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Community learning and learning-by-struggling in solidarity economics

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Abstract

The article covers the concept of solidarity economics developed by autogenous revolutionary struggles – potencias – in the Global South from the 1950s onwards. Theoretical placement and contextualisation of solidarity economics is critically discussed in the second section, followed by methodological and theoretical work on the concept in the third section. Findings and observations from field research in India and Venezuela conducted by the author in 2007 and 2008 are presented in the fourth section, where solidarity economics is seen as an epistemic community with the new language of struggle and also as an attempt at other epistemologies. Perspectives for mutual, participatory, and community learning from the aspect of ‘learning-by-struggling’ and the educational platform embedded in assemblies, encounters, and different forms of group discussion and decision-making processes are considered in the fourth and fifth sections, together with the idea of the authentic re-creation of community.

Keywords: solidarity economics; militant research; social transformation; community learning; learning-by-struggling

Introduction

In the last two centuries, many penetrating thinkers have raised questions as to how to act in a time of permanent and multiple crises. These include wars, migrations, poverty, historically high unemployment, widespread and even increasing social injustice, and more, all caused by neo-liberalism, ruthless economic growth, human resource theory, etc. We have reached a stage ‘where it is easier to think of the total annihilation of humanity than to imagine a change in the organisation of a manifestly unjust and destructive society’ (Holloway, 2010, p. 7). Among the many suggested alternative theoretical views, some communities and rebels have already developed ‘other’ production, ‘other’ development, and ‘other’ politics (the Zapatistas’ *autogestión*, stateless democracy or democratic confederalism in the liberated Kurdish territories, various attempts at participatory budgeting, micro-governments, etc.). In addition, some have also questioned the western ethno-centric epistemology, which has committed

epistemicide in the name of science (Santos, 2014). Theoretical blindness and epistemological blockage prevent us from seeing the emergence of the alternative economy and the counter-hegemonic movements arising in the Global South, as well as the ‘knowledges born in their struggle’ (Santos, 2014, p. x) and critical revolutionary pedagogical theory (McLaren, 2000). Therefore, I believe it is more than relevant ‘to draw attention to absent knowledges and absent agents’ (Santos, 2014, p. 163) and to learn the new language of struggle. The first step towards this kind of solidarity is to educate ourselves about the sociology of emergences (Santos, 2014) arising around the world as a field of enquiry and as an objective social reality, and, ‘by learning, to participate in its formation’ (Holloway, 2010, p. 12-13). To this end, this paper reconsiders the concept of solidarity economics developed by autogenous revolutionary struggles on the periphery of capitalism, particularly in Latin America after the 1950s, and the informal community and participatory learning that appeared as a result of a learning-by-struggling approach.

The next section deepens and contextualises the current discussion about the social economy versus solidarity economics. The third section introduces theoretical and methodological work on *potentias* – autogenous revolutionary struggles which I developed after a decade of fieldwork, and which were researched within various counter-hegemonic movements, oppressed communities, and solidarity economics. In connection with this concept, I identify where and how solidarity economics has been developed (Foucault’s *heterotopia*) and rethink another (not-yet-scientific) approach to observe, research and describe it, which permitted me to move beyond epistemological blindness, as defined by Santos (2014). The findings from my field research in India and Venezuela between 2007 and 2008 on self-determining revolutionary communities, movements, and co-operatives are presented as epistemic communities with the new language of struggle in the fourth section, with special attention given to the learning and educational processes in *potentias*. I also briefly refer to the well-known Zapatistas’ *autogestión* in Mexico, which I researched between May and August of 2005 and other comparable examples which I have studied or researched.¹ In both the fourth and concluding sections, I rethink what could be defined as learning-by-struggling and its perspectives for informal, mutual, participatory, and community learning with the aim of social transformation.

Frame of reference: theoretical placement and contextualisation of solidarity economics

Since the 1980s there has been a rising tide of theoretical works which have tried to reinvent social emancipation (libertarian municipalism (Bookchin, 1982), another production (Santos & Rodríguez Garavito, 2006), the multitude (Hardt & Negri, 2009), the green economy (Alvarez et al., 2006), the no-growth imperative (Zovanyi, 2013), and more) and a multitude of heterogeneous practices such as community-run social-centres, consumer and producer co-operatives, solidarity entrepreneurship, fair trade initiatives, alternative currencies, community-run exchange platforms, do-it-yourself initiatives, community initiatives (resource libraries, credit unions, land trust, gardens), open-source free software initiatives, community supported agriculture programmes, seed libraries, and collective spaces (housing, kitchens, kindergartens, retirement homes). Usually this kind of solidarity and these economic practices are labelled under the name ‘*économie sociale et solidaire*’, ‘*economía social y solidaria*’, ‘social economy’, or ‘solidarity economy’. All of the above-mentioned heterogeneous practices

might just be a few examples in the compelling array of grass roots economic initiatives which have developed in the last decades as bottom-up movements, co-operatives, or non-governmental organisations. Some see them merely as the remains of the popular economy, failed socialism, co-operativism, different liberation struggles, or the failed welfare state of *The Spirit of 45* and others see them as the labour economy (Coraggio, 2000), distributive economy (Laville, 2010), socialist economy (Singer, 2003), alternative economy (Santos & Rodríguez Garavito, 2006), and more. Although many inspirational examples were not able to bring about a more profound social change or desired paradigm-shift, they are all part of our history of practicing communitarianism, autonomy, horizontality, egalitarianism, mutuality, and solidarity.

