

Solidarity Economy in Brazil and Degrowth:

Is it possible a common platform of action and discourse?

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to analyze to what measure Solidarity Economy in Brazil (SE) and Degrowth have the conditions to establish a common platform. So, through the identification of a given textual *corpora* for both movements, it was possible to verify and compare their theoretical-conceptual basis. The analysis of the basic *corpora* consisted of 14 Solidarity Economy texts and 14 Degrowth texts in addition to the complementary *corpus*. A comparison was made based on a set of eight analytical categories, which are: actors, historical events, context, antagonism, theoretical sources, values, discursive and social practices, and model. As a result, it was verified that the movements distinct elements outnumbered the common elements, which outnumbered the antagonistic ones. The general conclusion was that common elements point out to the possibility of a common platform, once the antagonisms and differences do not hinder a dialog between the movements. Finally, it was concluded that FBES is a subject of Solidarity Economy that can benefit the dialog with Degrowth.

1. Introduction

Authors have considered that an important step for Degrowth's success would be to provide a platform on which social movements from the North and the South can converge (MARTINEZ-ALIER et al., 2010, p.1746). The fundamental element on this current debate is that the economic development model in the North countries causes negative impacts in the South (LATOUCHE, 2009a; LLISTAR, 2008; MARTINEZ-ALIER, 2012; MOSANGINI, 2008).

This paper aims to contribute to this debate by suggesting an additional guiding term for building a common platform: the theoretical elements that guide social groups existent in the South countries. In the case of this research, the South country that we focused was Brazil and the social group was Solidarity Economy (SE). The intent of this paper is to identify similarities and differences between Solidarity Economy in Brazil and Degrowth.

This paper emerged from the observation that Solidarity Economy in Brazil and Degrowth seem to share common elements, despite their differences. In his master's

degree's research, Boccato-Franco (2014) analyzed this issue and this paper synthesizes some of the results, discussions and conclusions of this research.

Texts were used as comparative source for both movements. Text selection and data collection were inspired on concepts and procedures from Discourse Analysis (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001; 2008; RAMALHO e RESENDE, 2011) and Content Analysis (BARDIN, 2004). The basic textual *corpora* were built upon two procedures: the incidence of reference in specialized bibliography and consult to specialists. Intertwining the mentioned sources made possible to reach a basic *corpus* of Degrowth with 14 texts, including articles, books, book chapters and political statements. In addition to 14 texts for Solidarity Economy – stated in the paper's appendix. A complementary *corpus* emerged from references as well as debates developed throughout the research. It was useful for clarifying certain affirmations, contexts or subjects that may have been unclear in the basic *corpus*.

Solidarity Economy in Brazil and Degrowth were characterized according to eight analytical categories, which are: actors, historical events, context, antagonism, theoretical sources, values, discursive and social practices and model. The elements that characterize each one of these analytical categories were used to establish a comparison between the movements. Based on comparison it were identified common, distinct and antagonistic elements.

2. Results

It was verified that the movements' distinct elements are predominant from a quantitative point of view. They seem to outnumber the common elements, which outnumbered the antagonistic ones. Some of the situations identified in the research are exposed below.

2.1 Common Elements

Initially, the Solidarity Economy in Brazil (SE) and Degrowth establish relations with the movement for environmental justice (CARTA DE SALVADOR, 2011; MARTÍNEZ-ALIER, 2012) and are close related to *Buen Vivir* (BILBAO, 2013; FBES 2013; VENICE, 2012). *Reti di Economia Solidale (RES)*, is a Degrowth's initiative (DEMARIA et al., 2013), and Brazilian Solidarity Economy Forum (FBES), is a SE's initiative, and both belong to the same network, called Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS) (RIPESS, [20--]).

Both movements share principles of organization. Those include horizontality, decentralization, democracy, self-management and collective decision-making (BAYON et al., 2011; LATOUCHE, 2009b; SINGER, 2002a). The movements agree that those principles are essential to contribute for the transformation of the *status quo*, as a form of empowering people and collectivities for making their own decision.

