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# The Plural Logics of Anti-Capitalist Economic Movements

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# Chapter 4: The plural logics of anticapitalist economic movements

Éric Dacheux

Economic concerns now motivate the public engagement of many activists, who are taking the initiative in modifying our ways of consuming and producing. By inventing another economy, these activists say they want to invent another world, to construct another life. Each of them, through their own action, intends to prove “their refusal to let themselves be treated and left to live as objects, their specifically human capacity to present themselves as subjects”, as the members of the ADRET<sup>1</sup> collective would say (1997, p.8). But this commitment to bringing about an alternative life occurs under various banners: alter-globalisation, degrowth, social and/or solidarity economy, sustainable development, to mention only a few. And all of these activists have struggled to converge in a common movement. Why is this? What are the theoretical and ideological differences between these different labels? The goal of this chapter, which is firmly embedded in an epistemology of complexity that invites the researcher to accept their share of normativity<sup>2</sup>, is to propose ways forward that might facilitate this necessary clarification. My goal is not, however, to present these differences in a neutral picture that synthesises the different theoretical approaches to the question.

This epistemology of complexity can be conceptualised using the terms of pragmatic sociology, whose example this chapter follows. This means not attempting a god’s-eye view – a study that sees itself as neutral and detached, and which claims to see the truth of these social movements more clearly than do their participants themselves (Boltanski and Thévenot, [1991] 2006). The task is rather to engage in reflexive questioning linked to on-the-ground activist practice, redeploying a question that the actors ask themselves in order to clarify all the dimensions: why do the economic activists who have the same declared enemy (capitalism), the same definition of their activity (constructing a practical utopia) and who often act together (petitions, protests, occupations, etc.) boast of being political movements that willingly tear each other apart? The answer proposed here does not attempt to encompass the point of view of all these movements but rather to clarify their complex differences through a particular lens, a particular point of view: that of the solidarity economy. This is why my discussion falls into two parts. The first will be dedicated to a theoretical definition of the solidarity economy. The second will aim to clarify the convergences and divergences between the solidarity economy thus defined and other strands of the same movement: the social economy, sustainable development and degrowth. In a third section, by way of conclusion, I will attempt to respond to the following question: with regard to what has been said about the solidarity economy – about what

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<sup>1</sup> ADRET came to prominence in the 1970s through a book called *Working two hours a day*, published by Albin Michel. The 1997 edition collected the accounts of ordinary activists who described their resistance against capitalism.

<sup>2</sup> Far from a positivism à la Karl Popper, I believe, with Edgar Morin, that the researcher participates in the reflexivity of the social, precisely by developing a rational line of argument that makes explicit their normative preferences (in this case, solidarity economics) in a way that facilitates a fully critical reading of their work (Hermès, 2011).

distinguishes it from other new modes of engagement – can we better understand the reasons for the distance that persists between them?

## **The solidarity economy: an attempt at a definition**

The solidarity economy is a set of concrete economic practices and a political project. The economic practices are intended as critiques-in-action of capitalism. They involve producing and/or exchanging goods and services without surplus value or shareholder remuneration being the primary objective, and include fair trade, the Association for the Maintenance of Peasant Agriculture (AMAP), the Work and Activities Cooperative (CAE), etc. These practices have developed on every continent. They involve many sectors: environmental, personal services, communication technology, etc. And they are organised in various types of legal structure – as nonprofit organisations, limited liability companies, cooperatives, etc. This diversity explains the difficulty of drawing up a cartography of the solidarity economy that all researchers would agree on. Yet all these organisations belonging to the solidarity economy have a common characteristic: they are “citizen engagements aiming to democratise the economy” (Dacheux, Laville, 2003). So behind the multiplicity of solidarity initiatives, there is a global political project that concerns the whole of society – a utopia. Its goal is to continue the modernisation process by expanding and deepening democracy. The solidarity economy aims, then, to reinforce representative democracy by developing participatory democracy (deepening) and to democratise the economic sphere by proposing that productive organisation (on the microeconomic level) and the coordination of exchange (on the macroeconomic level) both adhere to democratic procedures. As we will see, democracy is at the centre of the solidarity economy in both its concrete practices and its utopian project. This is why, before defining the latter more clearly, we must clarify what we mean by democracy.

