

## Seeing like a market: Commentary on Brendan Murtagh's (2019) *Social Economics and the Solidarity City*

In the aftermath of the 2007-9 global financial crisis, the social and solidarity economy has been repositioned as a possible pathway beyond austerity urbanism and neoliberal capitalism. In these intervening years, a number of significant contributions to this burgeoning field have extended and deepened critical enquiry, including works co-authored by contributors to this journal symposium (North and Scott Cato, 2017). *Social Economics and the Solidarity City*, written in 2019 by one of the leading lights in the field, is the latest – and, I would argue, deepest yet – synthesis of social economics and the city. Whereas the seminal *Can Neighbourhoods Save the City?* (Moulaert et al., 2010) zoomed in on the neighbourhood scale to explore how social innovation might bring about radical urban transformation, almost a decade on, *Social Economics and the Solidarity City* takes a wider-angle lens to see the social economy as an urban assemblage of (social) markets. In so doing, Brendan Murtagh offers us an almost encyclopaedic survey of the social economy landscape, its urban political hinterland and, looming on the horizon, alternative infrastructures of exchange. This collection of short commentaries was inspired by an unusually constructive and thought-provoking ‘Author meets Critics’ session at the 2019 RGS-IBG Annual Conference in London. In what follows, I outline the key arguments of the book and the themes arising from our discussion before making my own contribution, followed by those of each of the other participants.

Murtagh takes as his starting point Polanyi's (1944) insights into modes of economic integration. Whereas the market is defined by ‘free’ commodity exchange, the state by command (but often for redistributive, solidaristic purposes) and householding by the gift and self-provisioning, the social economy is defined by reciprocity, solidarity, cooperation and mutual aid. In Polanyian terms, it is part of a countermovement emanating from civil society to resist the dominance of market exchange under capitalism, to reverse the tendency for the (market) economy to dis-embed from its social foundations, and to reassert social values in the treatment of land, labour and capital. The social economy can thus be defined as a ‘third sector’ or, more expansively, an alternative approach to state and market coordination and to public and private ownership of the economy; comprising not-for-profit associations, cooperatives and mutual societies (and, latterly, social enterprises) operating to de-commodify the fictitious commodities land, labour and capital (and, increasingly, information). Whilst Murtagh does touch on examples of social economy experimentation in the first two fictitious commodities – such as worker-owned enterprises (labour) and community land trusts (land) – his focus remains squarely on capital, on money and its alternatives.

Six substantive chapters comprehensively synthesise existing literature on the social economy – moving from an abstract theorisation of market dynamics and the ‘rules of the game’ through urban politics and social economic assemblages to the level of individual organisations and the decision-making processes, legitimisation crises and ethical challenges they face before, finally, reaching the book's most practical register of how to finance, scale up, replicate and institutionalise social economies. In the penultimate chapter, Murtagh shifts gear for a more concrete exploration of ‘actually existing solidarity economies’ around the world. Here, he points to several exemplars – Montreal, Sao Paulo, Mondragon, Bologna, Bristol and Belfast, where Brendan's own socially-engaged research is focused – showcasing some inspiring examples of how alternative currencies, solidarity funds, intermediary organisations, federations and other supportive infrastructures have been tried and tested globally.

The chosen case studies, however, reveal the book's bias towards the neoliberalised global North, broadly defined, and the more institutionalised domain of the social economy: its organisational form (social enterprises) and formal capital markets. Given the book's title, it is surprising to find so little attention turned to the global South or, indeed, more economically informal, ideologically oppositional or politically transformative activities aligned with the solidarity economy movement. *Social Economics and the Solidarity*

*City* is very much about the first part of its title; not the second. Solidarity as a prefigurative alternative value system and global social movement lies outside its purview. In some sense, then, this is a ‘capitalocentric’ (Gibson-Graham, 2008) or at least market-centric reading of the social economy – albeit one that does explicitly draw on the work of Gibson-Graham and attempts to challenge and subvert the dominance of capital and identify alternative mediums of exchange. Just as Magnusson (2014) sought to reframe urban politics through the lens of ‘seeing like a city’ over ‘seeing like a state’, here Murtagh approaches the urban social economy from a novel perspective, that of markets and their assemblages, rather than the more familiar lens of social movements and (state-like) institutions. A better title might have been *Social Economics: Seeing like a Market*.

Assemblage is the book’s boldest contribution to the study of urban social economies. At the very real risk of rekindling those heated debates between critical urbanists and assemblage theorists (Brenner et al., 2011; McFarlane, 2011) Murtagh moves tentatively towards advocating an assemblage perspective for understanding the social economy at the urban scale. On page 11, he argues assemblage “offers an analytical frame to understand social economies and what they might mean for making more inclusive places.” This raises intriguing questions:

The idea of the social economy as an assemblage is empirically important. If the project is to stop making capitalism, what is made in its place (or rather its displacement)? What does this look like, and how practically do we, or can we, decouple urban markets from private accumulation?”