Although it is very common for solidarity economics to be integrated within the social economy, they are in fact two different approaches, and the implications of equating them are rather profound. Some authors explicitly expressed the differences (Nardi, 2016; Laville, 2010; Gaiger, 1996; Gaiger, Ferrarini & Veronese, 2015) and some implicitly (Santos & Rodríguez Garavito, 2006; Razeto 1993). Therefore, certain aspects of solidarity economics *versus* the social economy are highlighted in this section to clarify the frame of reference used in the next sections. This question seems to be important since both solidarity economics and social economies have been undergoing a renaissance and a profound transformation in the last few decades and since reconsiderations of the potentialities and the limitations of social transformation are finally coming to the fore in scientific writings after permanent financial, economic, and environmental crises; structural adjustment programmes; and austerity policies in last decades. The differentiation between these two economies might be important because collaborative, emancipatory, and transformative learning, as well as paradigm-shifts, which take place in solidarity economics differ from the learning process in the social economy. Despite many similar learning processes and approaches used by the social economy and solidarity economy, the learning activities of the latter encompass more diverse types of learning as well as much more radical and critical approaches, which I define as the *learning-by-struggling approach* and which I discuss in the fourth and last sections.

As already distinguished by Nardi (2016, p. 3-4), the solidarity economy seeks to ‘change the *whole* social/economic system and puts forth a different paradigm of development that upholds solidarity economy principles’. But the primary concern of the social economy is ‘not to maximize profits, but to achieve social goals’, to be the ‘the third leg of capitalism, along with the public and the private sector’, or, more radically, ‘a stepping stone towards a more fundamental transformation of the economic system’ (Nardi, 2016, p. 3-4). In the Brazilian context the concept of the solidarity economy does not encompass all solidarity-driven economic enterprises, but rather those that make solidarity the cornerstone of their internal dynamics and strategies (Gaiger, 1996). For Laville (2010, p. 36-37) the concept of social economy has mostly centred on economic success and has put aside political mediations, while the solidary economy ‘has brought to public attention notions of social utility and collective interest, and raised the question of the aim of activities, something that had been sidestepped in the social economy’. Emphasizing its citizen-oriented and entrepreneurial dual dimension, for Laville (2010, p. 36) the solidarity economy goes further than the social economy. Nardi (2016) sees it in an explicitly systemic, transformative, and post-capitalist agenda. This distinction between two overlapping concepts seems to be recognized also by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC, 2012), which knowingly shifted its policy away from solidarity economics in favour of the social economy. Recognizing emerging initiatives which are both political and economic in

nature (Laville, 2010) as a ‘force for social change’ (EESC, 2012, p. 25), the EESC opted for the hegemonic discourse of the social economy, which is perceived as ‘... correcting labour market imbalances, deepening and strengthening economic democracy’ (EESC, 2012, p. 13). The social economy therefore strives to enrich current economic democracy, while the solidarity economy struggles for *otro mundo*, for another democracy and another economy. Besides these distinctions, some other concerns should be taken into account for an understanding of new solidarity economics.

Solidarity economics is not a model, but a process that arises from multiple traditions, values, and beliefs, and is often inseparably embedded into the history of the emancipatory struggles of the oppressed, lawless, impoverished, etc. by diverse and heterogeneous micro-initiatives undertaken by marginalized sectors especially in the Global South. As noted by Hirschman the transformation of emancipatory energy that begins with social movements in Latin America and later changes into solidarity economic initiatives (and vice versa) is a common trait of the most resilient cooperative experiments (Hirschman, 1984 in Santos & Rodríguez Garavito, 2006, p. xxxiii). The rediscovery of the popular economy (Laville, 2010; Gaiger, Ferrarini & Veronese, 2015) and the renewed interest in cooperatives, particularly in Latin America, are recuperating alternatives to neoliberal capitalism with new ‘forms of production based on principles of democracy, solidarity, equity and environmental sustainability – and on a specific realm of transnational activism...’ (Santos & Rodríguez Garavito, 2006, p. xix).

I believe that besides all of the above-mentioned strategies and the viability of solidarity economics depending on its ability to create unique socioeconomic environments, some other relevant aspects or principles should be added. For example, various informal learning approaches: *learning through struggle* (Foley, 1999), *learning in struggle* (Vieta, 2014a), awakening ‘sleepy knowledge’ (Hall, 2009), ‘cognitive praxis’ as the creative role of consciousness and cognition (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991), informal learning through various participatory practices (Mündel & Schugurensky, 2004), etc. What I observed, and what has not yet been widely discussed, is the emergence of: (1) the ‘we-rationality’; (2) permanent rotation of tasks, rolls, obligations and jobs inside solidary economics as well as within the community; (3) formal, non-formal and informal learning, mutuality, and solidarity exercised within and through assemblies, *reunions*, or communes; (4) diverse consensus reaching processes within the same organisation as a decision making body as well as a learning platform; and (5) anticipating women’s consciousness, self-determination, and autonomy. All these aspects resonate within the learning-by-struggling approach developed and used in *potentias*, as I try to show in the last two sections.