## **Society: the ensemble of ensembles**

Contrary to many thinkers who have sought to identify the ultimate foundation of the social (the political for Aristotle, the economic for Karl Marx, the symbolic for Marcel Mauss), we will agree with Fernand Braudel (1984) that society is “the ensemble of ensembles”, a game of alliances and oppositions between systems with their own logic. In most of his work, the historian distinguishes four ensembles that compose society: social hierarchy, civilisation (or culture; for him the two terms are equivalent), the state, and the economy (Braudel, 1984, t.2, ch.5). However, in the general conclusion of this work, Braudel seems to reduce this number from four to three: “From these various social hierarchies – those of money, those of the state, those of culture – which both clash and support each other, which plays the leading role?” (Braudel, 1980, t.3, p.540). This is why, in this theoretical perspective, we concur with Éric Forgues (2000), for whom all of human society results from the conflictual interaction between three infrastructural axes, three fundamental orders: the economic (the development of resources), the political (the development of norms) and the symbolic (the construction of belief). Two elements distinguish modern democracies from previous societies. First, a distinctive antagonistic interaction between these three orders which, at a particular moment in history,

gives rise to a public sphere<sup>3</sup>. Second, a new regulation of this antagonistic interaction which from this point forward largely plays out in precisely this public sphere. The public sphere thus results from a particular, historically-situated, arrangement between the three orders and the specifically democratic authority where from now on the conflict between these three orders will be regulated. This theoretical framework permits a definition of the economic not as the sole matrix of the social<sup>4</sup>, but as one of the constitutive orders of our democracies. Now that the term democracy has been clarified in this way, we can try to define the solidarity economy, which we initially presented as a project of deepening and expanding democracy.

## **The three dimensions of the solidarity economy**

Economics is not a science of rational calculation which applies naturally to all human activity including culture and social ties – a pure science without an identifiable object. It is a social science concerned with a clearly circumscribed object: all monetarised activities (Dacheux, Goujon, 2007). Such a definition of economics – heterodox but defended by many authors (Schmitt, 1984; London, Orléan, 2006<sup>5</sup>) – allows questions of economic policy to be included in all debates about the general interest. It means that the expansion (or contraction) of the economic sphere does not necessarily result from self-regulating market mechanisms, but also depends on a collective decision. Current debates about free software and the patenting of genes demonstrate clearly that activities do not spontaneously become “economic”. In this sense of the word “economy”, what is “the solidarity economy”? For us, it is the economy of democratic societies. An economy which is not reduced to one single dimension (the pursuit of selfish interest) but which connects the three dimensions of democratic society: the political, the symbolic and the economic. More concretely, the solidarity economy is an activist dynamic and not a specific economic sector. This political movement encompasses recent social movements such as feminism and environmentalism. Put simply, it is distinguished by not being involved in the battle of ideas alone, but also in concrete economic actions. This is why these solidary organisations possess three characteristics:

- They may not engage in monetary exchange. When they do so, they adopt the official currency, the euro, or create their own currency.
- They may avoid the uncertainties of supply and demand by creating spaces of negotiation where all the parties concerned deliberate in a democratic way about the quality and price of the good.
- They also benefit from other activist or university support structures whose aim is to lobby elected representatives, in forming alliances with other elements of the social movement (political dimension), and/or, among other things, in analysing and

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<sup>3</sup> To simplify, and by way of example: the public sphere emerged in France in the eighteenth century during an era marked by, among other things, the revolution (political order), the Enlightenment (symbolic order) and the birth of industrial capitalism (economic order).

<sup>4</sup> A thesis held by Karl Marx which, paradoxically, today finds itself maintained by the neoliberals, with Gary Becker in the lead (1976).

<sup>5</sup> For these authors, “the monetary relationship is primary. It is through this that the market economy comes into existence.” (p.3)

understanding the developments and difficulties experienced by the solidarity economy in formalising a utopia (symbolic dimension).