Although the meaning of such terms as democracy, self-management and autonomy are still under debate in the Degrowth (CATTANEO et al., 2012), both movements agree that the terms mean far more than administrative procedures and are considered principles that must reach further other dimensions of social life (ASARA et al., 2013, FARIA, 2011; FBES, 2013; NOVAES, 2011). These movements constitute spaces to re-signify such principles.

Degrowth and SE assign equality as a fundamental objective, and assume it in the social, political and economic perspective (BAYON et al., 2011; FBES, 2013; KALLIS, 2011; LATOUCHE, 2009a, MARTÍNEZ-ALIER et al., 2010).

Both movements criticize individualism, in which human behavior is driven by utilitarian maximization. As a contrast, they prioritize relationships based on sharing, on gift and reciprocity (BAYON et al., 2011; CAILLÉ, 2009; LATOUCHE, 2009a). The idea of happiness and well-being is based on qualitative and relational attributes, and in the harmony between people and to the rest of the living beings as opposed to a utilitarian, quantitative and individualistic view of life (BAYON et al., 2011; FBES, 2013; LAVILLE and GAIGER, 2009; LATOUCHE, 2009b).

The movements assign negative value to created needs considering they only stimulate consumerism. They also put forward the understanding that created needs and consumerism are imposed by publicity. They distinguish basic and created needs, attributing positive value to the first and defining equality in terms of providing those basic needs to everyone (BAYON et al., 2011; FBES, 2013; LATOUCHE, 2009a, MANCE, 2009).

Both movements explicitly criticize capitalist development and consider important that transformation should go beyond merely overcoming capitalism. For Degrowth, it is a matter of freeing economic growth and productivist ideology. For SE, it should be overcome the ownership of the means of production; hierarchical division of labour; and mercantile exchange based on law of value.

Degrowth and SE belong to the sustainability field (NASCIMENTO, 2012), once they recognize that there is a threat to the future of Humanity. Within this field they

converge in a multidimensional perspective making reference to a number of crisis such as, energetic, alimentary, environmental, climatic, economical, moral, social and political, in such a way that environmental sustainability is not separated from other issues (BAYON et al., 2011; SCHNEIDER et al., 2010; FBES, 2013; FRANÇA-FILHO and LAVILLE, 2004, LATOUCHE, 2009a).

It is recognized in both movements' literature that technology is: i) not neutral and available to everyone, once it is developed for supporting the domination of those in the possession of political-economical power; ii) used to reproduce and preserve domination; iii) composed of social relations of production that disadvantages self-determination and autonomy, as emphasized by Degrowth literature (BÁDUE, 2012), and disadvantages self-management, according to SE literature (NOVAES, 2011; NOVAES and DAGNINO, 2004). Moreover, they agree that social technology (FBES, 2013) or a citizen science (BAYON et al., 2011) may contribute to expand the access to technique as well as to cease with inventions of false necessities and actually answering real demands.

2.2 Distinct elements

Although Solidarity Economy in Brazil and Degrowth may have common critical sources of modern society, they also have their differences. For example, Degrowth makes use of bioeconomy (BAYON et al., 2011; FLIPO, 2008) and SE does not.

Degrowth bases its critiques on quantitative happiness and well-being on researches and data (BAYON et al., 2011; DEMARIA et al., 2013; LATOUCHE, 2009a; MARTÍNEZ-ALIER, 2009; SCHNEIDER et al., 2010), while SE does not pay attention to data (FBES, 2013).

Both movements have different forms of experiments. SE in Brazil focuses on initiatives centered on work-production-consumption. Several Solidarity Economical Enterprises in Brazil work together with socially vulnerable populations under mercantile form of production (FRANÇA FILHO, 2007; GUIMARÃES et al., 2006; LECHAT et al., 2007; SENAES, 2013). On the other hand, Degrowth experiments are more diffused and evoke, for example, cohousings (DEMARIA, et al., 2013; LIETAERT, 2010). In this case, Degrowth seems to experiment principles of self-management, horizontality and participation in spaces beyond the market at the same time that it diffuses along middle-class segments.