Although debates concerning the meaning and relevance of solidarity economics have been with us for at least two centuries, from early attempts to create alternative communitarian responses to the capitalist economy, it should be recognised that some thinkers and historic periods dominated over others. Great examples of the rise of alternative production in times of hardship, recession, crisis, and even times of war during the first part of the 20th century, were either very rarely discussed under the concept of solidarity economics, or not discussed at all. Examples such as the self-management of six million people in the Spanish Revolution of 1936–1938, or the self-determining anti-fascist communities in Yugoslavia’s liberated territories – with community run schools, hospitals, cultural institutions located among factories, media, and other necessities in the armed struggle – failed to be perceived under the concept of solidarity economics.² Instead, the discussion was concerned with the political

dimension (socialism *versus* democracy) and was replaced with the rise of the modern welfare state in Great Britain and France in the 1950s, with the concept re-emerging again in the 1970s under conditions of economic hardship, and after Margaret Thatcher invented ‘There is no Alternative’. The same blindness exists today with respect to the Kurds. Amid their autonomous libertarian struggle, they are developing democratic confederalism and a stateless democracy with a solidarity economy, community schools, academies, hospitals, strong grass-roots movements, initiatives, etc. (Biehl, 2012; Burç, 2016; Cattivo, 2014; Dirik, 2016). In this sense and under the hardship of societal fascism (Santos, 2014) that we have experienced in Europe in the last decades, we are – again – not able to see and encompass the important and radical transformations that are already taking place – in the sense of the ecology of knowledges and intercultural translations (Santos, 2014): the libertarian struggle of the Kurds is able to combine the theory of Bookchin’s libertarian municipalism, disqualified by western science and activism, with the theories and cognitive praxis of the counterhegemonic struggles in the Global South that are not recognized and therefore not validated by western common sense.

Because solidarity economics often expanded during economic crises and wars, it was often implemented as a strategy to appease people in an uprising (Fals Borda, 1976). Special concern should therefore be placed on the questions of who is running the agenda of solidarity economics and why; what is the main objective of social economics and can it still be considered under the common sense of all-encompassing democracy? Although such discussions are rather difficult to come across in social studies and humanist documents, the past three decades have nevertheless offered some critical reflections on these issues. The example of Bolivia has been discussed by many writers (Galeano, 1971; Zibechi, 2006). While running from the colonial and imperial silver and gold mines to escape oppression and slavery, Bolivia created the highest self-governing city in the world, El Alto, which is also the second largest city in the country, and from the 1950s onwards became a spectacular example of *los microgobiernos barriales* – neighbourhood micro-governments (Mamani, 2005). Similar initiatives supported by marginalized groups and movements have been recognized in many Latin America countries, where the principles of Indian organisations are reactivated to generate original development models (Laville, 2010), or, as in Brasilia, solidarity economic initiatives persisted through indigenous forms of organizing and enhancing community life (Gaiger, Ferrarini & Veronese, 2015, p. 4). There were also many socialist attempts initiated by state authorities in the last two decades. For example, the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, where the transformation was not conceptualised as an economic or political project, but as ‘a pedagogical project that aims to develop “twenty-first century Socialism” through state-grassroots collaboration in the reorganisation of political space in order to develop participatory, democratic institutions and processes’ (Duffy, 2015, p. 650). For all these considerations and open questions, the discussion on solidarity economics should be deepened, since these issues were often not avoided, but rather intentionally excluded from the discussion. Such practices and examples should be recalled, recognized, and validated in order to understand the heterogeneity and complexity in which solidarity economics emerged and developed its emancipatory goals and the means to achieve them. To understand the education and leaning-by-struggling in *potentias* that are changing consciousness and enabling people to take an active part in the creation and re-creation of the *otro mundo*, further discussions and analyses of epistemic communities developed within solidary economics are sorely needed.

Potentia, militant research, and heterotopia

Having been born at the end of the 1970s, I had a chance to experience the last decade of socialism in Yugoslavia, where cooperatives called *zadruga* embodied companionship or community, and the term *zadruga* (singular) is actually just an explanation of who such organisations were really intended for (*za-druga*; *for-the-companion*, i.e. an attempt at collective work). At that time I was not aware of socialism's economic and political advantages and disadvantages, however I noticed how public discourse shifted after balkanisation in 1991, and how instead of solidarity economics, cooperatives were often equated with an informal economy, or 'moonlighting'. The negative connotation persists even today as new economic experiments are labelled social entrepreneurs, cooperatives or 'another economy' rather than *zadruga* although the legal form of this kind of entrepreneurs still exist. Soon after the collapse of *for-the-companion* solidarity in Yugoslavia, particularly after the uprising in Chiapas in 1994 and in Argentina in 2001, I started to research solidarity economics and the emerging alternative struggles of rebel communities in Latin America for my PhD and later post-PhD project. I used an ethnographic research method combined with a militant research approach. Similar studies can be traced back to Italian operaismo and autonomia movements of Panzieri, Tronti, and Bologna. I observed self-determining communities, conducted semi-structured interviews with people in social movements and the academic sphere, recorded testimonies, and researched alongside the oppressed in the sense of a worker's co-research and struggler's co-research (Gregorčič, 2011).

I conducted militant research, an alternative type of qualitative research, as it was introduced after the uprising in Argentina in 2001 by Colectivo Situaciones (2002; 2003; 2005). Militant research practices a 'militant biopolitics' (Hardt, 2011) through community-based action research, a research agenda that resonates with different politics, with *otro mundo*, envisioning the necessity of profoundly different approaches. It attempts to work under the alternative conditions created by the collective itself, and by the ties to counter power in which it is inscribed, pursuing its own efficacy in the production of knowledge useful to the struggles Colectivo Situaciones (2002; 2003; 2005). In fact it moves towards a paradigm 'based on the editing application of prudent knowledges, knowledges that transform research objects into solidary subjects and urge knowledge-based action' (Santos, 2014, p. 163). Militant research tries to generate the capacity for struggles to read themselves and, consequently, to recapture and disseminate the advances and productions of other social practices (Colectivo Situaciones, 2002; 2003; 2005). The researcher-militant is a character made of questions, one who is not saturated by the ideological meanings and models of the world, and one who is authentically anti-pedagogical because he remains faithful to 'not knowing' (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003, p. 8), 'drawing attention to the absent knowledges and absent agents' (Santos, 2014, p. 163). It can be recognized that militant research struggles with expert and dominant knowledge, established research methods, or with the 'monoculture of knowledge' (Santos, 2014) in comparable or parallel ways as the solidarity economy strive for the 'ecology of productiveness' (Santos, 2014). Besides, militant research strengthens epistemological insights at the expense of methodological determination. Since 2003 it has been widely used within counter-hegemonic movements, in alternative art and media, and partly also in academic work (Mato, 2000; Malo, 2004; Shukaitis, Graeber, & Biddle, 2007; Hardt, 2011; Gregorčič, 2011).