This vision, summarised in the table below, allows us to see the concrete forms that the solidarity economy takes:

*Table: the seventeen existing families of the solidarity economy*

|  | Sub-family   | Examples  |
|--|--|---|
| A) Political and symbolic activities supporting the solidarity economy             | 1) Networks of actors developing economic activities elsewhere<br>2) Other support networks  | - The Movement for the Solidarity Economy<br>- The Interuniversity Network of the Social and Solidarity Economy   |
| B) Non-monetary economic activities  | 3) Networks of non-monetary exchanges<br>4) Assisted self-production   | - Networks of Reciprocal Knowledge Exchanges (RERS)<br>- Programme for Self-production and Social Development (PADES)   |
| C) Non-market monetary activities  | 5) Social solidarity currencies  | - Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS)   |
| D) Monetary and market economic activities<br>Initiated by the solidarity economy: | 6) Fair trade<br>7) Solidarity finance<br>Specific niches:<br>8) Economic integration<br>9) Activity creation<br>10) Local services<br>11) Environment<br>12) Transport<br>13) Communication<br>14) Culture<br>15) Advice and training<br>16) Agriculture<br>17) Housing | - Artisans du Monde<br>- “La NEF” financial cooperative<br>- Jardins de Cocagne<br>- Pôle d’économie solidaire<br>- Creches<br>- Ressourceries<br>- Carsharing<br>- The website Rhinoceros<br>- The Federal Union for the Intervention of Cultural Structures (UFISC)<br>- Extramuros<br>- Associations for the Support of Peasant Agriculture (AMAP)<br>- Habitat et humanisme |

## The political dimension of the solidarity economy

For Claude Lefort (1989), politics, which is to say the operations of power – the disciplinary object constructed by political science and political sociology – is only a small part of politics

defined as “realisation”, which is to say, as Lefort clarifies, “the staging and meaning-making” that institutes the social (Lefort, 1986, pp.256-258). Taking a Habermasian perspective, we will understand the political order as that of the construction of norms, of the development of the rules of living together. In a democracy, these rules are debated in the public sphere (Habermas, 1997). One of the central characteristics of solidarity initiatives is to establish “local public spheres” (Eme, Laville, 1996), that is, spaces for shared speech allowing the parties concerned (users, professionals, volunteers, public authorities, etc.) to co-construct supply and demand, co-organising production and co-deciding price and quantity. For example, in the CIGALES<sup>6</sup>, the cigaliers (ordinary citizens who wish to make their savings useful) discuss the project among themselves and with the prospective entrepreneur, deciding on the level of financing and the ways in which they will assist the project. In addition, these local public spaces, as Laurent Fraise (2003) indicates, allow certain social needs that would otherwise be taken care of in the domestic sphere (childcare, help for the elderly, etc.) to be made public. They thus contribute to eliciting new social demands in the public sphere and to focusing the public authorities’ attention on unrecognised problems.

## **The symbolic dimension of the solidarity economy**

As Paul Ricoeur shows (1986), it is the confrontation between utopia and ideology that animates democracy. The project of the solidarity economy (putting the economy at the service of people) is a utopian project; it seeks to bring about a utopia in harmony with the original utopia of the European project. By recalling that cooperation is often more effective than competition in the sustainable production and distribution of goods and services in line with social expectations, the solidarity economy proposes an economic regime that no longer exhibits the structural contradiction between the end (peace between peoples) and the means (the economic war of each against all) that characterises the European Union. But peace does not just signify the absence of war between classes and between nations. Peace can only be sustainable if it is democratic, that is, not just desired but constructed by citizens. From this perspective, the solidarity economy seeks to reconcile the citizen, the worker and the consumer, by introducing a democratic rationality at the heart of economic practices (Floris, 2003). It places itself in direct opposition to the principle of European governance that aims to introduce economic rationality at the very heart of the democratic process<sup>7</sup>. Thus, by contesting the primacy of the economic order and by proposing an alternative European project, the solidarity economy is a utopia under construction that tackles the symbolic deficit that haunts the democracies of the European Union.

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<sup>6</sup> Clubs d’Investissement pour une Gestion Alternative et Locale de l’Épargne Solidaire (Investment Clubs for an Alternative and Local way of Managing Solidarity Saving).

<sup>7</sup> The notion of governance came from the business world, where it refers to the complexification of decisionmaking systems. Here it is a matter of including the different stakeholders to enhance performance and not to deepen democracy.

