



## Origins and histories

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## 10. Origins and histories

*Jean-Louis Laville*

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### INTRODUCTION

The tensions between capitalism and democracy have become obvious in the past few decades, and the social and solidarity economy's (SSE) significance has to be seen in this context. But there is also a longer story that this entry aims to reconstruct by identifying three periods in the past two centuries.

Generally speaking, the official narrative claims that a few utopian experiments initiated by pioneer worker and peasant movements failed in the early 19th century. To counter this superficial view, this first period will be described through a closer examination of the content of these 'real utopias' (Wright 2010), which constituted a form of associationalism based on democratic solidarity (see also entry 15, 'Associations and Associationalism').

The second period saw the recognition of different legal statuses: those of the cooperative, the mutual society and the nonprofit organization (see also entry 46, 'Legal Frameworks and Laws'). Since the end of the 19th century, they have been the components of a social economy, defined as a set of non-capitalist organizations operating within an institutional framework based on the separation between the market economy and the welfare state, particularly during the post-Second World War economic expansion (1945–75).

The third period links the different crises of the late 20th century with the emergence of the solidarity economy during the same period, which can also be considered as a resurgence of the associationalist movement. The origins and histories allow us to consider the significance of the SSE in the 21st century, and to address the conditions to concretize its transformative potential.

### 10.1 A MULTIDIMENSIONAL, SOLIDARITY-BASED ASSOCIATIONALISM: THE HIDDEN SOURCES OF THE SSE

The shockwaves of revolutions in the 18th and 19th centuries created new social demands all over the world. In South America, as well as in North America and Europe, they generated movements calling for emancipation through a new relationship between the political and economic spheres.

#### **The Diverse Profiles of Solidarity-Based Associations**

During colonization, South America was pillaged. Millions of Africans were enslaved, torn from their countries to be used as forced labour. They gathered together in mutual assistance organizations, mainly for religious celebrations and tributes to the dead. Elsewhere, poor colonists, peasants and artisans settled in lands unwanted by the oligarchy. All of them constituted a popular economy.

In the first half of the 19th century, anti-colonialist social movements escalated in South America. While the popular economy in its diverse forms survived, its internal structure was modified. For example, in Colombia, the Democratic Republican Society of Progressive Artisans and Laborers was created. In Brazil, former slaves resorted to economic survival strategies, collectively taking possession of the land. These *kilombos* (or *quilombo*, the term derived from Angola Jaga *kilombo*) (Nascimento 1977) were extensions of the semi-formal organizations through which they tried to deal with day-to-day problems. In Chile, a form of popular entrepreneurship was developed by the *labradores* over almost 150 years – from 1700 to 1850 – in agriculture, animal husbandry, pre-industrial mining and forestry operations, the small businesses run by women and also in artisanal production. In Santiago in the mid-19th century, more than half of the population was involved, in one way or another, in the popular industry established by artisans. Using local resources, they relied on community labour known as *la minga*.

The associative impulse allowing to change the popular economy in South America was also used in North America to demand civil rights. From the beginning of the 19th century, African Americans succeeded in building their own institutions: small mutual aid groups promoting self-organization and civic virtue (see also entry 12, ‘The Black Social Economy’ and entry 14, ‘African American and Distributive Justice’) (Hosseini 2019; Gordon-Nembhard 2014). For example, in the mid-1820s, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded by Bishop Richard Allen in 1816, had more than 1000 members. Almost a century later, this stance led famous African American activist and scholar William E.B. Du Bois (quoted in George 1973) to conclude that this church was one of the greatest Black organizations in the world, where religious and economic activities always had a political dimension. The church supported members in need by providing start-up capital to help small entrepreneurs. It also became a seat of protest. As they published petitions and newspapers and set up national antiracist conventions, African American churches were transformed into spaces of struggle against continuing discrimination.

Women, meanwhile, were kept away from the public sphere through an established separation between the domestic and political domains, reinforced by customary law. To avoid endlessly coming up against a wall of incomprehension, some women made their way toward a political existence through economic organizations: mainly refuges and daily support for poor women and their children. They benefited from donations from rural public authorities in North Carolina, as well as urban areas such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans and New York. Women were less reluctant than men to seek government funding, even soliciting help from local councils for this purpose. Progressively, they gained a reputation and influenced policies through a variety of means: public meetings, petitions, lobbying, and so on.