During my intense field-research periods, while observing, co-researching, and living with struggling communities, I searched intensely for a proper designation that would authentically identify the various principles and mechanisms of reconstruction or recreation of community, a concept that would explain the new sociality developed by communities, and how revolutionary struggles – by means of reinforcing *otro mundos*, alternative production, democratic democracy, etc. – create processes of self-determination and autonomy. I chose the term *potentia*, which was actually first introduced by Holloway (2002), who claimed that the transformation of power-to (*potentia*) into power-over (*potestas*) implies breaking the social flow of ‘doing’. The separation of the ‘done’ from the ‘doing’, and from the ‘doers’, means that people no longer relate to each other as doers, but as owners (or non-owners) of the done. Relations between people in capitalism exist as relations between things, and people no longer exist as doers. Instead, they are the passive bearers of things (Holloway, 2002, 2010).

This thesis appears in other literature as the alienation and fetishism of Marx, the reification of Lukács, the discipline of Foucault, and the identification of Adorno. I defined *potentia* as the subjectivities of those who strengthen what neoliberalism wanted to eliminate at all costs and with every possible means – sociality. *Potentia* cannot be perceived in terms of revolts, the creation of alternative policies, or emancipation practices of rebellious communities, *grupos de base*, affinity groups, or people in uprisings. But rather in terms of autogenous revolutionary struggles responding to the real, immediate needs of the community and producing new principles, processes, and requirements from within, which not only meet basic human needs, i.e. the material conditions for life, but for the most part create the social, cultural, economic, environmental, and political pre-conditions of sociality (Gregorčič, 2011). *Potentias* are re-organizing and re-globalising all that has been brutally localized and fragmented. With intercultural translations and learning-by-struggling, as discussed in the next two sections, *potentias* invented a multitude of new concepts, ideas, theories and practices, values and commitments, methods, and approaches, all resonating among each other.

The anti-capitalist tradition, the promotion of direct democracy, comradeship and solidarity, all of which are inscribed into the *potentia*, is ‘the tradition of the commune, council, soviet, or assembly’ (Holloway, 2010, p. 40). It is precisely these non-instrumental forms of organisation that focus on the articulation of collective self-determination to which Holloway points, and they are crucial for an understanding of the far-reaching goals of *potentias*. Commune, council, and assembly are the *potentia*’s main arena of encounters, meetings, discussions, and the re-creation of sociality, within which the innovative learning platforms are taking place together with political and social engagement. *Potentias* are not utopias, as defined by Foucault (2010, p. 8), designed to offer us consolation or, if unreal, something which happens within a wonderful, flawless locality, but rather heterotopias, shaking the ground underneath our feet. If utopias ‘permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fabula’ (Foucault, 2010, p. 8), then heterotopias ‘desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences’ (Foucault, 1984; 2010). For *potentias* to be able to persist in their struggle, they have to create their own sanctuary; their own heterotopia; some sort of dimension or a perfect space characterised by the same precision, order, and permeability that is lacking in the spaces of contemporary societies.

Potentias therefore thrive in peripheral conditions, in localised globalism or new cultural imperialism, as defined by Santos (2014), and it is precisely because of this position, situation, and other territorial and political restraints and connections that they cannot be exempt from neo-liberalism. They have no possibility of escaping or watching the deadly processes of global plundering from the outside. Namely, theory forms part of their life practice (cognitive praxis); it is not their vision or observation of life, because the socialisation corpus – habitus – has been inscribing itself for centuries. It is only in forms such as solidarity economics that the *potentia* appears as a subjectivity that can envision a new world, *otro mundo*, or a dignified society, by doing and/or re-creating it on an everyday basis. It is only in such processes where solidarity economics, embedded in *potentias*, reaches its goal – social transformation. By the same token, the *potentia* without solidarity economics cannot sustain its counter-hegemonic economic performance, and consequently also its autonomy and independence, as explained in the next section. As already highlighted in the prior section, solidarity economics is mostly developed by oppressed and marginalised groups and communities, and often in the so-called ‘rest of the world’ spaces, where solidarity economics does not simply refer to some kind of non-profit activity, voluntary work, or third sector, hidden under the umbrella of the welfare state or subsidised by a neoliberal economy, but, as discussed in the next two sections, something which was developed within the *potentia*, or ‘within the de-globalisation of the local and its eventual counter-hegemonic re-globalisation’ (Santos, 2005, p. xxvi). Therefore, solidarity economics must be considered just as much in a political context as in an economic context, since it tends to move towards the transformation of society, and consequently towards the transformation of the economy.

