

Short paper abstract:

Culture and communication are areas under the all-embracing infinite growth and development discourse. The concept of a “creative economy” is a clear example which originally defined culture just as another commodity product to be protected by intellectual property rights, produced only individually that contributes to growth through wealth creation. Such market based approach has already been criticized by actual and older theorists. Nevertheless it is still prevalent or expanding to so called “developing” countries, where serious cultural inequalities exist that are even reinforced by such approach. Just to mention two, one is a clear dependence from cultural outputs coming from economically better-off countries. A second one is the problem of concentration, which usually generates a cultural dependence of all cities in these countries with their biggest metropolis, because the overwhelming dominance of certain parts of cultural diffusion circuits over others imply that only in particular cities can something of value be produced. This reinforces a “stigma” in the cultural sphere, a symbolic violence against communities, which leads to the loss of their own capacities and self-esteem for cultural production. Thus a dynamic against a de-growth project is established, which justifies the need to increase research and discussions in such areas, apart from new actions to counterattack these challenges.

To illustrate general points on the importance of culture and communication for any sort of de-growth project, I will base my presentation on the innovative practices that the Brazilian network “*Fora do Eixo*” (Off Axis) has been using. This is a network of more than 100 self-organized cultural “collectives” that challenges a growth only oriented and concentrated development project in the area of culture and communication. To understand the importance of the network, it is relevant to mention some facts about the Brazilian context. Most cultural production is concentrated on the axis, made up by the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, with the former having an even larger concentration of cultural activities. Something similar can be said in terms of communications, but in this case the concentration is not only geographically defined, but also determined by ownership of few economic groups, like the most known “O’Globo communications” network. Thus, in a country with continental size (the 5th largest in the world), just 2 cities influence strongly commercial cultural production, guided by a growth oriented approach, and limiting professional opportunities of those off the axis. As a response, the Fora do Eixo circuit emerged in 2005 in the context of a change in the Brazilian music sector produced by the introduction of digital technologies for distribution. Fora do Eixo began in 4 small cities located off the axis (hence its name), and employed innovative practices that challenged such logic. It adopted and adapted practices of the social and solidarity economy to the cultural sector, such as using local currencies. These, among other instruments, allowed the network to grow in size and to become in the last 2 years a social movement promoting culture in Brazil. This challenged the standard model, reducing the influence of intermediaries and opened new opportunities for groups far from the axis. It is noteworthy to highlight that the movement began during a new a political context in the country under president Lula that inaugurated innovative and inclusive cultural policies.

The network expresses its desire to create “*a new possible world*”. Such aim is not only reflected in their political manifests that challenge a growth only based society, but more

importantly in their daily actions. Thus, the aim of my presentation is to characterize their main practices and social technologies. In particular, I will focus with more detail on the following three. First, a description will be made of the local currencies used by different nodes of the network to promote solidarity practices, which allowed to: unplug the dependence and poverty cycles that the dominant system creates; connect a network of producers in the country; foster cultural agent's circulation to show their cultural products in different regions of Brazil. Second, communication has become a relevant part of the network. Originally only dedicated to diffuse the events organized by it, but in the last 2 years it has become a spin-off that offers a vision from civil society of several issues in Brazil, in particular the protests that took place in June 2013. These are topics not touched by traditional, hegemonic media. Therefore their activities play a relevant role to diffuse practices and values of their project and on others that challenge the assumptions of a growth only vision of the world. Third, the creation of a "university" for the network that departs from the standard view of a place, with huge infrastructure. Instead, it is the creation of a collective common, the sum of all the formal and informal formation spaces in the network that help to systematize knowledge, train new members and diffuse its practices through an environment that departs from traditional teaching experiences. Among others, which in part justify that the network has become a sort of incubator of new projects and initiatives to create a new possible world.

Despite these promising and innovative projects, the network has not been exempt of tensions and challenges that are part of every sort of project that wants to get autonomy from such growth only imaginaries. The increased public exposition of Fora do Eixo has also gone hand in hand with an increase of its critics and resistances from groups that defend divergent projects. During 2013 the movement was the target of several attacks, both by evident adversaries to such "de growth" approach and also by ex-members that became disillusioned by the promises and activities of the network. This illustrates difficulties that such de-growth projects have, being in the middle of an environment hostile to them, that looks for every possible weakness to undermine them, so as to confirm there is just one path to follow, the growth only oriented one.

Finally, I will reinforce other points based on the Brazilian case. For example, that the case illustrates the need to continuously incorporate social technologies in tune with de-growth projects, showing the importance of diffusing practices, taking into account specific local adaptations. I will also reinforce the relevance of culture and communication in de-growth projects. It is a key area useful to raise awareness and to gain support for such local projects. This requires community channels that can act as a balance between State and private firm's visions, still predominantly in favor of a growth only imaginary and blocking other projects. Otherwise, if such dangerous structures are kept that reinforce just one model and concentrate resources, it is hard to believe that de-growth projects will have any chance at all to blossom.