Although certain convergences may exist within guiding principles of the relation of its participants, distinctions still exist. Degrowth does not have a formal framework,

any centralization or hierarchy (BÁDUE, 2012; LATOUCHE, 2009a). The same cannot be said about SE that has a more formal structure and instances that conceive it a certain degree of centralization (FBES, [20--]). There are instances in which hierarchical relations can be found, for instance in the relations between Municipal, State and National Forums, although they are based on collective decisions. In addition, the movement's organization has considerable levels of bureaucracy (FARIA, 2011).

Differences are also present on the strategies of actions of the movements. The first one is regarding oppositionist activism, that is significantly relevant since the beginning of Degrowth's movement (DEMARIA et al., 2013; FLIPO, 2008; LATOUCHE, 2009a). While it has not been found any reference to the strategy of action within SE in Brazil.

Although Degrowth and SE participate in the sustainability field (NASCIMENTO, 2012), there are differences. First, it has to do with the intensity they deal with issues, While Degrowth regards natural resources's use as one of the articulating elements of the movement. SE, on the other hand, discourses over natural resources seem peripheral despite the fact that sustainability is taken as a principle in terms of discourse. Secondly, in terms of consistency of the discourse, Degrowth provides several evidences and datas that suggest a burnout of the ecosystem's productivity (BAYON et al., 2011; FLIPO, 2008; LATOUCHE, 2009a; SCHNEIDER et al., 2010). Solidarity Economy, by contrast, makes generic and imprecise use of terms (FBES, 2013). Degrowth presents a critical analysis about the strategies for overcoming unsustainability that is mostly absent on Solidarity Economy discourse (FBES, 2013, MANCE, 2006). It is observed an unfamiliarity in SE with debates over the rebound effect and the limits of the ecoefficiency, decoupling and the substitution of factors of production that are frequent in the Degrowth bibliography (BAYON et al., 2011, LATOUCHE, 2009a, KERSCHNER, 2010, SCHNEIDER, 2008).

Another distinction is that Solidarity Economy does not approach the size and dynamics of the economy scale. While Degrowth defends a stable and leaner economy (KALLIS, 2011; LATOUCHE, 2009a, 2009b). This is an elementary theme on the movement's debates.

Degrowth diagnosis of the present situation is related to the ideology of economic growth and industrial progress, while SE seems to focus on capitalism. This distinction for both movements seems to determine four other differences.

The first is a technological criticism. Degrowth criticizes industrial technology and life's submission to technique – typical of industrial society (BÁDUE, 2012; BAYON et al., 2011). SE criticizes the capitalist technology and center its argument on social relations of production that embodies technology (NOVAES, 2011; NOVAES and DAGNINO, 2004). Technology criticism is one fundamental intellectual source of Degrowth while for SE it is not. To Degrowth the breaking off with a society based on technological progress is based on the understanding that it is the core of unlimited growth paradigm and consists of a relevant barrier for its breakthrough. Besides resulting in heteronomy it created the false notion that technology is the only source of resolution to problems faced by humanity. This approach, on the other hand, is lacking on SE discourse.

The second is in respect to distinctions on basic needs, from the created needs. From Degrowth's perspective, created needs are industrial inventions that are imposed on the population through publicity (BÁDUE, 2012; LATOUCHE, 2009a). From SE's perspective, created needs are the capitalist market's inventions imposed by the general media (FBES, 2013).

The third is that, for the SE the capitalism and its relational principle based on competition promotes ever growing inequalities in society, considering that cooperation and solidarity would be responsible for providing proper conditions for creating an egalitarian society (SINGER, 2002a). While for Degrowth the cause of inequality is economic growth which also includes capitalism (BAYON et al., 2011). In order to build an egalitarian society, the ideology of economic growth must be overcome.

The fourth is that Degrowth's critiques to consumerism extends to a critique to the development and the ideology of economic growth. In contrast, SE critiques to consumerism reaches out to a critique of capitalism. Besides, Degrowth opposes to consumerism because it is unfeasible to humanity. To this movement the reduction of consumption is part of its central arguments, mobilizing values of voluntary simplicity, frugality, and others (LATOUCHE, 2009a). To SE, opposition to consumerism is not handled from the understanding of its unfeasible generalization to humanity as a whole. And reduction of consumption is not a substantial argument.

