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Solidarity economy and anarchism: what to do with the *State form*? – Bruno Frère & Laurent Gardin

Many are the people who still go on linking the claims of solidarity economy to soft unrealistic utopias. Anyway, we will leave to their cynicism the most orthodox economists who remain convinced that it is logical for the political world to bow to the economic dictates of banks (as Greece, destructed by the treatments of successive austerities imposed by the ECB, knows very well). In this chapter we would like to show that the solidarity economy as a global economic program has never been a “spiritual” entity. Such a restoration of economy to civil society has indeed already been envisaged and tested by a serious political movement, which enjoyed some success in the middle of the 19th century, when the capitalist organization of society had not yet achieved the hegemonic power of the present day, whether in Europe or across the Atlantic (Schneiberg, 2007). It is the libertarian socialism that, like the contemporary solidarity economy, was not so much aiming at the disappearance of the state, or of any instance of supra-local coordination, as at the end of capitalism.

If, therefore, the capitalist order of the world is still firmly established, at present we can notice traces of rebirth of this libertarian impulse. We will try to discover at first the libertarian economy that emerged in the 19th century in order to appreciate the possible parallel. We will show that it was based then on some great ideas that are quite easily spotted also in the principles of structures and networks of contemporary solidarity economy: self-management, collective ownership of means of production, political

participation, etc. In a second step, we will try to show how a serious reflection on the libertarian socialism cannot today be deprived of a question already crucial at that time: what place we should grant to the State or to any form of collective organization related to it. We will then try to show that a serious problematization of this redefinition of a federative and radically democratized form is urgent within the libertarian thought.

From libertarian economic socialism and mutualism...

The libertarian socialism or anarchism was born in the 19th century, even though libertarian conceptions and practices had already been present in ancient times and among certain primitive societies. Usually we distinguish amongst different anarchist currents, ranging from anarchist individualism to anarcho-syndicalism through libertarian communism. The strongest ideological references are embodied by Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin or Godwin and Warren, as far as the English and North American precursors regards. Beside resorting to great authors or wide currents, we can be interested in the anarchists' practices in order to grasp the links with the solidarity economy. Gaetano Manfredonia (2007) has thus proposed a sort of social change conceptions using the Weberian method of the ideal kind. The insurrectionary kind, aiming at the revolutionary rupture from an active minority that sharpens social conflicts and can resort to violence to cause the collapse of capitalism and the State, is only one of the models of social change among anarchists. Two other models, the syndicalist kind and the educationist-accomplisher kind, reveal the peculiar features of the insurrectionary model, that often attracts the highest attention.

It is true that these are ideal categories and that, in their practice, activists do not fit into just one conception. As Manfredonia points out, the action of the revolutionary syndicalists of the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail) in France, at the beginning of the 20th century, like that of the anarcho-syndicalists of the Spanish CNT (Confederación Nacional del

Trabajo) before 1936, was not limited to trade union action and the preparation of the mass strike, but had also educational aspects whether through the Bourses du Travail in France or the libertarian schools in Spain. On their side, the followers of the insurrectionary model can enjoy daily cooperative practices even if they do not consider them fundamental in terms of social change. Although Proudhon has widely influenced the trade union movement and was ready to defend the revolutionaries of June 1848, through mutualism he was undeniably one of the most important authors of the educationist-accomplisher kind. This kind of practice of libertarian socialism is similar to the contemporary practices of solidarity economy and is sometimes analyzed in terms of libertarian practices and principles (Gardin 2006; Frère 2009; Pereira 2009, p. 101; Lenoir 2012; Corcuff 2012). It is a matter of mutual aid in the realization of economic activities to be formed within a perspective of emancipation from the influence of market and public powers. This dual socio-economic and socio-political dimension is consistent with the practices of solidarity economy (Eme e Laville 2005; Gardin e Laville 2017). Taken singularly, the contemporary structures of solidarity economy resemble the initiatives of the association movement analyzed and promoted by Proudhon in the 19th century. The father of anarchy, as he is often qualified, was at the same time at the origin of the new practices in associationism and of a theorization of these ones through mutualism, while being critical towards other theoreticians and practices leading sometimes to a rejection of associationism contributions that cannot be ignored.