In Europe, workers’ associative practices – which centred on the protection of professional skills – were experienced as an extension of their political emancipation. In the UK, with the development of forms of solidarity among artisans and manual workers determined to collectively defend their interests, the mutually supportive alliance between political emancipation and economic independence assumed an unexpected scale when these artisans and workers forcefully demanded that their collective forms of the organization be recognized.

In France, during the 1830s, the meaning of purposeful political action was re-examined in direct relation to social inequality. In 1848, a number of decisions were quickly made regarding the right to work, the abolition of the death penalty and slavery, and the freedom of the press, of assembly and of association. *Compagnonnages*, or French guilds, which were

mutual help organizations, secularized and became associations where workers were no longer subject to a hierarchy but determined their own governance. Meanwhile, mutual aid societies, which evolved from guilds, developed in a similar way to those in the UK and they provided unemployed or striking workers with help. These tools of struggle, which wove together corporatism, mutualism and republicanism, laid the groundwork for trade unions.

Although the UK and France are emblematic examples, others can be cited in the countries of the Iberian Peninsula, such as Spain, where the 1836 legislation against guilds failed to prevent the development of a labour movement. Thus mutual aid societies came into being in 1841; in 1887 there were 664 of them, and in 1904 they numbered 1271, with 238 351 members. They were combined with other forms of advocacy in multifunctional associative initiatives. Little by little, a patchwork of collective entities was established that borrowed from the popular economy but also demonstrated a desire for independence and collective pride.

### **The Common Features of Solidarity Associationalism**

Despite their diversity, all the initiatives mentioned above share certain characteristics. They create social relationships based on freedom of membership and equality between participants. These are relationships of solidarity that aim to bring lived realities into line with the principles adopted following the democratic revolutions. Social groups that have been discriminated against can decide to self-organize to fight the inequalities of which they are victims, sharing the idea that they alone can contribute to their own emancipation.

Thus the democratic solidarity invented amid the proliferation of associations differed from the traditional solidarities that endorsed age and gender differences, but it nonetheless originated in previous forms of belonging. Social change would not be achieved by breaking away from pre-existing communities, but by building on them and transforming them. Thus, mutual societies in South America changed their internal rules to give everyone the same formal power to make decisions; mutual aid societies in Europe adopted a more horizontal way of operating, soliciting the participation of all.

These changes also reflected a desire to escape the control exercised by the elites. Workers and peasants affirmed their pride in being able to act without the permission of those who had previously oppressed them. Collective dignity was asserted through street demonstrations, public events that expressed the pride of being rid of the tutelage of the elites.

This societal movement linked together economic, social and political issues. Women and African Americans in North America organized forms of mutual aid, but these social activities were inseparable from protests against exclusion from the political sphere (see also entry 12, 'The Black Social Economy' and entry 14, 'African American and Distributive Justice'). When providing these social services, their aim was to make an argument, to engage with local administrations and prove to them that their activities were useful, and demonstrate that they should therefore be included in democratic debate. Their economic activities thus had a social dimension as well as a political impact. The project of change implicitly defended by associationalism is also fundamentally governed by the rejection of violence. It places its faith in mutual learning and shared experience, which it believes will foster the recognition of more inclusive forms of citizenship.

Recovering the forgotten memory of solidarity-based associationalism allows us to show that it was not simply the application of utopian doctrines (by Fourier, Owen, Saint-Simon,

and so on). This phenomenon of self-organization was much broader. The importance of its message for today's SSE lies in the fact that it sought to embrace diversity in order to broaden and deepen democracy, which is considered to be a form of life (Dewey 1939, 240–45) that encompassed the economic sphere.

## 10.2 FROM ASSOCIATIONALISM TO SOCIAL ECONOMY

When the 'second' 19th century, the era of capital and empires, succeeded the 'first' 19th century, the era of revolutions – to use Erik Hobsbawm's evocative terms – associationalism and its demand for democratization gave way to the economic priority of industrial development. This was supposed to bring wealth to nations and their populations, ultimately resolving the social question.

In this productivist vision, solidarity was redefined in a more restrictive way. As mentioned above, the first form of solidarity was democratic. Based on mutual aid as well as on the expression of demands, it drew on both self-organization and social movement forms, which presupposed equal rights among the people committed to it. In opposition to this approach to solidarity, another approach was increasingly put forward, replacing notions of equality with those of benevolence and solicitude. This second form of solidarity was philanthropic solidarity, which referred to the vision of an ethical society where citizens motivated by altruism voluntarily fulfil their duties toward one another.

