SOLIDARITY ECONOMY CENTER

SOLIDARITY ECONOMY, SOLIDARISTIC CULTURE

Nowadays, it is no surprise that wherever we look, we face crises, be it climate change, coronavirus, or the multiple crises in the area of housing, care, or the arts. These crises, however, are not just one-off events that we can simply solve and go on with our lives. Rather, these are crises of capitalism, the socio-economic system we live in, that provides security and the chance of a dignified life for very few. The possible responses to these crises are varied and many, at the global, regional, national, and individual level.

A system of solidarity economy is one of the possible responses aimed at enabling communities to carry out ecologically and socially sustainable, self-sustaining economic activities, independently of market and state. Moreover, they operate in the long run despite the fact that the wider environment in which they are forced to exist is not organized in an anti-capitalist way (not yet, at least). This is why it is extremely important for the solidarity economy movement that the communities that organize it are connected to each other and that knowledge, infrastructure, and resources can be shared not only within a given community but also between groups. Those who operate according to solidary economic models do not, therefore, think that it is not worth giving an individual answer to global problems, as we experience these problems not only at the level of society as a whole but also in our own lives. However, these individual actions must be brought together to become collective action, so we are not just struggling for prosperity on an individual level.

The model of solidarity economy focuses on areas of life that are essential for the reproduction of life, such as housing, childcare, care for the elderly, energy management, and food security. In summary, these are what we call the reproductive sphere. Nowadays, it is often precisely these areas that receive the least attention, all the while neither capitalism nor individual human life would survive in the long run without them. The aim of solidarity economy is, therefore, in many cases, to create models in these areas that could work as alternatives to the current way of organizing these spheres. While capitalist production is based on extraction, that is, the exploitation of some oppressed group and nature, individual responsibility, and competition, production organized on a solidaristic basis serves the reproduction and prosperity of both communities and the individual, and profit is only valuable insofar as it contributes to common well-being. Such an alternative could be, for example, a housing cooperative, where members jointly own and share the property and organizational responsibilities associated with living together, while rent is not paid to serve a profit but to create predictable and sustainable housing. A similar example is the organization of communities where parental care, traditionally the responsibility of women, is shared between parents so that its burden does not weigh on single families entirely.

In our opinion, culture is also an essential part of life, which on the one hand we do not even notice how we shape and produce every day and on the other hand it impacts our lives as well. Of course, it is essential at this point to clarify what we mean by culture: the everyday practices that we all produce and shape in our daily lives in order to interpret the world around us as a communal experience. The culture we produce is influenced by the existing economic and social system, the global pop culture that the former produces, and many other factors that surround us. Culture as such is neither homogenous nor static. Evidently, it is extremely variable, along dimensions of class, gender, and ethnicity. What is certain, however, is that culture is not just a reflection of the system as a whole:

this relationship is much more of a back-and-forth phenomenon in which there is also the potential to change social structures.

As we can see, no matter how we try to conceptualize culture, we will never get such a clear and tangible answer or solution that is typical of other areas of the reproductive sphere. This does not mean, however, that this subject should necessarily be mystified or dismissed, arguing that it is difficult to understand and can be the privilege of only a few, or, closely related to this, that it is all just gentlemanly mischief and the textbook case of contradictions surrounding middle-class movements. After all, on the one hand, culture serves the reproduction of the existing capitalist production relations from the outset, so it is in the interest of every movement to break away from it, and on the other hand, every alternative also needs its own culture. In what follows, we attempt to illustrate with theoretical and practical examples why the solidarity economy movement and those cultural workers who, because of their social position, are able to shape cultural processes more actively, need each other.

The situation of cultural workers

First, it is worth looking at the situation of cultural workers today in society, and in general, who we are talking about when we discuss cultural workers. A cultural worker is someone who is involved in organizing, producing, or disseminating culture in the public sector, such as librarians, people working in houses of culture, and program organizers. Workers in the creative industries who are employed in the media, television, film, or music industries may also belong into this category. Freelancers, creative copywriters, trainees, and curators are also considered cultural workers. Globally and also in Central Eastern Europe, cultural work is also a particularly underpaid occupation, usually involving periodic assignments, project-based operations, often undeclared work, which also means that it does not provide a social safety net. This type of vulnerability and persistent insecurity not only affects cultural workers, as this form of employment became popular in other areas after the 1970s, but it can be said that these are the default conditions for those working in the cultural sphere. The exposedness of cultural work is also exacerbated as the sector has undergone significant commercialization and privatization in recent decades, a process that continues to this day (for example, in 2020 the Hungarian government has taken away the status of a civil servant from cultural workers, which despite low salaries meant relative security for many).

New forms of solidarity

It is justified to ask how cultural workers in essentially precarious situations can contribute to a social movement and what they can gain from participating in a movement that few can usually afford due to the unpaid nature of organizing work.