In France, Proudhon founded the Banque du peuple, that would be based on an alternative local currency. Like the National Equitable Labour Exchange of Owen, England (1865), we can consider this People's Bank as one of the first modern experiments in social currency. Moreover, Proudhon also theorized mutual interest-free credit (or "free credit"), the ancestor of solidarity finance, by studying certain rural practices of the time, aimed at

allowing small farmers to buy the land they cultivated. The “Caisse de credit mutuel” was thus intended to finance agricultural cooperatives against the first major industrial consortia (1851, 1846).

Frequently Proudhon evokes in his texts the Ateliers Canuts, true ancestors of workers’ cooperatives who tried to resist big manufactures and struggled against the merchants to escape the international price (very low) that they were trying to impose on their goods, seeking also local markets for their products (Frère, 2017). Not far from contemporary proximity services, the Canuts also made a point of recruiting little or not qualified workers to train them in the silk trades and, in the best case, integrate them into the management and ownership of the workshop.

All these initiatives were for Proudhon suitable to reassemble at a regional and then national level, to give life to federal economic governments whose elected members would have only revocable short-term mandates, so as to ensure a permanent rotation of representatives. This economic federation should have the responsibility of coordinating at the regional and federal level activities, exchanges and all the macroeconomic regulations through the application of justice principles to economy, developing the principle of reciprocity against the market exchange. The central place given to the reciprocal economic behaviour between groups of producers and consumers recalls also the plurality of Polanyi’s economic behaviours, whose progressive theses published in *La grande transformation* (1983) foreshadow the socio-economic democratic dimension of solidarity economy.

It is in fact this principle of reciprocity which is destined to rule the workers’ organizations internally (Proudhon, 1865, 1846). These principles have been summarized and synthesized to define the standard format of an associative or cooperative enterprise that may also frame contemporary solidarity economy structures (Frère, 2017): helping members of local communities by integrating their representatives; self-managed democracy;

social ownership of capital and means of production; primacy of people over capital in the redistribution of profits; rotation of management tasks; salary fairness; anti-capitalist commitment...

Thus resorting to Proudhon to analyze the association movement is not an immediate choice. First of all, we must remember that Proudhon, while seeking to construct a theory of association, was at first very critical towards the idea of association which refuses to create an “absolute system” as did the socialist reformers Cabet, Leroux or Louis Blanc (Proudhon, 1851, p.158). In this respect we can recall his misogyny towards the political action of women engaged in associationism, at the forefront of which is Jeanne Deroin, founder of the “Union des Associations”. But we should also remember the severe record he drew about the proliferation of associations in 1848. He noted that while there had been several hundred labour associations in Paris in 1850 and 1851, barely twenty remained in 1857 (p. 474). According to him, this failure was explained first of all by the naive and illusory thought of these associations, whose weakness he criticized. He thought that it was not enough to do without bosses and take their profit, because this represented just a 10% increase in wages in a large factory, according to his calculations. It was also necessary to radically question “the fruit of inexperience and prejudice, the accomplishment of the ideas of centralization, community, hierarchy, of supremacy, the political activity [which] would be quick in creating division and discouragement” (ibid., p. 473). For him, not considering the principle of free credit and reciprocity was the most obvious indication of this inexperience and of the faith in parliamentary centralism maintained until then by associationism. This absence largely explains the economic failure of the associations, with their inability to train men likely to be able to really do without their exploiters. Furthermore, we should note that he could have mentioned amongst the causes of the failure of these experiments the repression of which men or women promoting this change were victims, due to a Napoleonic state

policy definitively devoted to capitalist private property and the opening of French markets to international competition.

If Proudhon was indeed at first critical, the denunciation of Riot-Sarcey (2016) of his break from the labour practices seems excessive. As we have mentioned, we know that Proudhon theorized mutualism starting from the Canuts practices (Ansart, 1970; Frère, 2017) or that, at the beginning of the second republic, workers solicited him to provide an answer to the social question, leading him to launch the People's Bank. The link with the associationist labour movement was such that Jeanne Deroin's newspaper, *L'opinion des femmes* (1849, p. 8), which couldn't be charged of complacency towards the misogynist Proudhon, reported with pleasure the increase of women's names associated with the shareholders of the said cooperative bank.