### **From Philanthropic Solidarity to the Welfare State**

The emergence of this second form of solidarity was accompanied by discrimination against democratic solidarity. The existence of a popular economy in the countries of the South was considered proof that they were lagging behind others. From this progressivist perspective, history was seen as a succession of 'stages' of development, and the popular economy became a sign of economic backwardness. It was defined by what it lacked (legality, rationality, structure, social and legal protection, and a barrier to entry), and by its weaknesses (in terms of capital invested, skill levels, technological development and size).

Women and African Americans were persecuted, while charitable organizations saw their political aspirations stifled by male elites' benevolence. This process of normalization was achieved either through men taking direct control, or through paternalism that offered protection to middle-class white women as long as they complied with the behaviours that men considered appropriate to their gender (Ryan 1990). Although the organizations run by these women were weakened by male pressure, the situation of African American women was much worse (see also entry 12, 'The Black Social Economy' and entry 14, 'African American and Distributive Justice'). As victims of overt hostility, they had to fight with their limited resources for education and assistance, as well as for the assertion of their identity.

In parallel to this, the first-ever Farmers' Alliance was established, with its 400 000 members aiming to organize cooperatives to sell their produce. Large farmers' and workers' movements emerged between 1880 and 1890. Unionist troops were mobilized, and recent immigrants, who were prisoners of their own material distress, were used to break the strikes. The year of the 'big labour revolt' was 1886, with 1400 strikes mobilizing 500 000 workers. The scale of these confrontations led to their being referred to as a 'civil war' by Howard Zinn (2015).

Similar cleavages opened up in the UK. Aiming for a productive system based on mutualism as an alternative to capitalism, the working class defended themselves. But they were unable to bridge the differences between skilled workers undergoing a loss of status and unskilled workers, nor to form an alliance with the bourgeoisie, whose inegalitarian ideology was reinforced by the fear of revolution. The separation between the 'two nations' was inscribed in the 1832 electoral franchise, and the force of the counter-revolution isolated a movement toward equality, which remained a workers' movement. As in Great Britain and Germany during the same period, more stringent legislation was passed relating to the poor, who were considered responsible for their own plight. Murders and atrocities, coupled with the infiltration of movements and the violation of freedoms, sometimes led to their radicalization.

Through the repression and control of independent associations, and with the discouragement of workers' associations and the concomitant promotion of charitable organizations and patronage structures, this period redefined the contours of the associative map in favour of the social elites. But despite all the advantages conferred on philanthropic solidarity, social problems persisted. Their threat to social stability made the philanthropic solution – which attributed unequal conditions solely to individual responsibility – untenable.

This is why, from the end of the 19th century onwards, a democratic version of solidarity once again came to the fore, but this time it took on a new shape. Now democratic solidarity became the responsibility of the state, which enforced the rule of law. The social domain was framed as different from the economy and complementary because it was supposed to re-embed market capitalism in collective norms determined by representative democracy.

The institutional architecture that characterized the 20th century separated the economy, defined as the market, and the social, understood as the domain in which the state intervenes. The state's corrective role was emphasized after the Second World War when an international consensus emerged that, as stated in the 1944 Philadelphia Declaration, economic development was not an end in itself, but a means to achieve social development. Even though it took the form of various regimes, during this period the welfare state expanded on all continents, as social security systems were extended and the resources allocated to social policies increased.

### **The Recognition of the Social Economy: Benefits and Limitations**

Both before and after the emergence of the welfare state, popular struggles and philanthropic concerns led to the recognition of social economy organizations in which a category of stakeholders other than investors was given beneficiary status.

That said, these legal statutes introduced distinctions contrary to the initial associationalist ethos. Cooperatives were distinguished from mutuals and nonprofit organizations. They became part of the market economy and were engaged in sectors of activity with low capital intensity. The general logic of concentration of the means of production forced them to specialize in one core activity related to their members' identity.

The emergence of the welfare state in turn modified the role played by mutuals. As noted previously, many initiatives were organized in the 19th century to deal with the problems of work incapacity, sickness and old age on a solidarity basis by bringing together the members of a profession, sector or locality. They were tolerated and monitored by the authorities. Later, the levels of contributions and benefits, and the way they were collected and distributed, were standardized at the national level. After the end of the Second World War, the types of economic activity that these mutuals were engaged in led to their interdependence with social

security systems, and mutual health insurance societies became social protection organizations that complemented compulsory schemes. Increasing competition in the insurance sector put them under severe strain, similar to that experienced by mutual insurance companies covering property-related risks.