The new language of *potentias*: examples from Asia and Latin America

In this section, I explore *potentias* in two different states and communities which developed solidarity economics on the basis of a political struggle combined with learning-by-struggling. *Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha* (CMM)³, the Chhattisgarh Liberation Front, emerged in 1982 in India, and *Cecosesola*⁴ (*Organismo de Integración Cooperativa* or Organism for Cooperative Integration) was founded in late 1967 in Venezuela. CMM evolved from the labour movement initiated by the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh in 1977 and was led by Shankar Guha Niyogi. Before Niyogi’s murder in 1991, CMM became one of the most progressive revolutionary struggles in independent India, and was created as an exceptionally creative, revolutionary, and socially productive synthesis of self-organised miners, industrial workers, and Adivasi (diverse indigenous communities of small farmers and gatherers) into a so-called green-red coalition. Similarly, the *Cecosesola* was created in an extremely tumultuous political and economic period accompanied by guerrilla movements, a general economic crisis, social want, social unrest, and revolts, all taking place under the imperialist or post-colonialist paradigm already enforcing the neoliberal agenda at that time.

Cecosesola is one of the oldest cooperatives in Latin America that went beyond the economic domain and was able to broaden the scope of production and struggle to community life, livelihood and particularly to the new social and economic relations. It started with a funeral service co-op run by poor inhabitants of Barquisimeto, the capital of Lara. People that could not afford to decently bury their relatives simply created a co-operative, just as CMM created Shaheed Hospital only a year after the movement’s inception as a response to workers not being allowed to bring pregnant

Adivasi woman to public hospital. Soon after Cecosesola formed a transportation service with 127 buses for people who had no access to public transport, and in four years, starting in the mid-1970s, it became the most economically viable and largest local bus service in Barquisimeto. Like CMM members in India, members of Cecosesola faced severe political repression when the dictatorship saw them as its main political adversary. In 1980 the Venezuelan secret service and police arrested cooperative members and confiscated Cecosesola's offices, installations, and buses, and their co-op accrued a debt totalling nearly \$5 million. According to the business code, over the next ten years, Cecosesola would amass a debt equal to 30 times its capital.

Both *potentias* were developed in the conditions of contractual, territorial and societal fascism, as defined by Santos (2007), in the laboratories where the new neoliberal agenda linked to direct foreign investment created special economic zones or parallel-states with governmental lawlessness and administrative deviance, still existing and even expanding today. It was in fact within the domain in which these regions were not even politically democratic but at the same time socially fascist and overall strongly dominated by the hegemonic forces of global capital (ex-imperial and post-colonial *potestas*). Although CMM and Cecosesola used only non-violent means of protests, such as demonstrations (*morchas*) and strikes (*dharnas*), they were savagely put down, especially in the case of CMM, members of which still face terror, imprisonment, slaughter, violence, abuse, murders, and killings under the governmental campaign *Salwa Judum* (operation Green Hunt). Even more significantly, *potentias* experienced suppression from within – in their communities, villages, unions and even households, inside the family – by local, particular and arbitrary repression and fascism, inscribed in their pre-colonial and post-colonial culture, habits, tradition and religion, such as patriarchy, cast, divisions, gender inequality, sexual harassment, pre-arranged (child) marriages, alcoholism, domestic violence, religious splits, fundamentalism and other categorisations. Although the socio-economic preconditions for the development of Cecosesola were less repressive, both *potentias* envisioned the *imaginarium* of autonomous and self-determining communities, a new kind of community-based, participatory, stateless democracy. Both *potentias* underwent a profound and radical transformation within their own communities, villages, and households before they rather spontaneously, unconsciously, and mutually planned and deliberately developed a new paradigm-shift and a new cognitive and political praxis.

Two very important areas in which individuals and communities in *potentias* brought about profound changes, often unnoticed in the literature of social movements and/or alternative economy, are gender emancipation, what I describe as anticipating women's consciousness, women's self-determination, and *zero tolerance* for liquor and other addictions. CMM underwent a very radical anti-liquor campaign at the very beginning of their struggle. It was led by women – mothers, who were struggling to provide for their families. Supported by CMM trade unionists, women brought their drunken husbands in front of the CMM office, where the men had to perform a kind of street theatre on the 'advantages' of liquor consumption. CMM soon prescribed *zero tolerance* for liquor, as later observed by the Zapatistas and many other *potentias*, recognizing this kind of addiction as the first enemy in any liberation process. Observing the anticipation of women's consciousness in *potentias*, I believe that the entire community underwent a profound processes of unlearning of old and relearning of new norms, habits, values, attitudes, practices, beliefs, knowledge, etc., which continues to this day as a never-ending-liberation-process. This process could be analogous to what Illich (2002) called the deschooling of society, by which in the case of *potentias*, individuals and communities have to reject, or completely abandon, many

‘normalities’, traditions, beliefs, dogma, behaviours, etc. inscribed into their history, culture, and ancestral knowledge. Cecosesola members, for example, referred to ‘unlearning of the learned’ and to ‘new daily learning’. The process of unlearning was often initiated by pitting one stereotype against another and *vice versa*. In the case of CMM and the anti-liquor campaign, it was not the shame or dishonour that forced the men to fully abandon liquor, it was the fact that they had to pay a fine to CMM officials and that the money was returned back to their wives. The men abandoned liquor mainly to prevent the women having the power to self-manage the household income, a concept that was considered outrageous in their patriarchal society at that time. Although many new so-called positive discrimination practices were eventually established and internalised, women in *potentias* continue to revolutionize, re-configure and deepen women’s consciousness day-by-day. This was done not only accepting *zero tolerance* for violence, abuse etc., but also defining physical and psychological ‘untouchability’, the right to have their own areas of symbolic and cultural production, a kind of positive discrimination for electing women to positions or roles only by women, while other positions could be voted on, elected, discussed by all genders, etc. Similar and very profound processes can also be observed within the democratic confederalism of the Kurds and in other *potentias*.