After 1852 Proudhon became definitely an associationist. It is not this reason, therefore, that can shatter the comparison of his theory with that of solidarity economy. In fact there seems to be a deeper limit to understanding the solidarity economy from a libertarian perspective: many solidarity economy structures in fact enjoy a state support, or at least public subsidies (local or national) that allow them to carry on their activities (this is particularly the case for cooperatives that provide a range of local services). Some even see local elected representatives sit on their boards. However, it is customary to emphasize the insistence with which anarchists in general, and Proudhon in particular - especially after his experience in the *Assemblée nationale* (1851) - criticized representative democracy.

But does this mean that Proudhon did not envisage that any form of "State" was conceivable and necessary for a mutualist economy to grow? Not at all. And this is the undertone that Proudhon brought to his analysis of the federal State, which the most dogmatic anarchist commentators, whom we advise to approach now, often feign to ignore. Because it is perhaps by the yardstick of these that we will be able to consider the

practices of solidarity economy which, sometimes, intend to work in harmony with the public action.

... to the question of a democratic and federalized “State” form

As with economic power, Proudhon wishes to give a radically democratic and self-managing inflection also to political power. In this respect, he will continually refine his position, particularly in the *Principe fédératif* (1863), on the relationship between freedom and authority. Using the serial dialectic of putting two poles in tension, he wants to limit the authority of the state without denying it. The government is then subordinated by “the representatives or institutions of Liberty, namely: the Central Power by the deputies of the departments or provinces; the provincial authority by the delegates of the communes; and the municipal authority by inhabitants; thus freedom aspires to become preponderant, authority to become a servant of liberty, and the contractual principle to substitute the authoritarian principle in every form of public affairs” (1863, p. 81). Through his concept of contract, Proudhon underlines that the elements of the federation or confederation do not submit to the same federation or confederation, and thus rejects “any measure or initiative aimed at strengthening the power of the federal state or federation and thereby compromising the (political) sovereignty of the contractors, on which his federalist theory is based” (Cagiao y Conde, 2011, p. 292).

This political federalism dialogizes with the economic federalism based on mutualism which we mentioned above. The State then becomes an actor among other actors. “The State has retained its power, its strength (...) but it has lost its *authority* (...) If we can say so, it is itself a kind of citizen, a civil person like families, trade companies, corporations, communes. Just as it is not the sovereign, it is not a servant either (...) it is the first among equals” (Proudhon, 1860, p. 68). Proudhon’s legal thought is a thought of diversity. “Abandoning the monistic scheme of the law, Proudhon invokes the noisy

dialectic of a pluralistic society, in which each individual, each group, participates in the determination of the general interest” (Chambost, 2004, p. 247). From a broader point of view, the pluralist management of public affairs evoked by Proudhon is a mode of regulation (Vaillancourt and Laville, 1998, p. 131) going beyond the tutelary regulation through which public authorities alone decide on the general interest and then the structures of solidarity economy apply their directives. This model can be found in the financing of socio-professional insertion and requalification structures that consider the “labour market” as the sacred space that the “defaulters of the social body” must at all costs reintegrate (that unemployment is a structural invariant of capitalism is thus passed over in silence by the elected officials in charge of this sector to be protected). But the pluralistic management of Proudhon also transcends all forms of semi-market regulation which aims at putting the structures of solidarity economy in competition with each other, to achieve missions of general interest, again defined only by the public authorities on behalf of the New public management. We find such an orientation in the implementation of territorial policies co-created for the development of the social and solidarity economy that the local actors and the Réseau des collectivités territoriales pour une économie solidaire (RTES), joining elected officials of the social and solidarity economy, aim at promoting. Moreover, it was in a similar way that Proudhon sought to co-build the People’s Bank. Indeed, recent research on the latter shows that the Bank was not only his work but that it was founded in connection with the delegates of the corporations of Luxembourg created by Louis Blanc (Chaïbi, 2010, p. 17-18), who would play a key role in its management and development, while Proudhon was engaged in political and journalistic activities.

