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Editorial: social economy and learning for a political economy of solidarity

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Introduction

The dominant theme in the discussion of adult and continuing education in this millennium has been the increasing influence of economic rationales. Activities related to work and employment are prioritized and policy issues are no long questions of access and equal opportunities nor learning for citizenship and democracy. The attention has moved from the educational visions and intentions to the questions about learning outcome and competence development as an economic resource. In research and intellectual work this shift is reflected in new discourses which conceptualize learning activities from the point of view of their efficacy in individuals' competence – their ability to make use of learning outcome in social practices that cannot be anticipated and prepared for directly. In the RELA-issue on the new(?) competence regime(s) – RELA 2013/2 (Nicoll & Olesen, 2013; Salling Olesen, 2013) - we published a number of articles problematizing the use of the term competence and its tendency to assess human resources by their applicability in a capitalist labour market. For many researchers and practitioners this trend has led to a disgust for this competence discourse – but this issue of RELA also included contributions that opted for a broader idea of competences which could enable political autonomy and democratic work life. The argument was that “competence” in fact may become a holistic and practice related reconceptualization of learning. Following this argument the problem is not in the notion of competence but in the “political economy” in which it is used – where political economy refers to the real system of production and exchange and its built-in legitimacy and penetration of social discourses and political reason at large.

This conceptual dispute is at the core of adult and continuing education policy discussion. The term lifelong learning has widened the horizon to learning in different environments and put the learner in focus – but at the same time shifted its connotation – now pointing out a general request for everyone to learn in order to secure employability and economic efficiency. Adult and continuing education has gained political importance but even more important is the relatively inclining significance of

informal learning, learning in everyday life, in social activities that are not necessarily organized for learning purposes.

The increasing request for employable skills and economic efficiency are directed towards formal and non-formal education and training, but also towards learning in everyday life. It comes from a capitalist development in which human resources seem to be an increasingly important factor. While living in this environment we internalize the logics of the political economy, and the request on education and training to contribute with particular competences immediately seems legitimate.

Lots of people are uncomfortable with the degree and narrowness of this request. But most of those opposing it mostly do not challenge the political economy as such, but they seek to preserve a classical bourgeois idea of a boundary between the economic sphere and a civic and private sphere to which they want to assign education, or at least some types of education. We think that this struggle for an education sector as a protected sphere, unaffected by the economic system is already overtaken by the development, at least in the developed capitalist world, leaving at best a fading residual. Rather we assume that people learn from their lives and the society in which they live – learning is a life experience. This is the core of material theorizing of learning. For education it means that what people learn also in formal and informal education is structurally and not least subjectively shaped by the economic environment– and in their life world there is no fence between an economic sphere and a private or civic sphere. But where could then learning escape the self-legitimizing, quasi-natural capitalist reason?

With this material conception of learning we look for social spaces in which alternative (political) economies could be found emerging, not as ideas only but as material social dynamics (Negt & Kluge, 2014). This was the background for launching the call for papers for this thematic issue: Which are the life worlds that might provide alternative life experiences? How would the question of competence development appear in relation to economies and economic activities that are not capitalist? Which competences are needed and what learning is fostered in such environments outside or on the margins of capitalist economy and labour market? Instead of research relating direct to the main trends in the dominant economic structure and its followers in discourses of learning we wanted to draw the attention to a part of the economy which is not following capitalist rationale – which comprises not quite small but often neglected economic activities. We wanted to call forward research into the learning processes which take place within or in conjunction with these activities as well as the requirements for learning following from these activities. Can we instead of scouting for the ambiguities in the mainstream competence discourse more directly find alternative competence goals and learning practices which may indicate trans-capitalist aspirations and ideas about alternative economic framework for social life? By pointing broadly to learning and social economy we hoped to find research addressing these questions.