Another aspect that is also very relevant for the learning-by-struggling approach in *potentias* is the revival of assemblies, councils, and other community bodies with face-to-face communication, permanent formal and informal deliberative processes. The CMM linked the exploitation of the region to the suppressed cultural identity of Chhattisgarh and revived the *mukhiyas* (elected representatives of worker’s councils, Adivasi assemblies, etc.) as the new political body. *Mukhiyas* were systems of self-determination once used by Adivasi communities, which are now in the service of the working class, the community, and all members of the movement. *Mukhiyas* of CMM and the assemblies of the Zapatistas are the main foundation for community action and development in *potentias*, based on *consensus* and a kind of ‘*criterios colectivos*’ (collective criteria) as defined by Cecosesola. They are a kind of basic platform for community learning and exchange, or a kind of school for how to democratize their own democracy, a platform where they devise and anticipate their own *otro* community development. Under this platform new rationalities emerge, such as the above-mentioned ‘we-rationality’, that grow organically within *potentias* from individual to village, cooperative rationality, to collective rationality, with the discourses of ‘our community’, ‘our struggle’. Also there is a renewed terminology of *compañerismo* (companionship), *comunidad* (community), *cooperación* (cooperation), *comunidad* (communion), and *coordinación* (coordination), what Razeto (1993) defined as ‘factor C’, by which he understood solidarity as a sustainable and effective force that drives production in solidarity economics.

New political bodies (assemblies, *reuniones*, *mukhiyas*, etc.) and the ‘we-rationality’ are interconnected with role and job rotation in *potentias* and a heterogeneous inter-personal and intra-personal, informal, community, unintentional, and planned learning, appearing between tireless dialogues at assemblies, roundtables, and meetings. All cooperatives, organisations, and institutions under the Cecosesola umbrella have developed a complex process of consensus decision-making based on experiences and *criterios colectivos*. Participation in meetings to discuss finances and allocate their surplus into projects that benefit the community at large is actually the one and only tool where – if consensus is reached – power is exercised through a collective decision about further community development. Cecosesola’s members are all an equal part of the horizontal and heterogeneous network of cooperatives and collectives. They do not have

any special financial or economic knowledge, a secret code on how to run a co-op, but they do have very broad, rich, and detailed knowledge about formal and informal communication, conversation, dialogue, discussion, learning, and rich experiences about the collective decision-making process. In a way, Cecosesola holds *conscientização* meetings or, as Freire said (2000 [1972], 2005 [1983]), invites, convinces, encourages, and makes people understand the importance of their participation. In addition, formal and informal education is very much encouraged in Cecosesola, where members are provided funding to finish or continue their secondary education and/or study in Venezuela or abroad, as well as for study visits and exchanges. More than half of the three hundred members have travelled and gained new experiences and insights in this way.

While Cecosesola envisioned new development paths and a new sociality based on popular education, the liberation theology of Freire and Illich, emerging popular economy experiments, and in particular on their learning-by-struggling approach and cognitive praxis, CMM combined the Gandhian pedagogy of basic education (*Nai Taleem* or *Buniyadi Shiksha*) with the intercultural translation of ‘non-existent knowledges’ (Santos, 2014). This is the integration of the ‘world of work’ with the ‘world of knowledge’ and insights from the struggle of indigenous Bolivian mine workers which Domitilla Barrio de Chungara described in her testimony *Si me permiten hablar* (Viezzler, 1977). They developed a working class technological development paradigm, an innovative alternative to advanced technological development, which has caused foreign investors and the Indian government to opt for a reduction of their short-sighted greed for profit, and accept a long-term, less risky, and more environmentally and socially sustainable alternative. Through a judicious combination and complementary application of old and new technologies, and a vision of the long-term sustainable development for the region, CMM has proven that Chhattisgarh industry, which is less intrusive to the environment, can be significantly more effective and profitable than previously predicted by the coal mine owners, foreign investors, and the Indian government. With its working class technological development and redistribution of wealth which began to return to local communities in the form of higher salaries, CMM also set up a number of alternative educational, health care, social, and cultural institutions, as well as alternative bartering systems and innovative forms of working-class management. All of which contributed to a significant developmental boost for the region, influencing in particular the literacy and quality of life of its inhabitants, who had previously lived as second-class citizens. CMM has established a health programme, community rural healthcare centres, and an education programme (22 schools and secondary schools), improved worker settlements, promoted ecological awareness efforts, created newspapers, and done many other things in service of the community. One of the greatest achievements of CMM’s struggle is Shaheed Hospital, entirely funded by miners who simultaneously form the management team of the hospital; each day after they finish their own work in the mines they come to talk to patients and discuss curable illnesses, feelings, and needs. Shaheed Hospital was placed in Dalli Rajhara, which was until then known only as a home for the captive iron ore mines of the Bhilai Steel Plant, the largest integrated steel plant in India and the largest cause of pollution in the region.

Under the motto *sangharsh aur nirman* – economic and political struggles with developmental and cultural renewal activities – and functioning democratically under a collective leadership which had a clear political vision of an alternative social set up and the means to achieve it (Sadgopal & Namra, 1993), throughout the entire process the green-red coalition between the Adivasi and the mine workers also liberated itself from

the caste divisions and religious splits typical of Indian society, something which had not been overcome for centuries. CMM is probably the only example in India where Adivasi, outcasts (Dalits and others), mine and cement workers, doctors, lawyers, and others work together on a daily basis, confronting stereotypes, xenophobia, racism, and other issues through assemblies, meetings, and discussions. The CMM community also liberated itself from sexual discrimination, patriarchy, and other forms of authoritarian mechanisms of oppression because this was an indispensable precondition for the commune, for creating the *potentia*. In the Hemant School over 95% of the students belong to Adivasi and Dalit communities, and more than 60% are girls. By facing discrimination, arrests, displacement, and massacre on a daily basis, CMM has given rise to a new political philosophy of struggle, which is in a dialectical relationship with the reconstruction of a new vision of society. Deeply involved in the struggle for their own causes, they also envision a new world for themselves, and they reconstruct the new world while struggling.