To conclude the distinct elements between the movements, SE actors in Brazil are, in general, from sectors of society historically excluded or in situations of risk and connected to popular sectors. The movement emerges from practical actions in order to solve the actors' immediate problems. It disseminates through the expansion of these practices and articulation and constitution of political-institutional spaces. The

actors seek to guarantee elementary conditions of survival of certain social groups, or more stability and opportunities to those already integrated but yet vulnerable. The majority of the actors take part in the category of popular movements whose main demands regard the access to social rights. On the other hand, Degrowth is not constituted of vulnerable groups, but of groups that are socioeconomically integrated and who probably belong to the middle class. The movement emerges and disseminates itself through oppositional activism and through theoretical-discursive means such as political and academic events and publications. The actors promote the questioning of the present socioeconomical system.

2.3 Antagonistic elements

The distinct elements could turn into antagonisms. For example, the way to define the overcoming of capitalism and overcoming of development, to SE and Degrowth, respectively, are different, yet are bordering oppositions.

SE focuses on the relationships between social subjects. Degrowth extends it to relations with nature. While for Degrowth nature occupies a relevant place, SE does not take it much into consideration. One may possibly conclude the reason for the absence in the need to reduce economical activities in SE discourses. On the other hand, the notion of growth limits are present in Degrowth's discourse. As a result, the movement propose to limit the economy size and to reduce economical activities. This difference may constitute an antagonism since the absence of the debate over the limit of the size of the economy could mean that SE believes that the economy could grow infinitely.

Degrowth emerges partially from a critique of the development and the objection to the ideology of economic growth that are central in that movement. On the other hand, Solidarity Economy emerges as a result of economic growth crises of the 1980's and 1990's that generated large unemployment rates (SINGER, 2002). However, SE does not deny economic growth. It was not found on the literature researched substantial evidence to a critique of economic growth. What has been found on the other hand were qualifications – e.g. equitable growth, sustainable growth, etc. Taking that into consideration, the antagonism between the movements becomes explicit, when FBES (2013) argues for the reformulation of economic growth while Degrowth argues for its abandonment.

Degrowth's criticism lays heavily upon the notion of development. Development is condemned since it is built upon ideologies of industrial progress and economic

growth. In addition to that, the concept of development utility's maximization is stressed as a driving force of human behavior (BAYON et al., 2011; LATOUCHE, 2009a). For SE, criticism does not lay directly upon the notion of development but is specific to capitalist development (SINGER, 2002b; FBES, 2013).

Finally, the last antagonist element is in respect to differences regarding the acceptance of the term Sustainable Development (SD). Degrowth condemns this term to be a typical oxymoron: sustainability and growth (LATOUCHE, 2009a). SD is considered an empty concept because it fails to measure levels of growth and responsibilities of countries (BAYON et al., 2011). And SD became a conglomerate of administrative and management recipes that blurry the causes of crises (BAYON et al., 2011). SE in contrast, incorporates the term SD seeking to differentiate the capitalist's use of the term (FBES, 2012; 2013); they recognize capitalist appropriation of the term fitting into the capitalist economical logic of the accumulation of capital. For these reasons, they seek to qualify it in their own terms bringing it close to the idea of *Buen vivir* (FBES, 2013).

3. Discussion

Aiming to identify a common platform and considering that the antagonisms may constitute obstacles to the dialog between the movements, a discussion from a qualitative perspective needs to be made.

3.1 Autonomy, democracy and self-management

Degrowth's movement recognizes democracy and autonomy as fundamental and attributes to both a sense of freedom of choice and decision, self-determination of the individual and the community, besides a sense of opposition to heteronomy and outside control. Similarly SE brings out those senses of opposition when relating self-management, democracy and autonomy. When the movements make reference to autonomy, democracy and self-management, they bring out principles for the transformation of the *status quo*, that seek individual and community empowerment on decision-making of political, economic and social issues. Therefore, it is suggested that those subjects may constitute elements that could bring both movements closer together.