The solidarity economy movement, like any other social movement, cannot provide an immediate solution to all systemic problems, but it the way it operates and its fundamental

aspirations respond to certain dilemmas. The solidarity economy movement a political and an economic initiative at the same time, as it creates the material basis necessary for a political movement, ensuring the infrastructural self-sufficiency of the movement.
Work and economic relations organized through democratic decision-making, joint ownership, and management, that is, the way in which cooperatives operate, can help to ensure that participation provides greater stability for cooperative members in the long run. On the other hand, unlike many models, here the participants work with a community of which they themselves are members. What this means is that we don't have to work from an external, foreign role, and as a result personal involvement and interest can work differently, as we build the movement for ourselves, not just for others. Thus, personal stakes lessen and rise at the same time: operating in the solidarity economy movement, one does not have to do activist work and come up with solutions to systemic problems on their own. In addition, however, at stake will be not only the well-being of others but also of our own and of our immediate environment. Working in communities can also mean that recognition comes from a wider community, while the urge to improve society can also be embedded in more stable activities. A wide-ranging cooperativist movement can also provide an opportunity for a stronger net of social safety for its members than what participants would individually experience in their daily lives. Related to this is the fact that cooperative networks can provide greater protection from both market and state actors. Furthermore, it is an important aspect that initiatives in the cultural sphere, such as socially engaged, participatory arts, or different forms of philanthropy, can be transformed and that certain features (such as community organization, activist cultural organizing, art pedagogy) can be part of a wider social movement, which can also be reinforced by offering a new perspective and sustainability.

The underfunding of the arts and culture sphere in many cases forces cultural workers to exploit themselves and each other on the one hand and to compete with each other on the other. This lack of resources is very familiar to semi-peripheral social movements as well, and it can be of great help to share various good practices that focus more on cost reduction and cooperation. Such practices include, for example, the recycling of everyday objects, materials, the knowledge coming from DIY, access to extensive informal networks, and the active use of various creative forms, which, by implication, are used more often and more directly by cultural workers in their work than others. In the cultural sphere, it is often expected that a person has an extremely wide range of expertise: marketing, self-management, editing, communicating with communities, accounting, and the list goes on. These organizational and communication skills, which are taken for granted within the cultural sphere, can be very highly valued and important skills in a movement.

Cultural workers can also contribute a great deal to the solidarity economy movement by being capable of fostering the development of the culture of the movement. However, we need to be aware that being accustomed to patriarchal and capitalist world order, we need to learn to forget many things and that this does not happen very quickly and without a better understanding of the root of the problem. It also helps to create new, alternative cultural practices that better reflect the situations in which we exist and those in which we strive to exist. It is important to involve people in creating these with more experience in how, for example, pedagogical and artistic methods can be used to promote

not only de-learning poor community patterns and modes of operation but also the democratic creation of new alternatives. This movement culture is essential for people to have more than a technocratic, objective attitude towards the movement, and to find new habitual-emotional attachment to it (be it a choir, a craft workshop, or various cultural programs). Such cultural forms can also reinforce existing initiatives of solidarity economy (a collective housing model, for example, works not only because it offers more affordable housing, but also because those who live in it like the way they live together). These cultural forms are also much less talked about within the movement itself, while creative agencies, influencers, and the intellectuals of capitalist society are constantly producing cultural, identity, and consumption patterns that normalize exploitation. This can only be overcome if we create not only economic but also community, spiritual, emotional, and cultural alternatives to the profit-oriented economic model, a cause to which cultural workers can contribute greatly.

Practical examples

In the following, we would like to present some concrete practical examples. We consider them important not primarily because we see them as exact examples to follow, but because they are relatively long-term initiatives intertwined with other solidarity economy institutions, and the participation and skills of cultural workers, as mentioned earlier, are essential in launching and managing them.

AFRIKAANDERWIJK COOPERATION

Afrikaanderwijk Cooperation was launched as an arts program in 2008 and has since become an extensive cooperative network in one of Rotterdam's neighborhoods with mostly immigrant inhabitants. The aim of the arts initiative was to develop a participatory, community-based arts program that allows for the creation of a long-term, self-sustaining organization. This is important because one of the weak points of participatory arts programs is that socially sensitive projects can only be intermittent interventions without long-term impact and change. To this end, the arts group and the residents identified the problems that affect the everyday lives of the locals the most, mainly having to do with unemployment. The residents also had a lot of knowledge in the fields of handicrafts and gastronomy and also operated a local market. The goal was for residents to get a job within the neighborhood by institutionalizing and formalizing their previously informal work, their existing skills, and resources using the cooperative model, so that the income generated can remain theirs as well.

In this vein, the aim of the first art initiative was to promote the quarter's market in the city and to create new ones employing many methods from arts (such as decorating stalls, rearranging the market, inventing new products from available raw materials), and in collaboration locals, cultural programs were organized in the area of the markets. Then, with the help of the municipality, they were able to rent out a kitchen and a workshop, where catering and clothing workshop now operates self-sufficiently.

The initiatives first operated as non-profit arts foundations, and the start-up capital needed was also raised through arts and cultural grants. The Afrikaanderwijk umbrella cooperative was founded in 2013, by which time both the catering and the textile workshop were able to operate independently. Along with local businesses, the Freehouse Foundation (the founding organization) is also a member of the cooperative. Participating businesses also offer their services on a market basis and to municipalities, with the goal of keeping revenue with cooperative members. Currently, half of the revenue goes to members, a quarter to the cooperative, and the last quarter goes to cultural and social programs within the district.