## The economic dimension of the solidarity economy

The solidarity economy opens the economic order itself to plurality. By developing economic activities such as the *régies de quartier*<sup>8</sup> and the personal services that hybridise market (sale of goods), public (subsidies) and civil (volunteer) principles, the solidarity economy demonstrates the existence of the multiplicity of principles of exchange that had been highlighted by economic anthropology. Similarly, by introducing the “one man, one vote” principle in decision making, solidarity cooperatives such as Andines (fair trade) and Ardelaine (organic wool) open up the economic order to democratic rationality. In addition, by offering geographically-rooted jobs that cannot be delocalised, the solidarity economy enriches the repertoire of measures that can be taken by the public authorities, whose social policies for addressing unemployment are worn out. Above all, by placing the notion of reciprocity at the heart of the fight against exclusion, solidarity initiatives such as the networks of reciprocal knowledge exchanges and the *Pôles d'économie solidaire* help restore this goal of equality between citizens, which is so lacking in our democracies. But the solidarity economy is not only concerned with the microeconomic. Solidarity economics proposes, and this is the third point, that we rethink currency, as shown by initiatives such as the local melting-money exchange systems<sup>9</sup>. These are designed to limit currency to its functions of encouraging and measuring production and mediating exchange; they are thus opposed to speculative monetary practices that consist in accruing money for its own sake and not as a facilitator of economic exchange. Thus currency becomes a medium that reinforces the bond of a political community and no longer this unlimited object of desire that, as Aristotle has already noted, destroys the social bond.

The solidarity economy is a singular utopia that bets on more democracy as a way of overcoming the current crisis. But this utopian project is a project – unlike those taken up by the socialist utopians of the nineteenth century – that anchors itself in concrete economic initiatives and feeds a form of political activism that revitalises the local public sphere. I will now try to describe the similarities and differences between this movement and other movements that contest the current economic order.

## Differences and links between the solidarity economy and other anticapitalist movements

The solidarity economy contests and intends to combat what Karl Polanyi (1944) calls the disembedding of the economy. This political contestation, which takes the concrete form of economic organisations, is not new: it has roots in the worker associationism of 1848 (Frère, 2009a; Laville, 2010). Nor is it isolated, because it is part of a very diverse contemporary anticapitalist movement. In this second part of the chapter, we will try to understand the similarities and differences between the solidarity economy and the other movements belonging to this tendency. Given what has been said about the democratic dimension of the solidarity economy, this will be a matter of understanding the difficulties experienced by all these

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<sup>8</sup>*Régies de quartier* are organisations that bring together people living in the same area: residents, elected representatives and local authorities. They are collective projects with three dimensions: a social dimension – to generate social links through their activities and services and create jobs for those residents in greatest need; an economic dimension – to create activities that meet emergent needs; and a political dimension – to enhance residents' participation in their area's development and to promote an active citizenship in order to “live better together”.

<sup>9</sup> To ensure that money circulates and is not hoarded (held back to speculate), it loses its value as time passes.

movements in uniting politically. The most visible, the oldest and the most institutionalised of them all is that of the social economy.

## **Solidarity economy and social economy**

Bringing together organisations of different legal status (mutuals, cooperatives, associations), with varying economic clout (from Credit Agricole to the small local association), in very diverse sectors (from agriculture to automobile insurance), the social economy is seen more as a particular mode of economic activity rather than as a social movement. But all these organisations function democratically and represent shared political values. In addition, they have come together to make their voice heard in the public sphere, forming groups that, like the CPCA<sup>10</sup> and the CEGES<sup>11</sup>, engage with candidates during the different electoral campaigns, including the presidential elections. Admittedly, for many of them the distance between advertised political values and actual economic practices is huge. They are strongly criticised for this by advocates of the solidarity economy. First, we must determine the similarities and differences between the social economy and the solidarity economy, before examining the term “social and solidarity economy”, which is gradually imposing itself on the vocabulary of public policy.