At a time when specific components of solidarity economy are thus the object of recognition by public authorities throughout the world, we think it is necessary to deepen the thought on the relations towards the public actor

that allow the development of this economy while preserving its autonomy. Admittedly, the institutionalization of solidarity economy questions the purely anarchist approaches whose guards, in the words of Manfredonia (Ibid., 12), are “the use of direct action and the refusal to recognize public authorities or employers as interlocutors ‘to counter’ any eventual recovery or institutionalization of struggles”. But the employers must absolutely stay out of the way, and the question that is becoming urgent today is the following: could an experiment of anarchist economy completely independent from public action be able to stay viable and autonomous, or just possible on a large scale, at a time of globalized capitalism more draconian than ever, which for 50 years has engulfed and digested the most original initiatives everywhere? Certainly, new cooperative and interdependent practices appear everywhere, whether one thinks of the Zone d’autonomie temporaire and the Zones à défendre (ZAD) in France (Bey, 1997) or the development of the commons (Dardot, Laval, 2014). But how to spread, coordinate on a large scale and develop over a whole territory? Traditionally, as Bakunin already noted, the problem of the anarchist and libertarian organization is that it does not cope with distances and large dimensions. Which federal organizational link can be invented on a large scale if we are not radically rethinking the State form, definitively transforming its organization?

In front of the fears that solidarity economy could be exploited by traditional public policies, an alternative could be the development of initiatives unrelated to them. But then, in addition to a fight lost in advance against a capitalism that is spread absolutely everywhere in the territories, the risk is that one of these two hypotheses come true:

- these initiatives will experience a confinement within alternative companies that are weakening due to the self-exploitation of the people who invest in them. It is the case of those anarchist communities which are certainly fascinating, but also so demanding that many of their members end up leaving;
- these initiatives attempt to open up to the outside and the market, in a liberal or even libertarian way, and this leads them towards a market success by weakening

all the mutualist objectives noted in the previous section. In both cases, the question of the confrontation with the political power is evaded. But this, in our opinion, should not be impossible in a radically federalized democracy.

This path towards other relations between solidarity economy and public authorities finds a new echo in the inclusion of solidarity economy in the political constitutions of Latin American countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia (Vaillancourt, 2015, 2016). But for these policies not to become a corporatist regulation in favour of social and solidarity economy, it is important that their co-construction mobilizes also other territorial actors and the civil society (*Ibid*, 2016, pp. 114-115). This acknowledgement of a solidarity economy in a pluralist democracy distances us from two of its meanings that deny its political dimension.

The first of these meanings criticizes and defies the existence of solidarity economy by identifying in it mainly the disengagement of the State or a disruption “of the foundations of the statute of the civil service” (Hély & Moulévrier, 2009, p. 41). In a Proudhonian perspective, it is rather the private capitalist economy and not the public service that is to be supplanted. For Proudhon, mutualism or the current solidarity economy would not be a third sector able to overcome the failings of the state or of capitalist companies; on the contrary, the latter make up for the inability of the working classes to organize themselves on bases of justice (Gardin, 2013, p. 202). The State will continue to provide budget lines oriented towards social security, unemployment, health care, retirement pays, culture, public spaces, etc. Better still, it can, will even strengthen them. Simply, the taxes collected to ensure all these redistributive actions would be on a fully associative, cooperative and mutualist economy, rather than on a capitalist one. A form of secondary, large-scale and universal solidarity would thus come to support or substitute the forms of primary solidarities registered locally in the associations and cooperatives of solidarity economy.