In the United States, as in many southern countries, the weak development of the state largely left social services in the hands of families, resulting in gender inequalities that non-profit organizations rarely questioned. In Europe, however, where the state's functions were more expansive, nonprofits participated in the development and delivery of social services and were incorporated into welfare state regimes.

The social economy consequently gained economic significance, but it was also neglected in the political and economic debates focused on the respective roles of the market and state. The cost of this expansion was that its constituent entities became subject to institutional isomorphism: cooperatives in competition with capitalist enterprises underwent market isomorphism, while mutuals and associations were reframed by welfare state regimes and submitted to state isomorphism.

### 10.3 THE EMERGENCE OF SOLIDARITY INITIATIVES

When the synergy between market and state entered into crisis in the last decades of the 20th century, new types of solidarity became visible (detailed for Europe, South America, Laville, 2023).

#### **Some Local and International Initiatives**

In South America, there has been a rediscovery of the popular economy. Based on mutual help and shared ownership of the means of production, new popular initiatives have sprung up, including worker takeovers; organizations of the unemployed who sought work collectively; community food groups, such as collective kitchens and vegetable gardens; organizations dedicated to problems of housing, electricity and drinking water; pre-cooperative self-building organizations; and associations for providing healthcare and cultural services to the community. These initiatives can be seen in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru or Uruguay. They are supported by Black and indigenous movements (Alvarez et al. 1998, 333), as in the countries of the Andes, where the principles of the indigenous organizations have been reactivated to generate original development models, such as the United Nations prize-winning Nasa project in Colombia.

Another example is the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil, which came into being in 1984. By 2000, 250 000 families had reappropriated unoccupied and unproductive land. At that point, the movement included around 50 farming cooperatives involving 2300 families, and around 30 service cooperatives benefiting 12 000 families.

In these cases, the public dimension of popular economic activity is obvious. In these cases, the fight for better living conditions is intrinsically linked to the fight for the rights of citizenship. This struggle oscillates between protests and the self-resolution of problems, without separating material questions from questions related to living conditions and coexistence. The same point is made by women's groups that are opposed to the dichotomy between public and private, production and reproduction (Verschuur et al. 2021). Women are in the majority

in popular initiatives because they believe these collective initiatives might help to identify and contextualize their needs so that they can express them and bring them into the public sphere. Given the failure of standardized universal measures, these initiatives are a means of consolidating rights and translating them into capacities for action, thanks to the collective, which is a resource for developing self-confidence, relieving the weight of responsibilities assumed in the family sphere, and reconciling them with a commitment to social justice. These collective actions aim first and foremost to be pragmatic responses to the problems of daily life. However, they also formulate societal and environmental claims, establishing a link with ecological feminism in opposition to an economist's conception of wealth.

These popular economic activities in the South have prompted a shift in attitudes to activities that involve caring for others, including a more equal distribution of these tasks and heightened awareness as to the wealth that they generate. In this respect, they are very similar to initiatives established in the North in the 1980s under the name of 'proximity' or 'community' services. These initiatives proposed new organizational forms and solutions to local social problems.

In the Scandinavian countries, the 'cooperatization' of social services is primarily a way of increasing the role of users – as demonstrated in parent-run crèches – and was accepted under the pressure of financial constraints affecting the public sector. In France, one of the main examples of these innovations has been the movement for childcare involving parents' participation. In the United Kingdom in the 1990s, associations representing cultural minorities and disabled people developed radical approaches that also encouraged user participation. In the sphere of local development, grassroots community approaches appeared, including community enterprises (which are numerous in Scotland), community foundations and community development trusts.

Among the attempts to regenerate local economies, there is also a movement to revive the concept of popular credit present in Proudhon's exchange bank project in France, Raiffeisen's mutual agricultural credit bank and Schulze-Delitzsch's popular bank in Germany, and the credit unions in the United Kingdom. This revival is being led by the old mutualist and cooperative banks, who are returning in a certain sense to their original aims, as well as by new players. The idea that money should be at the service of social ties is being extended in the exchange of goods, services and knowledge, organized through social currencies. The goal is no longer to democratize access to the official currency, but to create a unit of calculation that is shared among the members of the same association. Unlike national currencies, social and alternative currencies, which are issued by a group of citizens that gives them a name, are currencies that escape state monopolies. They are designed to develop interpersonal relations, constituting spaces of trust where rules of trade are negotiated, which enables local capabilities other than those mobilized by mercantile production to be valued. Among them are Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS), which appeared in 1983 and involve – as far as can be gleaned from the scant information available – over 1.5 million members spread over more than 2500 associations in around 30 countries, particularly in the West, South America and Japan. A few examples are the Italian time banks, French Local Exchange Systems (SEL) and the German Tauschring.