One may also notice that SE in Brazil puts forward a considerable built up of experiences regarding self-management practices and internal democracy of productive enterprises, considering the thousands of Solidarity Economy Enterprises in Brazil (SENAES, 2013). It has not been explored enough on Degrowth literature, in

which it is rare to find works analyzing practical productive experiences focusing on this subject area (JOHANISOVA et al., 2013), especially from the perspective of the South countries. It could be characterized as a possible common platform to be established between both movements, in which SE in Brazil could provide Degrowth with a wide range of concrete experiences on the implementation of self-management.

3.2 Economic Growth and Development

SE in Brazil takes in and qualifies notions of economic growth and (sustainable) development, while, on the other hand, Degrowth rejects them. In order to problematize the idea that these antagonist views could be a barrier to the dialog between the movements, it is relevant to consider:

First Degrowth understands that inequality, competition and environmental destruction are constituting parts of economic growth (BAYON et al., 2011). Economic growth does not take place without them, and for that reason, economic growth paradigm must be abandoned. FBES (2013) incorporates to its own particular perspective of economic growth notions of equality, diversity, sharing, cooperation, distribution and sustainability. Economic growth is not its major objective, but the building of a society based on those notions.

Secondly, part of the Solidarity Economy movement in Brazil has been approximating to *Buen Vivir* (FBES, 2013). *Buen Vivir* is known as a notion that puts together different views that wishes to overcome the conventional development and that are rehearsing new perspectives on society and environmental values (GUDYNAS & ACOSTA, 2011).

Thirdly, considering the common elements between SE in Brazil and Degrowth, such as: preference to basic needs and opposition to created needs, opposition to consumerism and publicity, defense of equality, quality of relations, harmony between human beings and of those to nature, recognition of an intrinsic value of nature that transcends treating it in terms of economic utility and opposition to materialism, one may ask: how much of the antagonisms may be a semantic issue - the use of the words development and growth - and how much they are in fact a matter of principles, ideology and of coherence of everyday practices?

Considering the last three arguments conjoined, a new question emerges: would the fact that SE assumes all of those standings, values and critiques, entail SE interests in overcoming economic growth and its productivist bases that are defended by Degrowth?

Finally, data, reflections and concepts (and above all the ones that are based on Bioeconomy) that sustain the hypothesis of the unfeasibility of the economy unlimited growth defended by Degrowth are not familiar to SE in Brazil. Thereafter, it may be asked: what impacts upon the conception of growth and development would there be for SE if that debate became part of the movement? Wouldn't it be a good theme of approximation of both movements?

Although the term sustainability is used by SE in general terms, it does not seem to be a *cliché* for constituting a politically correct discourse. But considering that the movements interpret unsustainability from the social, environmental and economic point of view, and that both share values like equality, anti-capitalism, consumerism, materialism, among other common elements, wouldn't then sustainability be another element to approximate both movements? Couldn't Degrowth's knowledge accumulations on this theme contribute to SE developing a more consistent sustainability discourse and practice? It is suggested that this theme could be a possibility of dialog between the movements.

3.3 Consumption reduction and Necessities

Degrowth defends the reduction of consumption and also of economic activities as a consequence. Considering that actors of SE in Brazil are excluded from majority of goods and services available in the market, from the most essential to the most futile, wouldn't that suggest an incompatibility between the movements to defend consumption reduction?

We suggest it would not, because by defending the reduction of economic activities and consumption, Degrowth is not suggesting that part of the population should be continuously deprived. On the contrary, for the movement the reduction of consumption of the rich is the only way that meeting all basic human needs will become feasible (Bayon et al., 2011). Actually, this debate is not new to the Brazilians considering that there are well known thesis out there regarding unequal exchanges between the nations, in which central nations enrich in detriment of the periphery (FURTADO, 1973). On these terms, one may ask: would it be rejected by SE in Brazil a debate over the reduction of consumption of the rich and of the superfluous goods and services? Would SE be converging with the necessity of consumption's reduction when it opposes to consumerism, to the necessities created by capitalism and that are imposed by publicity? And also when it defends the notion of well-being based on qualitative and relational attributes?