## **Social economy**

The social economy is a concept developed by economists (Léon Walras, Charles Gide) at the turn of the twentieth century, but which was popularised by politicians in the 1980s. In France it was Michel Rocard, on the advice of Henri Desroche (a specialist in the area and director of studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études), who proposed to group cooperatives, mutuals and nonprofit organisations involved in economic activity under this heading. Today there are many academics who add foundations to this list. This status-based approach is justified by the existence of common characteristics: “The social economy brings together economic activities performed principally by cooperatives, mutuals and nonprofits whose ethics can be translated into the following principles:

- 1) the end goal is to provide services to members or the collectivity rather than profit;
- 2) self-management;
- 3) a democratic decision making process;
- 4) primacy of people and of labour over capital in the distribution of income.” (Walloon

Social Economy Council, 1990)

The social economy shares two significant traits with the solidarity economy: a common historical root (1848) and a vision of social transformation that offers an alternative to capitalism. Historically, the first cooperatives in France were formed in the fourteenth century in the Jura, by dairy producers who wanted to manufacture large rounds of cheese. But as Cyril Ferraton’s (2007) historical work shows, it was really from the time of the Second Republic that

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<sup>10</sup> Conférence Permanente des Coordinations Associatives, which is the nonprofit sector’s body for discussion and lobbying.

<sup>11</sup> The Conseil des Entreprises, Employeurs et Groupements de l’Économie Sociale is the social economy’s employers’ union.



an associationist workers' movement developed in France. Faced with the emergence of industrial enterprises belonging to private capital, it was necessary to develop workers' associations that could manage the tools of production both by and for themselves. History would see capitalist industry triumph, but it was from this associationist framework that cooperatives, mutuals and nonprofit organisations in the legal form that we know them today in France would be born. The second shared trait – linked, as we have just seen, to the first – is the will to present itself as an alternative to capitalism. But contrary to Marxism, for example, this alternative project is not revolutionary. It is a project of social transformation which bets on subverting capitalism from the inside – that is, from within the market economy, which it leaves unchallenged<sup>12</sup>. This is what Thierry Jeantet (2008) and Jean-François Draperi (2007) show very clearly in their respective books.

Despite these two shared traits, appreciable differences still exist between the solidarity economy and the social economy. We will look at at least four. The first is economic weight. The social economy represents around 10% of GDP – a significant proportion which can be explained by the essential role played by the mutualist movement in the French insurance system and the financial importance of banking cooperatives (Crédit Agricole, Banque Populaire, etc.). But this economic importance owes much to the nonprofit movement, which alone has 1.7 million positions, or one in ten private jobs. The solidarity economy is a set of much more modest initiatives; the best-known sector (fair trade) represented two euros per inhabitant per year in France, and globally accounts for only 0.01% of exchanges. The second is the relationship with productivism. At its inception, the social economy sought to produce goods and services differently, but the equation “more production = more collective wealth” was not challenged. By contrast, the solidarity economy initiatives developed in the 1980s subscribed, almost as a matter of course, to a strong critique of productivity and also emerged from environmental concerns. The third difference is linked to the vision of the market. From the solidarity economy's most radical perspective, democratising the economy means replacing the principle that the market is the best resource-allocation mechanism with deliberation in the public sphere over price, the quality and quantity of the good or service (in line with fair trade or local exchange systems). What is fundamentally at stake is the connection between the market and democracy. From a perspective dear to liberalism (both political and economic), the market economy and democracy go together. But from a more critical perspective the market economy leads inexorably to capitalism, which is itself a denial of democracy – a thesis defended, for example, by Karl Polanyi (1944), or more recently by Alain Caillé (2005), both of whom are frequently referred to in work about the solidarity economy. The fourth difference relates to the goal pursued. As Jean-François Draperi (2007) claims, the key element characterising the social economy is “the principle of double quality”: the producer and the recipient of the good or service are members of the same organisation. So it is in the name of the collective interest of the organisation's members that decisions are taken. Now even if in practice this collective interest often accords with the general interest, the goal of a social economy organisation remains – thanks to the principle of double quality – the collective interest. The goal of a solidarity economy organisation, however, is not the collective interest but the general interest

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<sup>12</sup> Which is in agreement with the recommendations of Fernand Braudel (1984), whose general conclusion proposes to revitalise the market economy in order to escape capitalism.

