

SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY (SSE) AS A TRANSITIONAL PATH TOWARDS A DEGROWTH SOCIETY

THE CASE OF THE GENEVA CANTON

“À elle seule, elle ne pourra pas régler toutes les questions centrales qui se posent à l’humanité, c’est certain, mais sans doute est-elle en mesure d’apporter sa pierre à l’édifice d’une économie au service des hommes et non au service de la financiarisation du monde”¹

Thierry Jeantet (2008), L’économie sociale, une alternative au capitalisme, p.54

At a moment in which the current development model seems to have reached its limits - as the growing consensus on the issue shows - we are facing an inflection point in which the choice of an alternative model becomes possible.

In this context of multidimensional crises, impacting politics, economy, society and environment², the aim of this short paper is to summarize the research conducted in 2013 in the Geneva Canton, looking into whether Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) can be considered as a transitional path towards a degrowth society.

This question is relevant in the framework of a developed and capitalist economy, and it does not mean to be extrapolated to more global contexts. It is important to remind that there are as many definitions of SSE as authors, and that the degrowth paradigm does not make sense outside the so-called developed countries.

We chose to focus on the Geneva case precisely because of the innovative approach of the region with regard to SSE, as it includes the environmental dimension as part of the definition. This is crucial when SSE is associated with degrowth, and clearly innovating, as Johannisova argues that “social enterprise theorists, if they mention environmental benefits at all, see them as a subsidiary of the social”³.

The aim of the research is to complete the macroeconomic approach that usually dominates the degrowth literature, with the idea of offering instead an example of a specific analysis based in a particular territory.

The paradox that allows this research question is the impossibility for the degrowth paradigm to exist inside a capitalist system, which would require an irreconcilable break-up with its values and dynamics. It is precisely here that the hybrid nature of SSE model is relevant: capable of adapting itself to a market economy, it offers at the same time an alternative societal model based upon principles and values shared with the degrowth paradigm.

This paper is based on the definition of the Declaration of the 1st International Conference on Degrowth held in Paris in 2008 which defines degrowth as “a volunteer transition towards a fair, participative and ecologically sustainable society”⁴.

As previously said, the definition of SSE adopted here is the one suggested by the *Chambre d'Économie Sociale et Solidaire* of Geneva (Apres-Ge) whose objectives are to promote a local economy, to reinforce democracy, to defend human rights, to support sustainable development and cultural diversity⁵. Among the values promoted by this organisation are: social well-being, participatory decision-making, environmental friendliness, autonomy, solidarity, diversity and coherence. The definition adopted by this organisation is sufficiently large and innovative to incorporate a wide range of organizations (associations, foundations and cooperatives, but also private companies) as long as they all agree with the values. For an organization to be a member of Apres-Ge is it also required to have a legal status, be based in the Geneva region, be transparent, autonomous, environment-friendly, participative, socially managed, limitedly profitable and to pursue collective goals and interests.

Transition, that we understand as “*une lente maturation d'un changement en profondeur*”⁶ is the key concept that connects SSE and degrowth. This “slow maturation”, in our study case, is permitted by SSE, which could bring a “deep change” leading to a future potential degrowth society. We are not trying to establish a comparison between both concepts, but rather a potential projection of SSE towards a degrowth paradigm.

For this exercise, we identified six analytical dimensions: profitability, re-localisation, environment, attitude towards work, collective interest and democracy from the following documents: “Degrowth bullet points”⁷ and the “Charte d'Économie Sociale et Solidaire de la région genevoise”⁸. We were able to set a parallel, based on each dimension, between values promoted in both documents, for degrowth and SSE respectively.

Both approaches criticises the “operating system” of developed societies and they both aim at constructing alternatives from the grass-roots; they are holistic and multidimensional approaches, and even potential systemic solutions; they are based on communities where the social link is a key element for the construction of a convivial society from an *illichian*

perspective⁹; and last but not least, both SSE and degrowth aim at satisfying the population needs. With this regard, SSE actors are usually capable of responding to locally identified needs, which already questions the capitalist marketing and advertisement industries and capitalist practices such as planned obsolescence, which has contributed - according with the degrowth thinkers - to *create* needs with as only goal the maximisation of enterprises' profitability.

The theoretical dimension of the investigation was supported by a qualitative and quantitative analysis that allowed us to reinforce our hypothesis. The qualitative study is based on interviews of SSE actors from the Geneva region and on the outcomes of several relevant conferences held recently. These inputs allowed us to deepen the conceptualization of the empirical research with the aim of focussing on the potential links between SSE and degrowth in the Geneva Canton. We then defined four analytical dimensions: ecological, productive, territorial and organisational upon which we construct the survey that was circulated through all the members of Apres-GE (around 250 at that time).

Even if we are conscious of the limits of our results, it seems plausible to us to confirm the hypothesis that SSE could offer a transitional path towards a degrowth society. However, it is necessary that actors working in SSE are aware of their role and create synergies among them to share their critical vision of the current development model.

Are we witnessing a profound break with capitalism? Is it already possible to talk about a transition? The answer to those and to other questions will depend on the capacity of SSE initiatives to sufficiently adapt themselves to the current model in order to not be excluded from it, while at the same time being able to build an alternative model based upon responsibility, equality, autonomy and solidarity¹⁰.

It is precisely this hybrid nature of SSE, almost chameleonic, that simultaneously presents the strengths and weaknesses of the success of this transition. A success which will not directly lead to a degrowth society, but which could be a first step.

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¹ « By itself, it won't be able to fix all the challenges faced by humanity, that's for sure, but it will undoubtedly contribute to build an economy in the service of people rather than in the service of the world financiarisation", translation by the author.

² Fotopoulos Takis, 2007, p.4

³ Johanisova Nadia, 2008, p.2

⁴ Degrowth declaration, Paris Conference, 2008

⁵ <http://www.apres-ge.ch/node/30285>

⁶ Guigue Bruno, 2001, p.66

⁷ Results of the « Conference on Economic degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity », that took place in Barcelona in 2010. The document is available at:

http://montreal.degrowth.org/downloads/degrowth_barcelonabulletpoints.pdf

⁸ Apres-Ge, 2005

⁹ Illich Ivan 1973, p.13

¹⁰ DRAPERI Jean François (2007) : « Comprendre l'économie sociale. Fondements et enjeux », Dunod, Paris, 264p.