Similarly, the goal of Cecosesola is social transformation, and the economy is secondary. Cecosesola has undergone numerous production and service stages and now, after almost five decades of struggle and re-creation, it connects over eighty organisations, associations, companies, and groups in the states of Lara, Portuguesa, Trujillo, Barinas, and Yaracuy. Today, Cecosesola as an umbrella cooperative – the ‘co-op of co-ops’ – is the single largest food-producing cooperative in the country. With over a thousand workers, it supplies around 30% of the population in Lara, and slightly less in other states, selling over 450 tons of farm produce per week, something which has additional importance considering the worsening global food crisis. Over the last decade, Cecosesola has also established a healthcare network of six community centres and a hospital, treating over 160,000 patients every year, costing approximately 60% less than the healthcare services in private clinics. Very much like the CMM hospital, health care workers encourage preventive treatment and are strive for a different attitude towards patients than what is typical of public healthcare services. Another success of Cecosesola has been in establishing highly complex systems of solidarity; it offers financial help to those who have suffered a loss of produce or income, or lost their apartments, jobs, or health due to a natural or other kind of disaster. It has a network of credit unions, welfare services, newly-founded educational and healthcare centres, and advocates an alternative self-governing policy, which was developed outside of and long before the Bolivarian process, and it maintains this policy to this day. Cecosesola alone created a school that helps different co-ops under its umbrella with accounting, management, and investment decisions through workshops and counselling; in effect it was a ‘pedagogical project’ for solidarity economics before one was imposed by the Bolivarian government.

In both cases – for CMM and Cecosesola – solidarity economics is characterised by negligible material production costs, the use of basic tools, or recycled ones, and technologies already discarded by others. They combine knowledge and practices from the field and use experiences from the new community *habitus*, using its narratives and testimonies as well as their own history of struggles, mistakes, and losses. Both are economically and financially successful: Dalli Rajhara National Bank was awarded for having the highest savings among its inhabitants at the end of 1980 in India; and Cecosesola sells for more than \$32 million in products annually. And both are socially progressive, innovative, and somehow charitable (all primary and secondary schools, universities, the healthcare system, the complex system of solidarity, etc. were initiated and are permanently supported by them). However, *potentias* would not be possible without autonomy and self-determination. For this reason sustainable local food and

other material supplies are the crucial elements incorporated in solidarity economics. However, this is not enough to sustain permanent social transformation.

Discussion: learning-by-struggling

Razeto (1993) observed how unemployed workers, expropriated farmers, housewives, and other impoverished and oppressed people without working experience simply *hacer economia* (created an economy), which brought them direct and material benefits. Similarly I tried to understand how *potencias* re-create the social, cultural, economic, environmental, and political pre-conditions of sociality in the condition of contractual, territorial and societal fascism (Santos, 2007), or what is hidden behind the authentic re-creation of a community. Razeto developed ‘factor C’, while what I tried to somehow develop is the learning-by-struggling approach embedded into *potencias*. For this I analysed learning in two solidarity economics practices, since *potencia* without solidarity economics cannot sustain its counter-hegemonic economic performance, and consequently also its autonomy and independence, as explained in prior section.

Learning-by-struggling exercised at assemblies, meetings, and gatherings in solidarity economics practice (or broader in *potencia*) played a most vital role for re-creating the community. In learning-by-struggling many already defined and encompassed informal learning processes are linked, combined and intertwined. Among them situational and social learning (Pateman, 1988; Wenger 1998; 1999), community learning (Thompson, 2002; Longo, 2007), intergenerational learning (Serrat, Petriwskyj, Villar, & Warburton, 2016), emancipatory learning (Inglis, 1997), transformative learning (Dirkx, 1998; Mezirow, 1991; Illeris, 2014) and mutual and participatory learning (Mündel & Schugurensky, 2004). Learning-by-struggling also contains elements of popular education and new, as yet undefined modes of learning through permanent *encuentros* (encounters or meetings). This is a kind of political educational space of coming together in dialogue, where analyses for communal development, plans for direct actions, fears and desires, despair, and joy are all shared, exchanged, discussed, and considered. These *encuentros* maintain a respect for the heterogeneous proposals and practices derived from the different worlds of historical and political repression and enhance the community and the interdependency between members of the *potencia* and between different *potencias*.

Learning-by-struggling also occurred inside the decision-making arena, in the only tool where – if consensus was reached – power was exercised. The platforms of different assemblies or group discussions that directly or indirectly included all generations in the community, genders, classes, ethnic origins, or religious backgrounds created epistemic communities among *potencia* (and among solidarity economics) members, with the ‘we-rationality’, informal learning, mutuality, and solidarity exercised within and through assemblies, *reunions*, or communes, anticipating women’s consciousness, self-determination, and autonomy, and more. All these aspects already presented in the previous section, resonate within the learning-by-struggling approach developed and used in solidarity economics, that are embedded in *potencias*. The form of their communication was close to storytelling, narration, testimony, using metaphors, surrealism and even myths, although they discussed very concrete and critical topics such as survival, the local economy, boycotts, social actions, and more.