While recognizing the variety of social purposes in the social economy, which is a point in itself, we want to focus on those dimensions where social economy breaches the prevailing rationales of capitalism, or where the activity is in a tension between the social purposes pursued and capitalist economy as mediated by direct economic relations (markets) or cultural factors (socialization and values of participants). Contemporary capitalism is a political economy in the sense that it is quasi-natural universal order which is underpinned by the shift of power from the nation states or local communities to structures with almost no faces and locations which prescribes values and rationalities.

Many of the elements discussed above can be found in the first article of this issue – a text by Lisa Mychajluk, titled Learning to live and work together in an ecovillage community of practice. Ecovillages are citizen-organised residential communities that strive for a more sustainable way of life. These communities of practice provide an everyday collective life experience in which citizens can gradually learn in an alternative way, developing practices of living well in place. The social learning taking place is of course fundamental to build and maintain the cooperative culture. More than that, Lisa Mychajluk shows the importance of building a set of social competences (inclusive discussion, honest and compassionate communication, non-violent conflict resolution, embracing diversity of people and perspectives, etc.) which are key in this alternative way of living and working collectively.

The label of social economy is a broad, inclusive term encompassing a range of economic activities and organisations which share the attribute of NOT being driven for profit. Some of the practices that today fit into the label come a long way. Most obviously cooperativism had its origins in the 19th century. Cooperatives are, like the name indicates, based on the idea that the socially unifying factor is work, and access and rights are based on the participation in work. In this sense they can be seen as the simplest opponent to capitalism. As an economic practice it is inspired in the values of autonomy, equality and solidarity that can be made concrete by the foundational principles of cooperativism (Birchall, 1997): the democratic control of the cooperative by the cooperative members; decision-making independently of the capital contribution of the members; independence of State; cooperative ties with other cooperatives..

However, social economy evolved to include more than classic (or innovative) forms of cooperativism. Santos (2003b), in a book adequately titled “*Produce to live: the paths of non-capitalist production*”, points out nine important features of social economy of which we will just mention a few:

- Once the profit logic is absent, the incomes of productive activity should be used to bring advantages to further people, in a sustainability logic;
- Social economy targets the most fragile collectives of society that are excluded in some cases (thus to have a productive activity is a first step for changing their situation);
- Experiences often come from the third sector but the State can act as an important partner; and should be based in principles of equality, social justice and solidarity;
- Although those are essentially productive practices, they have the potentiality to promote changes in social and cultural systems.

Recently we have seen a great variety of experiences of economic organisations which challenge the basic principles of capitalist production and exchange emerging. To mention just a few, the *Grameen* Bank in Bangladesh that gave birth to the microcredit experiences all over the world; the cooperatives belonging to the *Mondragon* group that grew immensely and nowadays has its own university; 20 years after the breakdown of the Yugoslav Self-management system the employees of the huge electro industry Koncar in Zagreb took over a bankrupt company and continued its operation, and even founded a so called ethical bank in conjunction with it; one of the big homecare service providers in US is a cooperative; the various practices stemming from the LETS system (Local Exchange Trading System); the Fair trade initiatives that challenge the injustice of modern capitalist globalised trade; the participatory budget experiences in Porto

Alegre, Brazil, that were an inspiration for the various models of participatory budgets that exist in a big number of countries; not to mention a variety of systems and practices that appear locally in a huge number of countries, such as employee buy-outs, parents' self-organized child care, enterprises based on people on the margins of the formal labour market, alternative social institutions etc.

This sample of experiences in social economy shows that numerous citizens and institutions are capable of organizing and through different participative (sometimes large-scale) economic initiatives, seek to achieve a social purpose instead of seeking profit and capital accumulation.