(the social bond rather than the good itself). So whereas mutuals, cooperatives and special-interest nonprofits (*associations d'entraide*) fit into the social economy, general-interest nonprofits (*associations d'intérêt générales*)<sup>13</sup> are part of the solidarity economy, whose goal is to extend and deepen democracy.

## **Social and solidarity economy**

In France, the label “social and solidarity economy” is a strategic name, a convenient phrase to unify and give more weight to a divided and not very visible sector. (A private conversation at a symposium with the inter-ministerial delegate for innovation and social economy at the time, Hugues Sybille, confirmed this view.) It is true that this desire to carry weight in the public sphere finds its justification in the fact that many solidarity initiatives adopt the legal structures of the social economy (principally cooperatives and nonprofits). In addition, at the international level, this label is used by networks of actors who, seeking to construct a global network, have chosen it because it enables them to reconcile different members (in particular, the social economy of Québec and the solidarity and/or popular economy of South America). Thus the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social and Solidarity Economy (RIPESS) – which brings together more than a thousand actors from across the world every four years in “Let’s globalise solidarity” meetings – offers the following definition: “The social and solidarity economy designates a set of economic initiatives with a social goal, which participate in the construction of a new way of living and thinking about the economy through tens of thousands of projects in the countries of both the North and South” (RIPESS.org). “Social and solidarity economy” is thus a unifying term allowing actors of different economic weights with different activist histories to act together. But even collected like this under the same banner, there remain many differences between advocates of the social and solidarity economy and those demanding sustainable development and degrowth.

## **Solidarity economy, sustainable development and degrowth**

The solidarity economy is, according to some activists (Collectif MB2, 2002, ch.1), the offspring of the movement *Vivre, Travailler et Décider au Pays*, founded in the 1970s, which developed in the countryside to fight against the economic and cultural desertification of rural areas. Now the search for a synergy between different actors capable of contributing to the wellbeing of the population would, if it happened in the public sphere, resemble a solidarity economy measure. But today the notion of “local development” is not strongly linked to a local public sphere; it is often only used in a technical sense by experts involved in the area’s economic governance. This is also true of “sustainable development”<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup>Whereas special-interest nonprofits (*associations d'entraide*) act to help their own members – e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous – general-interest nonprofits (*associations d'intérêt générales*) may act to help others – e.g. Secours Catholique, the French national branch of Caritas Internationalis.

<sup>14</sup> According to the definition proposed, in 1987, by the World Commission on Environment and Development, sustainable development is “development that responds to the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to respond to theirs”. This development should, theoretically, be sustainable in three domains simultaneously: economic, ecological, and social. In practice, the first aspect is prioritised.

## Sustainable development

This term does not describe a particular form of activism but – and herein lies its ambiguity – enlists under the same banner both multinationals and CAC 40<sup>15</sup> managers as well as local systems of exchange and revolutionary activists. The quite broad consensus on the idea of sustainable development is only possible because it is profoundly ambiguous. For the most radical critics, sustainable development is an alternative to capitalism, the model of another society that is more respectful of the environment, certainly, but also one that is less inegalitarian, where an economic logic submits to a political logic. But you also find industrialists opposed to this conception, for whom sustainable development is synonymous with sustainable growth and/or sustainable profit. It is not a question of putting an end to capitalism but of transforming it. This is a natural historical process, since the strength of capitalism is to transform the evils that it generates into new markets. The birth of a market in rights to pollute is an illustration of this.

The critique of productivism from which the concept of sustainable development originates is shared by the solidarity economy. As we have seen, the latter, in contrast to the social economy, carries the question of ecology in its genes and challenges the dogma of growth. Similarly, the need to orient economic activity towards markets more respectful of the environment finds a strong echo in the solidarity economy. Many solidarity initiatives grapple with environmental questions, just like the *ressourceries*, which seek to transform used objects into new practical and aesthetic objects. Finally, the declared desire not to separate the economic and the social is a concern found in the very term “solidarity economy”, even if in the end the solidarity economy does relatively little to incorporate the central issue of trade unionism and social dialogue into its discourse and structures. Despite these three common points, many differences remain. First, some solidarity initiatives, notably in the global South, challenge the very notion of development, whether sustainable or not. Second, sustainable development carries no strong political demand for democratisation, whereas deepening and expanding democracy are at the very heart of the solidarity economy. Third, even if they demand the sustainable development of an area, proponents of the solidarity economy know that what is good for one local area is not necessarily good for others (diverting a riverbed to irrigate a plain, for example), from which arises the need to think about solidarity between different local areas so that the wellbeing of some does not stem from the disadvantage of others. The solidarity economy thus promotes solidarity between different geographical areas, which is not much in evidence in sustainable development except insofar as it is present in development aid as it is practised today.