Another novelty was the emergence of cooperation between the North and South. Resulting from the encounter between representatives of the South, who demanded that development aid be converted into fair trading practices, and environmentalist and human rights associations in the North, fair trade established two aims from the outset. The first was to improve the



lives of small producers in the South, marginalized due to their lack of financial resources and experience, by creating channels for their agricultural produce and handicrafts to be sold to consumers in the North who wished to contribute to greater solidarity between North and South. The second was to build a network of consumers by raising public awareness about the injustices of the rules of international trade, and through activism that targeted political and economic decision-makers. The issues addressed by fair trade are also tackled by initiatives such as responsible solidarity consumption and solidarity tourism networks.

## 10.4 A NEW PROBLEM

None of these initiatives, which have gained legal recognition in various countries, can be fully understood through the third sector approach, which establishes a watertight separation between associations and cooperatives. This separation is increasingly challenged by reality when initiatives use either associative or cooperative status to carry out economic activities that they see as means at the service of ends related to democratic solidarity. Thus, in the case of organic farming, renewable energy and economic integration, such initiatives internalize environmental and social costs that are externalized by other companies. In fair trade, solidarity finance and proximity services, there is also respect for criteria of social justice and the accessibility of services. By raising the question of the aim of economic activities, the solidarity economy has brought notions of social utility and collective interest to the public's attention.

The dual focus – both political and economic – of the solidarity economy approach underlines the need for associative, cooperative and mutualist initiatives to influence institutional arrangements. The social economy has not been able to counter the institutional isomorphism created by the division and complementarity between the market and welfare state. The social enterprise approach is also insufficient because it is too centred on the economic success of organizations, and it has put the political to one side. Indeed, as a reaction to the perverse effects of this focus on economic success, initiatives that aim to be both citizen-oriented and entrepreneurial have reinforced the political aspects of their activities. But this will have a limited effect if these initiatives are unable to promote democracy in both their internal functioning and their external expression. Beyond looking inwards at their own organization, they must also reflect on the reasons why they find it so hard to scale up. Through its dual focus, the solidarity economy questions the categories of economics at both conceptual and empirical levels, refusing to limit economic phenomena to those that are defined as such by economic orthodoxy. It also questions orthodox economic science's power to delimit reality, fostering more general reflection on how the economy is defined and instituted (see also entry 7, 'Heterodox Economics').

## CONCLUSION

The social and solidarity economy might be nothing more than a tactical compromise, but it might also generate new momentum by combining the social economy tradition with the emergent solidarity economy. One of the reasons why this entry focuses on the origins and histories of the SSE is to create this new momentum.

To ensure that this new momentum is generated, three key questions are required:

- Better cooperation between the components of the SSE, so that established initiatives are linked to less-established ones, is necessary for the improvement of collective strength in particular countries.
- Alliances with all the social movements, such as trade unions, and collective actions working to bring about a solidary and ecological transition, are necessary to avoid isomorphic tendencies.
- Participation of the SSE in co-constructing public policies, in order both to move beyond the margins and to prevent a loss of distinctiveness through absorption into the mainstream.

The economy cannot be conflated with the market alone, and social solidarity cannot be conflated with the state alone. The SSE approach by no means has all the virtues – it can often drift towards the commercial and the bureaucratic – but it gives form to social practices that cannot find a home elsewhere. For this reason, it can give politics a place that economism refuses to give it, without thereby focusing on the state. It transforms economic activities and their institutionalization into phenomena that are simultaneously economic and democratic.

This penetration of democratic principles into activities of production, trade, commerce, savings and consumption is necessary to strengthen democracy and avert a slide into technocracy or authoritarianism. Without rebalancing economic conditions, political equality cannot be preserved. The SSE is the new label for initiatives that have long argued for a democratization of the economy. Its further development is crucial for the future of democracy (Gibson-Graham 2006; Laville 2015, 2023; Hart et al. 2010).

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