Assemblage is mobilised as both analytical frame and political tool – a tool for tracing the associations and connections made between social economy actors and organisations so as to see the linkages and networks assembling to form, if given the right institutional and political support, an alternative to our current urban-economic system dominated by capital and the state. Assemblage as method is elaborated through the notion of *mapping* such social economy markets and in so doing bringing these markets more concretely into being through, for instance, policy visibility.

Assemblage is presented anew as a tool for transcending the social economy’s fundamental contradiction. In chapter 4, Murtagh writes: “The compatibility between surplus and solidarity is what makes the SSE [social and solidarity economy] and its assembly a distinctive, but also problematic, arena of social change.” In being mediated by money – i.e. the commodity form – the social economy makes a pact with capitalism just it tries to undermine and displace it; a strategy tantamount to using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house in full view of the master, which as Lorde (2018) reminds us, appears somewhat self-defeating. So long as the social economy operates through the medium of money, the contradictions of capital will forever (re)appear within it, however successful it may be in turning surplus into solidarity. This is reflected in the mission drift and ‘institutional isomorphism’ Murtagh identifies, in chapter 5, as afflicting social enterprises especially (see: Nicholls, 2010).

Murtagh points to a number of possible routes out of this predicament, such as local exchange trading systems (LETS), alternative currencies and time banking, and there are tantalising moments where, quoting Berndt and Boeckler, “alternative imaginations in ‘moral markets’ that are driven by a different set of rules and imperatives than rational instrumentality” (page 31) come into view. This is reminiscent of Karatani’s (2014) envisioning of a new form of exchange beyond state command, the commodity form and the gift. In his refocusing of Marxist political economy on modes of *exchange* rather than *production*, Karatani (2014) argues that it is the specific way in which goods and value flow and circulate through society that matters for understanding socioeconomic formations and their transformation rather than, as Marx argued, the relations of production and how value gets produced. Such a perspectival shift draws attention to different modes of exchange, reflecting Polanyi’s economic logics. Mode A (gift exchange) is rooted in relatively egalitarian tribal and clan societies; Mode B (state command, plunder and

redistribution) came about with ancient agrarian empires; while Mode C (market exchange) emerged on the periphery of Mode B-governed world empires, amongst small city-states, before becoming hegemonic as the capitalist world market. Mode D is an imagined relation yet to come, combining A's reciprocity with C's freedom from bonds – a real utopian imaginary of universal solidarity prefigured imperfectly in cooperatives, mutualism and other social economy formations.

This perspective moves us towards a more relational understanding of value and draws attention to an important implication of Murtagh's assemblage approach – how value (social and financial) is realised through supply chains and processes of exchange as critical to the power, potential and integrity of the social economy. It gestures towards a re-appraisal of the socialist calculation debate, market socialism and democratisation of the price mechanism (see: Elson, 1988) for conceptualising what a solidarity market might look like. Some of these dormant ideas have been picked back up recently in interventions on platform capitalism and 'digital socialism' reflecting upon possibilities of socialising the 'digital feedback infrastructures' (Morozov, 2019), the supply chains and algorithmic technologies used for logistical distributional planning by huge capitalist corporations like Walmart (Phillips and Rozworski, 2019). Were a network of cooperative organisations able to construct and democratically govern supply chains and non-capitalist mediums of exchange through digital feedback infrastructures currently dominated by the likes of Walmart, Amazon and Uber might we begin to see the emergence of a social economy urban assemblage?

In sum, three themes emerge from my reading of *Social Economics and the Solidarity City* – assemblage as method, seeing the social economy as a market, and moving towards alternative imaginaries of value and exchange beyond capital. Conspicuously absent from all this is the state – an inescapable institutional apparatus and arena of class struggle through which the social economy and its political-economic power are ultimately constituted. In purposively foregrounding the market, Murtagh can be forgiven for largely overlooking the state. But the municipal state has been an important player in the development of celebrated urban social economies in cities such as Montreal and Seoul. Local state institutions and policy-making are being harnessed in places like Preston and Barcelona to pursue progressive procurement strategies via anchor institutions to recirculate wealth through social enterprises that produce social value and to incubate and develop emergent worker-owned co-op movements (Thompson, 2020). Such examples provoke the question: what place afforded the local state and anchor institutions, as central nodes in urban assemblages, in a social economics for the solidarity city? If this is where the book's originality lies – in conceptualising a social *economics* of the social economy as an urban assemblage coordinated through socialised markets – investigation into how such markets are constructed by state institutions should be firmly on the agenda.

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