Many of these activities and organizations are organized in the "third sector" between private capitalist market based sector and the state. In modernized capitalist societies a substantial part of economic and social activity is organized by the state, in a public realm, pursuing social purposes without any need for profitability. That is not what we are looking for, although some of our questions could also be raised in that context. Likewise you can imagine private activities pursuing social purposes without profitability, like private philanthropy, without any substantial aspect of economic exchange. They are also not the topic here. The third sector category mostly implies a partly but not entirely market based operation: most production cooperatives sell their products in more or less open markets, and many of them have to borrow capital in the ordinary financial market. Others which are subsidized by the state produce goods or services which must be sold in the market. Consumer cooperatives obviously compete in an open market with profit-based providers. There is, therefore, various kinds of social purposes in the social economy. This point seems important to us, because social economy structured itself around the plural nature of economic activity. At the same time, it opposed the reductive trends of economy to the principles of the market and to the rationale of private accumulation. As such, social economy has an important role in building new regimes of social well-being (Gaiger, 2009), but the practices of their organisations are not exempt of tensions or contradictions, as often are forced to navigate between the state and the markets – and find, at the same time, creatives ways to still pursue their goals.

At this point, we want to highlight the second text of our thematic issue, by Jennifer Sumner and Cassie Wever – Learning Alterity in the Social Economy: The Case of the Local Organic Food Co-ops Network in Ontario, Canada. The paper looks inside a coalition of co-operatives that focus on locally and sustainably produced food, reflecting on the learning dimensions of this social economy organisation. The words of the authors might help us to understand deeper the difficulties and tensions of social economy organisations:

Like fair trade, the social economy operates both within and against the market, offering an alternative while still being embedded within the capitalist economy. In the words of Goodman et al. (2014, p. 83), organizations in the social economy 'sit somewhat uneasily between the private sector and the state, between market and non-market relations, and profit-making and non-profit structures, often combining elements of each'. While the economic values of these organizations may be similar to market values, their social values stand in stark contrast to the individual, self-serving values championed by the capitalist economy.

Learning is central in this context. Simply put, Jennifer Sumner and Cassie Wever found that the members of this network of cooperatives participated in social learning and learned *alterity* in the social economy – a very important concept in our opinion, although vague. Learning alterity within social economy lies at the very core of finding new ways to solve these contradictions and therefore find alternatives to capitalism. It

discusses how it is possible to coexist with capitalism, but still try ‘to change it from within’. In this context, learning alterity is not simple nor without problems, but it identified the ambivalent condition of learning “otherness” being inside and at the margins of the prevailing economic system at the same time.

We said before that social economy is a broad, inclusive term. It is also noticeable that its evolution was everything but linear, suffering various influences from the wider social political contexts across the world. In more than one historical period or space, social economy has been accused of a certain decay in its ability to discuss the political societal models, or in its relative compliance (or denial) to become a simple ‘economy of repair’ (Laville, 2004). A different label was born around the 80s of the 20th century, which gradually gain visibility: that of solidarity economics. Solidarity economics is not exclusive of Latin American, as it might seem at first sight. Along the decade of the 90s, it has grown roots in various francophone contexts, seeking new paths regarding (the more?) institutionalised organisations of social economy. In addition, a big number of labels and related concepts later on developed, not only in Latin America, but also in Africa or Asia: popular economy, familiar economy, community economy, among others (Defourny & Develtere, 1999).

In Latin America, solidarity economics refers to a set of practices departing from the free and democratic association of workers, whereas cooperatives usually act as a company in the market, but having a different internal structure. Solidarity economics is strongly connected to citizenship and popular education, it entails cooperation in economy but also makes available to the collectives the means of production and the self-management of activities of various natures (Gaiger, 2009). By promoting the everyday life participation, solidarity economics call for the involvement of people in community problems and, more important, try to face wider collective struggles. Solidarity economics experiences are usually organised in citizenship building settings, thus favouring the creation of public spaces characterised by proximity (Tauile, 2002). It denies the separation between societal dimensions and economy, trying to join a certain efficiency with the productive cooperation (Gaiger, 2006).

Although much could be said to explain the sociological roots of the emergence of these different phenomena, it is important to stress that there is not an opposition between social economy and solidarity economics, which share obvious commonalities and purposes. Both aim to be a switch from the conception of a market society to the notion of a plural economy, even if the utopia seems hard to achieve. For Laville (2003), much depends on the ability to enhance the cooperation between the social economy and solidarity economics, together with a capacity to improve the relations with social movements and public bodies.

