to carry out systematic studies on the companies recovered by their workers. The various aspects addressed in this field include inquiry into the importance attached to self-management (Ruggeri 2012), decision-making in the assemblies (Rebón 2017), and descriptions of the tensions that appear in speeches and practices. Here, Rieiro observes the following:

[...] the forms of organization are being innovated. An example of this is the figure of coordinators and the search for horizontal planning [...] Beyond the subjects and the individual interest / commitment to recovery, workers must begin to generate a collective subjectivity capable of allowing a common action. Through this participation, which tries to modify its environment, a timid change in the old contemplative attitude can be observed, happening to affect psychically and existentially in the events on those that stop being "observers" to form a constitutive and active part of them. Individual trajectories are not automatic or homogeneous. The appropriation of the productive and political project takes place between discussions, differences and internal struggles for arduous moments, but which generate an intersubjective attitude, where individuals begin to recognize themselves as part of a "we" (Rieiro 2012, 5-6).

Meanwhile, the transformation of subjectivity has also allowed us to return to the quality of social bonds, and the exercise has been carried out by reconsidering the counterpoints between the utilitarian reason hypothesis and the forms of sense assignment that are present in the interactions of economies based on self-man-

agement, solidarity and work. Here the question is the following: How can principles different than those of utilitarian exchange gain weight and supremacy? In my opinion, the answer forces us to evaluate the location of reciprocity in everyday life and in a theory of economies. For Gaiger the answer is to assume the real and conceptual existence of a “homo donator” (Gaiger 2016, 83), which helps us make sense of the practical reasons that reproduce commensality, autarky, and the market of reciprocity.

Commensality would be an expression of group identity, collective memory, of an idea of justice and equity; autarky describes a consequence of the “domesticidade,” that is, the results of self-consumption management that would characterize the peasant family economy and the popular economy. And the treatment of the reciprocity market is conceived as a regulated integration that facilitates the circulation of objects and participants (Gaiger 2016, 98–109).

At this point I must emphasize that this perspective is not naive, that is, it also recognizes that reciprocity produces asymmetries that are used by companies for profit on the territory of the “domesticidade.” This reveals the neoliberal policy devices of philanthropy, social responsibility, social enterprises, or inclusive businesses. All these models of reciprocity management create situations in which citizenry is cornered in the cage of the faithful consumer while the rights of workers fall into oblivion, with the force of the gifts that cascade, always from top to bottom, pacifying the class consciousness, reducing the expectation of the claims, and strengthening the distributive inequality that benefits a plutocracy (Gaiger 2016, 126–129).

3. We have also learned that the capacity to produce interactions that transform subjectivity occurs whenever there is an interpretive community (Gómez 2016), which in turn is produced when people engage in dialogues where they question the meaningful content of their productive and commercial lives. These experiences take place between congeners that are in a spatial and temporal community (Schütz 1993), and such productive collectivity displays its subjectivity thanks to the processes of production, accumulation, and appropriation. Within this “technical-methodological framework,” workers and owners of the means of production and/or distribution are likely to observe themselves and apprehend others in “a permanent exchange that follows a spiral path” (Pichón-Rivière 1975, 211).

This transformation of subjectivity does not only happen with the members of the organizations that are in the popular, solidarity and/or social economy. It also happens to militants of political parties, among workers of the public sector bureaucracy or

among officials of for-profit economic organizations; and it is very possible that it happens because the mass media involve these experiences and reincorporate them into the public agenda as exceptional cases. Revisiting Pérez (2002), we can argue that these means of communication disseminate the non-utilitarian and non-hedonistic identity in the globalized world, and when it returns to the local territory, neighborhood, commune, or region, it reinforces the cohesion of the commercial fraternity of the organizations and thus adds socio-cultural resources that are the basis of community social capital.

4. Economic organizations with or without profit, supportive or not supportive, create sociotechnical networks that solve production or exchange problems. In the case of solidarity economy and popular economy organizations, we have observed that they solve their problems in public spaces that are based on short marketing circuits and that also allow a transparent, predictable capitalism with fair or measured profits (Braudel 1986). Even more, those public spaces – or agoras – attract those who recycle the city’s waste or make culinary preparations. In these agoras, the worker is fed, the immigrant participates stripped of his network of inclusion, and ordinary people take part in recreation (Polanyi, 2009).

In addition, this type of empirical reference has allowed us to coin the term *social technology* for the tools that are manufactured in enriched interactions with cultural values, in activities of diagnosis, choice, and planned implementation (Sen 1987; Forni 1992; Gómez 2014, 2016a). To illustrate its existence, we remember a practice of collective savings that is common among women. Over a number of days, weeks or months, an amount of money fixed by the members is deposited in a fund that is paid out to each member in turn. In Chile, this traditional set of interactions is called “polla,” in Mexico “tanda,” and Vélez-Ibáñez has also found other names for it: “cundina,” “quiniela,” “mutualista” and “vaca”; in Peru, it is known as “pandero” or “junta,” in Guatemala as “chuchual,” and in the United States as “tanda” or “cundina” (Vélez-Ibáñez 1993, 32–44).

5. The experiences of solidarity economy and popular economy are models of public policies that can reach a different scale and be adapted to the qualities of each territory. More precisely, each organization is a resource-management device that does not depend on the individual with unprecedented abilities, nor on the spontaneous and willful act. The consequence we wish to emphasize here is that the performance of these organizations increases the efficiency of the ecological system, and this efficiency can be identified by the following indicators: creation of jobs, distribution of wealth, valorization of the human be-

ing, diversity of identities, enriching the solidarity and quality of life (Gaiger 2004). On the positive side of these indicators, or when the production of common goods and the extended reproduction of life are verified, we can argue that the ecological system is an “economic common-being” (Gibson and Graham 2011, 216).