Besides the reduction of consumption of the rich and of non-essential and non-efficient economic activities, Degrowth also defends changes on patterns of production of basic goods and services, once those are based on unsustainable grounds. Therefore, it becomes unfeasible the generalization of access to those goods and services. The questioning of the patterns of production of basic goods is not significantly present on SE discourse. This way, Degrowth extends the debate regarding necessities, once the problem lies not just on the necessities created by the industry or capitalism, but also on the basic ones. Thereafter, Degrowth puts out the relevance of debating over patterns of production of those goods and services, in order for them to be socially and environmentally feasible in such a way that all may have access to them. Here lays another element that could contribute to a common platform between the movements.

Both Solidarity Economy and Degrowth promote the questioning of basic and created needs. Although they have distinct approaches, the movements constitute spaces that maintain active the debate about the nature of those necessities. Such a debate is pretty much missing on the media scenario and of institutionalized public policies. This is one more element for a common platform between both movements.

3.4 Social Dimension

By recognizing the differences between the actors that constitute each movement and their immediate objectives, but also recognizing that the movements incorporate the social issue on their discourses, another question is put forward: how much could SE contribute to grant global legitimacy to the debates promoted by Degrowth once SE is essentially based of actors of a popular sector? And how much can SE and their immediate social demands influence Degrowth's formulations once it is a typical middle-class movement? It is suggested that the social dimension is a potential subject of dialog between SE and Degrowth.

4. Conclusion

This paper proposed to identify similarities and differences between Solidarity Economy in Brazil and Degrowth, intending to contribute to the debate on the construction of a common platform between Degrowth and social movements in the South.

It may be concluded that there are shared elements between the movements that can show the way to the construction of a common platform. This affirmative takes into consideration the following common elements that stood out: autonomy,

democracy and equality; notions of well-being based on qualitative and relational attributes and the harmony between human beings and their relationship to nature; opposition to consumerism and the meaning of life based on quantitative and materialist terms; they differentiate basic needs from created needs and attribute positive value to the basic ones; they approximate themselves to *Buen Vivir*, they identify movements for environmental justice as allies; and actors from both movements integrate the same network, the RIPESS.

Degrowth substantially opposes to the ideologies of economic growth and development, that also includes sustainable development. SE, on the contrary, incorporates and qualifies those ideologies. Regardless of those differences and antagonisms, it may not be concluded that there are incompatibilities of dialog between the movements. Questions regarding whether differences and antagonisms actually constitute barriers for establishing dialogs on those themes came up when considering existing common elements, and when recognizing SE's questioning of economic growth and capitalist development.

It is also concluded that the social approach, the sustainability and technology issues, although dealt differently in terms of intensity and quality, may approximate the movements by complementing each other instead of keeping themselves at distance. Especially when considering their different historical contexts, constituting actors, problem solving of immediate demands, accumulated experiences of practice and their (in)consistency of data.

The general conclusion is that common elements point out to the possibility of a common platform, once the antagonisms and differences do not hinder a dialog between the movements.

However, it must be said that the movements carry solid polysemy. Subjects and discourses vary within each one of the movements. Depending on the segment taken into consideration, differences and divergences may be stresses or minimized to increased convergence. Therefore, in order to be more precise, it may be concluded from the SE actors present in the bibliography analyzed, that FBES is the one capable of benefiting SE dialog with Degrowth. On the other hand, SE actors connected to the factories that were recovered and occupied by the workers, may constitute a segment of the movement that could create barriers for a dialog between them.

Differences and antagonisms existent within both movements can either foment the approximation by complementing each other mutually, or be the cause for

increasing distances. In order to move forward, it would be necessary to expand the considered textual *corpus* or deepen this analysis in order to better specify levels of convergences and divergences. And, from a practical point of view, provide meetings and debates of segments closer to each other in the realms of both movements. It would be like promoting an encounter between middle-class intellectuals with productive popular sectors involved in trying to overcome misfortunes resulted from the current economical model. If they learn how to be open and receptive and give up of prejudices, they will mutually learn and profit from their relationship. They may as well understand threats existent in a capitalist mode of production, appropriation, consumption, control and master the ideology of development; the need to overcome poverty and decrease inequality in an articulated form to the decrease of threat caused by an irresponsible and unbridled use of natural resources; and finally, autonomous, democratic and collective forms of recreating society's relation to nature.

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Appendix

1 - Basic corpus of Degrowth

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