Nevertheless, one should stress solidarity economics’ characteristics that express contextual configurations of southern public spaces and social struggles. For example, the centrality of self-management that culminate in strong social networks of cooperation; the informality, in a way related to the intense informal character of some of the southern economies themselves; or the strong political dimension, which, in some places, has aided to the building of different qualities for democracy. Just to give an example, Santos (2003), while researching the Porto Alegre participatory budget experience, has shown that the participatory budget not only introduced to the models of the processes a mix of representative and direct democracy, but also that the quality of representative democracy itself was enhanced with these participatory citizens practices.

The similarities between social economy and solidarity economics do not erase their historical and contextual differences – expressing, probably, the north-south differences. As Gaiger (2009) has shown, in the south it is mostly about struggling

against poverty and misery, using the virtues of popular economy to find solutions to these phenomena. This explains why it is so important to find alternatives to capitalism, in the sense of building economic relations free from reproduction of inequalities or processes of exploitation. However, taking into account the focus of our thematic issue, the important is that those and other conditions of solidarity economics tend to shape a *different way of learning*, closely connected to the social actors experiences. And this different way of learning can maybe be a pre-requisite to the sustainability of the alternative experiences.

The third article of this thematic issue, by Marta Gregorčič, is Community learning and learning-by-struggling in solidarity economics. It is a radical proposal coming from an ethnographic approach combined with a militant research approach, in the south (India and Venezuela), that discusses critically solidarity economics. It introduces the concept of *potentias* in the context of autogenous revolutionary struggles, showing us that a more radical breach with capitalism is not simply a utopia. However, in order to build such critical communities oriented towards processes of social change, learning is key, primarily to develop processes of Freirian *conscientization* – which expresses a dynamic connecting awareness processes, the learning that change is possible, and the actions that make this change concrete. Marta Gregorčič show us the importance of learning-by-struggling taking place in solidarity economics practices, vital to community building. Truly learning by-struggling revisits the links between learning and social change. In the author words,

Learning-by-struggling is mutual articulation of collective self-determination and cooperation which is taking place through communication and decision-making platforms such as the assembly, *mukhiya*, councils, or the political and educational space of coming together in dialogue – *encuentros* – through diverse and heterogeneous platforms. These meetings of *conscientização* invite, convince, encourage, and make people understand the importance of their participation and are re-creating the community of the oppressed into *potentias*.

This third article brings us closer to the focus of our thematic issue and the reasoning about its relation to learning. We see social economy as a potentially alternative reference for learning: As a lived live which partly enacts different values and rationales it is a learning environment – and it also presupposes specific skills and competences.

First of all social economy and solidarity economics entail a fundamental (need for) learning of autonomy – social economy relies on members who collectively take responsibility and shape their own life. Secondly we need to see social economy as a utopian and open horizon which can only gradually be developed by learning processes. Many of the social purposes have the nature of mitigating some of the impacts of capitalism: Securing the access to work/employment for a certain group of people. Avoiding the environmental damages of production. Securing survival of a community or region. Saving cultural values that cannot survive on market conditions. But most of them also and unconnected have a utopian and innovative nature: Shaping a good work situation. Raising quality standards of goods and services. Creating novel products. Creating the space for individual and collective values, for artistic work, etc.

Utopian ideas in the sense of unrealistic wishful thinking is an all too easy response to the weight of the prevailing political economy, and not so fruitful. On the contrary we assume that exactly the fact that social economy exists only in forms that partly breaks the universal economic rationality, but also does so as a result of strong engagements and indeed important social reasons form the condition for learning processes which in turn pave a way for alternatives. For this reason the empirical study of the actual

learning processes in social economy could provide a “learning laboratory environment” for learning processes that involve fundamental social and psychic reconfigurations of people involved (Salling Olesen, 2014) – and also showing the needs and challenges for moving beyond the capitalist political economy. Apart from conceptual reflections on the relations between work, socialisation and learning, the articles in this issue bring what we may in this context call case studies in the learning and education aspects of the emergence process – the micro processes of developing different types of social economy and the learning from experiences in activities already going on. From the empirical studies in the learning from such activities we gain insight not only in the potential and difficulties of such organisations but also more general insights in the significance of socio-economic frameworks and individual learning and identity.