The continuous action for the defense of human rights has modified common sense. Therefore, it became feasible to observe that the reproduction of the social division of labor places women in a subordinate position, and that several of the activities they undertake were not considered in the analysis. This bias, moreover, fixed a patriarchal domination in various branches of the production of life and commodities, because it was science itself that naturalized the logic of the components of these phenomena. Following this line of inquiry, the studies on solidarity economy now seek to contribute to the understanding of the economic functions of the care provided by women to their families.

6. Thanks to the involvement of the researchers with the people who took control over their jobs and who may or may not be part of an economy based on solidarity or guided by cooperation, progress has been made in the methods used by economic sociologists. It has also advanced the ways in which we build scientific knowledge about economies. Here the impact caused by the categories and variables of the *gift* is undoubted, the theoretical consequences derived from the relationships between: work and solidarity, and community and nature; and non-traditional economic resources. Without these conceptual references, it is difficult to understand why the inclusion of Mauss and Polanyi in research designs happened. Even from here, it is possible to see that there is a conceptual repertoire that delimits the phenomenon under study, where the contributions of Appadurai and Clastres are added.

Several topics still merit a deeper revision. Among them, the decolonial perspective stands as an important approach that has come to broaden observation in the field in important ways. Addressing the indigenous uprisings in Latin America, the conflictive inclusion of Afro-descendants, and the feminist movement, the decolonial perspective has strengthened inquiry into power and politics. For example, it helps us to understand, explain, and influence the construction of private property under neoliberalism, or to understand and participate in the construction of collective work that produces social surplus.

In general terms, the decolonial perspective provides two key insights to approach economies. The first is its definition of coloniality as a device for the elimination of other economies than the capitalist, and its impetus to impose a conception of society as a

unit and totality. From this perspective, it was possible to observe the existence of a marginal pole that brought together survival strategies based on self-management, solidarity and work (Quijano 1998), or to confirm in favor of the formalist current of the economic discipline that there was a legitimate way to produce knowledge: the scientific (Santos 2009).

Most researchers in this field raise stark criticisms of the economic discipline, which seek to define what is, or what should be, the “expert” interpretation of the economy. These opinions argue that the practices are reduced to economic rationality, price market, economic growth and development. In addition, from different approaches, diagnoses are made about the transformations of “the Euro-American paradigms of development” (González 2014, 131) and about the variation in the behavior of capital, from its phase of proletarianization to achieve profitability, towards another, the current phase, in which profitability is obtained by financial speculation, dispossession strategies, the destruction of ecosystems, the deregulation of salaried work, and the privatization of state companies.

By developing this critical stand, the decoloniality perspective plays in favor of the legitimation of the daily life of the women, men, communities, and organizations that constitute the structurally heterogeneous community bonds. And as we anticipate, this act of legitimation has been possible because these other ways of making the economy provide refuge to people who returned hopeless from the urban salaried workforce (Marañón 2014).

The second key is the incorporation of natives’ ideas about the spaces and time of coloniality as a “world upside down,” for which the conception of the world is like a mosaic of times and spaces that do not depend on their relationships; on the contrary, it would be a coexistence in a mottled social state (Rivera 2010, Gago, Cielo and Gachet 2018). By the same token, the assumption of the community’s dependence on nature is noteworthy, which means moving the individual from the center of creation, putting instrumental reason in the margins and, in its place, using the content of what emerges from the collective that is inherent in the economies that flourish in Latin America. These collective actions would initially be an indigenist cultural affirmation and only later an effort destined to solve what modernity could not settle.

That is why the Kawsay worldview is included, and it is treated as an episteme, for example, to guide a methodology of reflection from and with the spirits that live in what is not human. As a result, we witness the display of different symmetrical sociologies that are opposite or strange to the strategies used by the state to carry out social modernization. At the same time, there is a process of construction of a relevant

language, which is necessary because our language in the social sciences comes from a modernizing matrix. In this matrix, its solipsistic individual could have the capacity to elaborate a method that guarantees access to laws of universal behavior, and so he would move from the barbarian to the modern, from the informal to the formal, from the simple to the complex, to the organizations and the communities. Therefore, our language in the social sciences may speculate upon a subject that is outside of history and its community.

In favor of the new language there is a real economy that demonstrates the plurality of ways to achieve sustenance, and we must recognize that, in this common world, the codes of the economic and other aspects of life “are not interpreted, this is, they are not decoded in the plane of representations; they are lived and, in such a case, they are decoded in the plane of the experiences” (Moreno 2006, 226). It is in this sense that Rivera uses metaphorical concepts to regain the polysemy that derives from the ways of being in the world, especially those worlds that coexist without entering into lasting relationships, through which she seeks the theoretical levels (abstract and hermeneutical) of what she has lived in scientific experience. In her words,

“[...] the fact is that all those horizons -pre-Hispanic, colonial, liberal and populist- converge on the syntagmatic surface of the present, in the here-now of the lived continuum, as an apparently chaotic juxtaposition of traces [...], which are embodied in everyday habitus and gestures” (Rivera 2018, 76).

As a way to close these notes for a sociology of economies based on self-management, solidarity and work in Latin America, it is elementary to assume that today the challenge invites us to place scientific experience within tools that promote co-production of knowledge, negentropy, and the formation of collective subjects that produce analyses, define the procedures based on collective reflexivity, facilitate the making of records and transmit the results to non-specialized audiences. This is very important since a large part of the economies that have occupied the previous pages register their production processes, distribution and consumption in ways different from those used by social science research methodologies and, especially, the tools for designing or evaluating public policies.

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