## Degrowth

Degrowth is simultaneously an economic concept, a utopian project and a form of political activism that operates in the public sphere. As it happens, one of its best-known representatives, Serge Latouche, has been very critical of the solidarity economy, suggesting that its very name reinforces what it claims to challenge: “It is only through the process of de-economising

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<sup>15</sup>The CAC 40 (Continuously Assisted Quotation) is the main stock index of the Paris Stock Exchange.

economies that an alternative economy project, plural or solidarity, can acquire meaning and substance, and not be just an excuse, a utopia, or even a booby-trap” (Latouche, 2001, p.26). To understand this reproach – but also to grasp other profound differences and shed light on the points of greatest similarity that this critique passes over – we must briefly return to the definition of degrowth.

Starting from the simple premise that there cannot be infinite development on a finite planet, proponents of degrowth plead for a radical rupture: to not try to develop better but to cease to develop altogether, to limit our influence on the ecological system so as to reconstitute the natural capital that has already been destroyed. The forefather of this notion is generally considered to be Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1971), a mathematician who became an economist after meeting Joseph Schumpeter at Harvard. Appropriating the concept of entropy, this Romanian economist asserted that “the overly-vaunted and oversold technological progress of our era should not blind us. From the point of view of the economy of earth’s resources – the foundation of humanity’s industrial way of life – most innovations represent a waste of low entropy. [...] For too long the economists have preached in favour of the maximisation of our profits. It is high time we recognised that the most rational conduct consists in minimising regrets. Every weapon and every large car means less food for those who are hungry today and less produce for some generations to come” (Georgescu-Roegen, 2006, p.184-185). In this original work we find two key principles: a critique of growth and the need for self-limitation. Serge Latouche adds a third principle, that of “decolonising the imaginary”. According to him, degrowth is not the same as the concept of negative growth, but rather a symbolic weapon against a utilitarian and individualist economic ideology.

Now in this need to rethink the economy from a non-orthodox perspective there is a deep affinity between the solidarity economy and degrowth. As Patrick Gianfaldoni notes: “These two movements have in common a radical critique of productivism and possess the same desire to subordinate economic logic to the logic of the general interest and in particular to respect for the environment” (Gianfaldoni, 2010, ch.6). We also find the writings of thinkers from these two movements in the anti-utilitarian publication edited by Alain Caillé, the *Revue du MAUSS*. Similarly, the concept of self-limitation espoused by degrowth is not too far from the concept of self-production defended by theorists of the solidarity economy like Guy Roustang (2009), while the critique of productivism and the need to conserve ecological resources have a strong presence in both movements. Finally, on the level of practice, self-organisation, democracy and reciprocity are found in initiatives that go under the name of both solidarity economy and degrowth.

The differences between these two movements, which are closer than is generally thought, are of two kinds. The first is theoretical. Degrowth is at base a critique of work, more precisely a critique of the marxist vision of work as the condition of man’s flourishing. Meanwhile the solidarity economy, as Bruno Frère clearly shows (2009a), is consciously embedded in work – a creative and non-repetitive form of work that allows the individual to flourish – and the conviction remains that it is through economic activity that you change the economy. Still on the theoretical level, degrowth is the application of the second principle of thermodynamics to the economy, while the solidarity economy is anchored in theories belonging to the human and social sciences (sociology, anthropology, history, etc.). In addition, basing itself on the principle

of deliberation, the solidarity economy does not presume a priori that degrowth is necessary in all sectors. It bets on collective intelligence organised democratically to determine what should or should not be produced (more education services and fewer pesticides, for example). Finally, the solidarity economy, taking into account the earth's finitude, does not subscribe to the paradigm of scarcity. In most cases, scarcity is not "natural" but rather the product of a system that deprives all those who do not have access to money. Malnutrition, for example, does not result from insufficient global food production but a global economic system that gives rise to over-nutrition in the North and under-nutrition in the South.