The next contributions to this issue fit this category of important case studies that further illustrate the importance of learning in social economy. Oksana Udovyyk wrote “I cannot be passive as I was before” - Learning from grassroots innovations in Ukraine. The article focuses the learning processes within grassroots innovations emerging in post-EuroMaidan times in Ukraine, claiming this educational space to promote critical consciousness development. The author uses a Freirian inspiration to analyse the development of elements of critical consciousness. In this environment

and despite the great strength of previous experience of social actors, social learning leads to the development of dialogical skills, reflection capacity, etc., that seem to increase efficacy and agency.

The fifth article of this issue reflects on the educational potential of social economy projects in the Himalayas: The case of Avani, by V.P.J. Sambhavi, Mieke Berghmans, and Joke Vandenabeele. The Avani are a community-based organisation whose projects represent an experience within the prevailing logic of capitalism – the same capitalism that condemn those hill communities to be excluded by its mainstream mechanisms of functioning. But the Avani’s choose ‘to use local resources to create innovative market practices and in doing so giving a tactical twist to what we have described as a discriminatory place logic of capitalism’. Therefore, their place turned into a production site, even if the learning processes inside are not without tensions. As we saw before in this text, it is not easy to be simultaneously ‘in’ and ‘against’. The Avani seek to incorporate an attention towards the environment and social justice, fighting the inequalities produced by capitalism, within the framework of market practices and a regular capitalist economy. Clearly, this is not a linear path, but surely is a common goal to other experiences, once again reminding us how alterity can be crucial when choosing the social economy paths. The emancipatory potential of such practices cannot dismiss the building of educational spaces as a requisite for the people to be able to participate in action and social change, strengthening our claims on the importance of learning processes within social economy.

The last article of this thematic issue is titled ‘The social economy as produced space: The ‘here and now’ of education in constructing alternatives’. This text by Scott Brown is different in nature from the rest of the contributions: a theoretical essay that deals with learning within the social economy only via a spatial analysis. In a first moment, the author uses Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy to build arguments on the importance of dialogical relations as framed between subjectivity and objectivity. In a second moment, the article gets an inspiration from Lefebvre to lead us to understand capitalism as a spatial force. In fact, in the core of this text lies the concept of *produced space* as capable of describing the complexity of the processes of social economy, both inside or outside contemporary capitalism. Capitalism itself is the worldwide bigger producer of dominant, excluding spaces. It is no strange that critical geographers turn

their attention to this spatial dimension or to the incongruences between time and space nowadays. The concept of globalisation by Harvey (2000), for example, is precisely drawing our attention on the capitalism ability to produce, dismantle and re-organise its productive landscapes, with an increasing temporal freedom. Thus, globalisation can be understood as global phenomenon that produces unequal landscapes – or uneven developments of time and space.

Social economy in its many variations and vague delimitations is an environment produced by global capitalism. Yet it may also enable social practices and learning processes which might not necessarily follow the mainstream rules of today's capitalism. In fact, such social practices can be seen as a learning outcome responding to life conditions and contradictions in capitalism. If we understand societal dynamics as historical and material processes we must direct empirical attention to study the micro-processes in which such endogenous dynamics may potentially grow up. Assuming that learning within such micro-processes form the key to any agentic capacity of social change this thematic issue has visited a few particular cases which expose specific learning environment and specific learning processes Even though some of the articles do not theorize learning very explicitly they seem to indicate that social economy can be both the presupposition and the potential outcome of such emergent learning processes.

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