The second meaning of solidarity economy, which in reality aims at challenging it, is brought about by social entrepreneurs. It advocates the

establishment of laws in the social health sector that “replace the bottom-up historical process based on civil society initiatives, a top-down process enacting at the same time a takeover of public authorities, a planning of the supply and the competition among the players” (Itier, 2016, p.43). This way of claiming to reinvent a social post-welfare state model shows a socio-liberal orientation clearly. In addition to restoring to the State a power that Proudhon’s subsidiary and pluralistic logic wished to remove permanently, it was letting associations to get caught in the throes of that competition which Proudhon’s economic federalism sought to eradicate by allowing federations of non-profit economic structures to democratically distribute the production of goods and services. Faced with these two perspectives and in particular the second - i.e. the extension of the market - warmly encouraged at the level of European policies, libertarian socialism and solidarity economy may appear very weak. The effort to make them complementary and articulated allows however to take a different future into consideration.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to draw a political-economic perspective of solidarity economy. By tracing its intellectual and organizational foundations from a socio-economic point of view (part 1), we have tried to relate concrete empirical experiences that develop jointly into a complex and paradoxical relationship towards the “State” form, in order to draw their socio-politic dimension (part 2).

This allowed us to explore how the cultural heritage of criticism formulated in the 19th century by the libertarian socialism continues today to inspire contemporary solidarity economy without being necessarily aware of its anarchist origins. Even if pioneering associations have failed to become an economic and political model (from the last decades of the 19th century, libertarian socialism will lose its struggle against State socialism

within the Committee for a Workers' International), their institutional, cultural and organizational traces remain still perceivable today (Frère, 2009).

However, we persist in thinking that a libertarian approach to solidarity economy is likely to help it to get out of the ruts in which some conceptions seek to lock it up. Solidarity economy is neither a third sector (it aims to replace the sector of market capitalism and not to create a third one), nor social entrepreneurship (which wants to make “moral capitalism” and social initiative compatible), nor a charitable economy (aimed at relieving the excluded fighting against social violence and potential revolution), nor a supplementary economy that would aim at relieving the State of its social responsibilities.

If conservatives of all kinds are willing to promote, a bit within a libertarian logic, “the radical devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to councils, local residents and community groups” (Conservatives, 2010), they do not consider that the capacity and capability of these local residents, especially those living in the poorest communities, can play a direct role in controlling all economic resources and political responsibilities on a large scale. Because this even-tempered localism, if it really assumed its libertarian logic, should recognize that the empowerment of local residents must also lead logically to the destruction of the concentration of power and economic resources in the hands of shareholders.

The solidarity economy or the libertarian socialism that we seek to theorize is very clearly aimed at the State returning its political power to society and capitalism restoring its economic power to that same society. However, it is an idea that may seem strange and utopian to the defenders of the third sector and the various currents mentioned below (*social entrepreneurship, social business* etc.) who are all willing to consider transferring the social responsibility of the State defined “de Providence” in

some countries in Western Europe to a charitable civil society populated by voluntary associations, and / or to the free market.

In our conception, in the case of libertarian socialism or solidarity economy the ideal of a non-capitalist society cannot get back to the inaccessible horizon of a post-revolutionary society (as it was in many variations of Marxism-Leninism). It is practiced here and now, as Proudhon said. Of course, solidarity economy is marginal. But it is not utopian. It continues to be realized today through various forms of civic engagement (Amap, solidarity finance, etc.), by proposing mutualist principles that once harnessed the Proudhonian theory as well as the first experiences of cooperatives' and workers' associations (e.g. those of the Canuts). These civic engagements are still of the educationist-accomplisher kind, since they allow both the economic emancipation and the (dis)learning of the rules of the market economy of productivism that we want to keep at bay. Let us repeat again: solidarity economy must be considered neither as the capitalism of the poor, nor as a social business, nor as a set of charitable organizations, nor as a system of social subcontracting of public services. The success of solidarity economy is due to the fact that it is not inferior to a tutelary state "... and that it rejects submission to the rules of the market. No capitalist principle can help to understand how it works: neither the invisible hand, nor free competition, nor the pursuit of financial interests, nor private property, nor even the idea of growth, be it social or cultural. But beyond the enthusiasm it can arouse, the question that has regarded its mutualist project for twenty years, at the same time political and economic, is still the same: can it succeed where its ideological precursor, the libertarian socialism, failed 150 years ago? If we consider the forces involved, nothing is less certain. Unless it is structured by a powerful federative organization (which some would still want to call State, Union, Federation or other) and is politically settled on its libertarian principles.