STAD IN DE MAAK

Stad in de Maak (Building the City) is an organization initiated by cultural workers involved in housing issues, also based in Rotterdam just as the Afrikaanderwijk Cooperation. Stad in de Maak was founded after the 2008 economic crisis by Dutch architects formerly engaged in socially engaged arts. Their goal was to create a housing cooperative, meaning much lower rents for residents, typically cultural workers in a vulnerable position themselves. To this end, buildings destined for demolition were rented out for the long term (for a maximum of 10 years) by requesting the property company, through the local government, to remit the planned maintenance cost for 10 years, and using it to make the buildings waiting to be demolished habitable. Their long-term goal is to withdraw the properties from the real estate market by purchasing them (this endeavor is still ongoing), thus ensuring that the cooperative form is maintained. In the cooperative's housing model, members pay rent in proportion to their earnings, and on the lower levels, they operate communal facilities and services such as laundry, printer, babysitting, and movie theater. They support themselves from the income of these and the rents. They also regularly organize community events, drama events, film and dinner evenings for the neighborhood and residents of the building, and also run community offices and workshops.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

There are also plenty of cultural initiatives that aim for a smaller scale. We can also find a large number of organizations that deal with the cooperativisation of the cultural sphere so that culture is as widely available as possible, and certain institutions can operate on a more solidary basis. Examples are the Zagreb-based Clubture Network, which has been bringing together cultural and artistic initiatives in post-Yugoslav countries since 2002, or Timelab in Ghent, where art residency programs are transformed into works of art that can then be used by communities. These scholarship programs do not specifically expect works of art in return from creators, but essentially seek to provide a safe existence for young career starters. For example, the Romanian members of the Tranzit network of contemporary art in Central Eastern Europe have also embarked on various permacultural initiatives in Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca, operating community gardens in both places.. In Bucharest, a community house has also been set up, providing an independent space for the local cultural and artistic scene, as well as a garden thanks to the specific design of the building.
Other initiatives include various cooperative games such as Commonspoly or the Organize! advocacy board game by the School of Public Life (Közélet Iskolája). Other organizations

are primarily looking to create spaces where locals have the opportunity to meet, organize, politicize and engage in community activities, such as the Oslo Flatbread Society, which has a community garden and bakery, or the Land in Thailand, where community-owned rice fields are run by a housing cooperative and where young cultural workers often turn up.

Dilemmas and issues

As we can see, most of the examples described above are Western European initiatives. Due to their advantageous position in global capitalism, these countries have more infrastructure available to launch and sustain such initiatives. Applications and scholarships of larger scales are available, and the production of knowledge about cooperatives can also be more concentrated and supported.
It is very important to see the material conditions that result in a different situation in a Central Eastern European environment. The underfunding of the cultural sphere makes it fundamentally difficult to build independent institutions, and it is also worth reckoning that the state's presence is significantly stronger in the region. It follows that for cultural initiatives it is worth joining and cooperating with existing initiatives in other areas, possibly with a more stable infrastructural background. Such an existing initiative could be, for example, the housing or care cooperative of the Solidarity Economy Center and it should also be seen in the examples presented earlier that Stad in de Maak simultaneously formed a housing cooperative and Afrikaanderwijk began to work with the already existing market infrastructure of the district. On the other hand, it is also extremely important to think not only about market participants, but also about relations with local governments and the state, and to map out the possibilities in practice. For this, the semi-permeable membrane model of the solidarity economy may be useful, which seeks to attract external resources and at the same time keep within the cooperative with solidaristic modes of operation. In doing so, they seek to avoid coercive bargains that push initiatives to the point where they lose their political agenda and radicality and merge into, for example, the state institutional system.

Another important and thought-provoking aspect is the question of the community, such as how to avoid the mystification of communities. It is essential to realize that by themselves neither the cooperative model nor working for the community is a guarantee that these initiatives will truly work in a democratically, socially, and ecologically sustainable way. More importantly, neither cooperative nor community should be perceived as abstract notions but as concrete practical factors. Different strategies can be applied in each situation, different tensions, dilemmas, and needs arise in each community, and there is no single universal approach that can solve them, there are only good practices that help to outline directions. Such good practice could be, for example, cooperation with the already mentioned existing reproductive initiatives in the case of Stad in de Maak and Afrikaanderwijk Cooperation. These programs were based on existing material and social conditions and responded directly to current problems such as the housing crisis or unemployment. In the case of Afrikaanderwijk, it is also important that they aim to formalize and politicize existing informal solidarity practices necessary for self-sufficiency so that these practices do not engage with the problems produced by capitalism on a symptomatic level, but work against it.

Avanti

What we have shown above is how cultural workers and the solidarity economy movement can reinforce and mutually support each other. We hope that while the thin line between self-exploitation and self-interest is often difficult to see and follow, this publication and the examples presented will help to better understand, both in theory and in practice, what options we have for action.

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