Paradigm shift experiences, mutual learning, participation, and community re-creation strengthened their community identity, enriched culture, and increased resistance, trust, and sociality among *potencia* members. It has increased the quality of

life and finally bonded incompatible the realities of hidden and oppressed subjectivities. It has increased interdependency and enhanced social connectivity among learners. Like the children and teachers in the Zapatista communities, where all are ‘participants in the educational process’ (Gregorčič, 2009), members of alternative educational systems established by *potentias* are often equated with teachers and learners, encounter ‘knowing’ with ‘not knowing’. Finally, adult members of *potentias* were all equal participants in the revolutionary process and experienced horizontal and egalitarian structures of power relations in all new organisations and institutions; they have created, as well as in solidarity economics, mostly exercised at assemblies or meetings. The same egalitarianism and dialogical relationship perpetuated the new social relations, which could be seen in the principle that everyone in the community has to do everything, and no one does anything alone. This is very similar to the principle by which the Zapatista *potentia* in Chiapas runs his or her educational process: *nadie educa a nadie y nadie se educa solo* – no one educates anyone and no one educates itself alone (Freire, 2000 [1972]). Every role in the community and its position is rotated weekly, monthly or annually – which then re-socialises educational and communication bodies (assemblies, *mukhiyas*, councils). Community members participate in rotating positions that operate under the democratic principle of commanding by obeying, struggling, and reconstructing every aspect of their community life. The diverse forms of group discussion and decision-making processes which took place in the form of assemblies, *mukhiyas*, councils, sometimes small collectives, or big round tables were a fundamental communication tool for *potentias*, decision bodies, and sites of learning-by-struggling at the same time and inside the same process.

What the ecological, financial, and economic crisis on the one hand and *potentias* on the other call for is a different way of producing, living, exchanging, thinking, and researching. ‘This has opened up ethical and political possibilities to change pedagogical work in order to discontinue its function in the service of repressive interests of the state and the neoliberal economy and to facilitate its inclusion into emancipatory efforts of counterhegemonic movements’ (Zadnikar, 2015, p. 1). To step on this long path, ‘profoundly different projects are required, including academic ones, for those of us who desire to bring this other world more fully into being’ (Healy, 2014, p. 212). Towards that end and with the recognition that ‘the catalytic power of learning and its sister activity knowledge creation have been undervalued and under-theorized in the discourses of social movements’ (Hall, 2009, p. 46), I tried to reconsider learning by struggling, the informal community learning in the emerging solidarity economics. It was appropriate to lean on militant research, a qualitative research approach embedded into social transformation. Just as Freire and Gramsci’s theory which stressed education for critical consciousness, some contemporary critical educational theorists and researchers (McLaren, 2000; Hall, 2009; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2004; Hardt, 2011; Vieta, 2014a; Duffy, 2015; etc.) are revisiting the links between learning and social change. What I attempted to show in this article in this regard was the need for theoretical work that goes hand in hand with the transformative work (Santos, 2014), methodological innovativeness that strengthens epistemological insights, and the need for attempts to articulate not-yet-defined processes that are appearing in *potentias*. In this respect I emphasized the learning-by-struggling as a vital process for the re-creation of solidarity economics, self-management and *autogestión* in a broader, political sense and self-determination. 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 are re-creating the community of the oppressed into *potencias*.

Endnotes

¹ Militant research in India was done between August and November of 2007, and in Venezuela between April and June of 2008 for my post-doctoral research project: Social Dimensions of Sustainability through the Processes of Dematerialisation and Resocialisation (Slovenian Research Agency, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences). Research in Mexico was done between May and August of 2005 on my own.

² As argued in the next section solidarity economics alludes to self-management as well as to self-determination. This argument supports a profound study of Vieta (2014b) that proved how *autogestión* and the stream of self-determination are relevant for the new emerging cooperativism in 21st century. For Mendizábal and Errasti (2008) *autogestión* has its theoretical roots in the forms of cooperative and collective production practiced in parts of revolutionary Spain in 1936. They define it through 'cooperative production' and 'social and participative democracy' (Mendizábal & Errasti, 2008, p. 1). *Autogestión* for contemporary Latin American theorists most immediately invokes the democratisation of the economic realm at the micro-level of the productive enterprise, such as worker's coops and collectives, worker-recuperated enterprises, rural producer cooperatives, family-based microenterprises, as well as neighbourhood collectives (Cattani, 2004).

³ In order to research the Chhattisgarh Liberation Front in India, I observed, co-researched, and worked with more than 30 miners, trade unionists, Adivasi families, doctors, nurses, etc. for two months. Long semi-structured interviews were done with lawyers Sudha Bharadwaj and Vrinda Grover, doctor Saibal Jana in Shaheed hospital, the leader of CMM in Bhilai Kaladas Dahariya, and many others. In addition to them I also interviewed important theoreticians and critical thinkers: educator Anil Sadgopal, PhD, professor of politics Hargopal, PhD, head of the human rights forum Balagopal, PhD, journalist Subhash Gatade, documentary movie director Amar Kanwar, Telugu revolutionary poet Vaaravara Rao, and many other supporters of the movement such as Rachna Dhingra, Ravi Sinha, Sri Nivas Rao, Ramkunwar Rawat, Madhuri Krishnanswamy, and more.

⁴ To research Cecosesola I discussed, observed, co-researched, and worked with dozens of farmers, various co-op members, nurses, and more for one week in May of 2008, and conducted semi-structured interviews with former co-op president Gustavo Salas Romer. In addition to him I also interviewed: Adriana Ribas, a member of the Ezequiel Zamora National Campesino Front, Douglas Bravo, a former guerrilla fighter and critic of Bolivarian process, Gonzalo Gómez, editor of alternative web magazine, Roland Denis, a member of Militant Assemblies building the territories of People's Government, and many others.

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