The second kind of differentiation is cultural. At base, degrowth is the resurgence of themes from the 1970s espoused by proponents such as Cornélius Castoriadis, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and Ivan Illich. It is about denouncing the drift of technologies which end up turning against their users<sup>16</sup>, and recalling the creative force of the imaginary, the power of the symbolic alone to change representations of a sclerotic economy that is nonetheless so hegemonic that it is quite impossible to change it from the inside. From here springs a profound distrust of institutions and new technologies among degrowth activists. This distrust is much less prevalent among solidarity economy activists who voluntarily get involved in local public policy (Fraisie, 2003) and who seek to use the internet to reinforce the political and economic dynamic of a movement that has little media presence (Dacheux, 2007).

In this second part, the theoretical and empirical similarities and differences that we have identified between solidarity economy, social economy, sustainable development and degrowth must not lead us to artificially freeze a changing reality. Theorists talk to each other and their analyses evolve; activists cross paths in different protests and are simultaneously involved in several organisations belonging, in the analyst's view, to "different movements". It must not be forgotten that we are studying a single anticapitalist movement taking different forms rather than social movements strongly organised around intangible political values and declared and shared collective identities. But the fact remains that this movement is not without its contradictions and that the study of similarities and differences between its many tendencies allows us to shed light on them, thus offering the actors a valuable tool for self-reflection.

## **Plurality: the principal strength and principal weakness of the anticapitalist economic movements**

At a time when researchers are denouncing the perils to which capitalism subjects democracy (Caillé, Humbert, 2006), it is not surprising to see activists wanting to change their lives by changing the economy. The solidarity economy is an example of this economic engagement. It is a sector with marginal economic weight, a form of activism that seeks to create local public spaces and a utopia that aims to deepen and expand democracy. In the context of an economic crisis that erodes the egalitarian foundations of democracy by dangerously exacerbating inequalities, this unique form of activism can play a major political role. On condition, however, that it successfully constructs alliances with other movements that advocate an alternative to capitalism. These alliances are difficult to construct. Why? Our work, centred on the political analysis of these movements, allows two explanations to be proposed. The first fixes on the

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<sup>16</sup> For example, the car, created to save time getting from A to B, now immobilises people for hours in urban traffic jams.

internal diversity of these forms of engagement. Though we have analysed the political ideal types of these forms of anticapitalist activism for the sake of clarity, Bruno Frère's analysis of the solidarity economy can be extended to all the movements mentioned: the diversity of spaces of engagement and modes of organisation makes political unity very difficult even within each movement: "[...] while the sector could be politically strong, it persists in functioning only as a network, leaving the multitude of initiatives from which it is constituted to their localised political weakness" (Frère, 2011, p.11).

The second explanation relates more broadly to the very question of democracy. To begin with, the democratic aim, which is central to the solidarity economy, is not made explicit in sustainable development. Second, the difference between the social economy and the solidarity economy in their conceptions of the link between market and democracy explains why the label "social and solidarity economy" is struggling to translate into concrete financial alliances or common political proposals. Finally, while the solidarity economy and degrowth share the same emancipatory vision of democracy and agree on the need to re-embed the market, these movements implicitly disagree about how to achieve a more democratic society. Degrowth seems to privilege the symbolic as a way of shaking up the political order and pushes it to submit the economic order to a logic of the general interest, while the solidarity economy seems to prefer economic engagement as a way of anchoring utopia in daily reality.

At base, these two explanations converge: the diversity of areas of intervention and the plurality of conceptions of democracy are the strength of a movement liable to propose various responses to the political, economic and symbolic questions posed to democracy by capitalism; but this diversity and plurality also constitute its principle weakness insofar as they are an obstacle to the construction of a coherent programme identifiable by citizens and public authorities. Strengthened by its economic engagement and its utopian proposition, the anticapitalist movement is weakened by these political divisions.

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