

Abstract

Title: Worker cooperatives within neoliberal economy: transformative or palliative?. The Argentinean case.

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the tension inherent in the concept of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), namely: whether it should be seen as an alternative to capitalism or a means of ameliorating its worst effects. Moreover, although this tension has been minimised by the existing literature, it will be uncovered in this paper.

In the last few decades, as a response to economic, political and socio-cultural restructuring suggested by Washington Consensus, many social actors across have engaged in collective actions that sought to reduce poverty and exclusion, and to achieve social transformation. These responses took different forms including philanthropic organisations, barter organisations, producers' cooperatives, informal self-employed unions, etc. However, not all of them are alternatives to capitalism nor do they provide welfare. Although worker co-ops aim to overcome market rationality, they trade in a capitalist market. Therefore, presenting the discussion as a dichotomy does not show the existing shades of grey on the field. Hence, from a critical discourse analysis perspective, Argentine workers' cooperatives are analysed in this paper.

1. Introduction

Market liberalisation and deregulation policies have been homogeneously implemented world-wide as a result of the universal adoption of the neoliberal doctrine over the past three decades. These measures were similar in design -although diverse in their intensity-in developed and developing countries without distinguishing among countries and their different existing situations (Bitzenis et al., 2007). However, neoliberal doctrine has been found to have a number of limitations, in particular its inability to sustain the wage labour system (Dinerstein and Neary, 2002). The result of this has been a decline in living conditions (UN 2006).

In response to economic, political and socio-cultural restructuring, social actors engaged in collective actions that sought to reduce poverty and exclusion, and to achieve social transformation. This response took different forms including philanthropic organisations, barter organisations, producers' cooperatives, informal self-employed unions, etc.-Social and solidarity economy (SSE) organisations are an example of this: these are any form of production or exchange which takes into account social justice and equality (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005) through relationships based on cooperation and association. Moreover, the importance of SSE organisations has increased in recent years as well as the government support they have received in many countries, standing in stark contrast to the dominant neoliberal rhetoric. In recent years, governments have tighten up their relationships with SSE, pointing them out as an effective way for reducing bureaucracy due to their localness (Murray 2013) and an partner in welfare distribution (Kendall 2005).

However, not all of the SSE organisations are alternatives to capitalism nor do they provide welfare. Furthermore, some scholars have highlighted the political utilisation that governments have made of SSE organisations to deliver government policies and contract out welfare services (Pearce 2005), and justification of SSE localisation as a reinforcement of the spacial segregation of the marginalisation process (Amin 2003). Drawing upon these threads, this paper explores the disagreements and tensions in the field of SSE, and presents it from a critical point of view, exploring the multifarious forms that this impulse towards humanising the economy (Restakis 2010) has taken in Argentina. This addresses the unresolved paradox of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), namely: whether it should be seen as an alternative to capitalism or a means of ameliorating its worst effects, both in social and economic terms. This paper is part of a work that is currently ongoing, and many of the methodological decisions are taken within this broader project. The epistemological approach is poststructuralism, which understands reality as contingent, a product of social interaction and therefore relational, in which elements are defined by their relations rather than an essence (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002). Moreover, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the methodology to stress this issue. Thus, this paper will shed light onto heterodox economic forms and the inner understanding of the role SSE perform in Argentinian society.

In particular, this paper focuses on one printing worker co-op in Argentina and explores the palliative and alternative tension on two levels. On the one hand, the relationship with government

is one of the forms in which the co-op alleviative side of capitalism is expressed. On the other, member's participation is a vivid example of the positioning as a radical alternative. The selected co-op for this research was made up five years ago, and is also part of the Argentine Co-operative Graphic Network Federation, a network of printing co-operatives that aims to ensure competitiveness and economic and social sustainability of its members (Raffaelli 2014). Literature regarding SSE presents it as a uniform entity located on the philanthropic or alternative side, present the definition as a single entity, glossing over the tensions that exist within the organisation and the sector. However, a clear exposition of the tension between the transformative and palliative roles identified in this paper as important is missed. Thus, I take another route by I exposing and dissecting these tensions. This will be done through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis, which allows both to be critical and uncover power relations. This fits with my choice of poststructuralism, since this theory provides me with the theoretical tools to conduct such a dissection.

This paper is structured on 5 sections. It begins with providing some insights into the existing literature in the field of SSE, which understand it in polar opposition, and which builds up the analytical framework for the analysis of the data. Moreover, it provides a critical historical account of co-operative movement in Argentina, to understand the links between the sector and the state. After presenting the methodology and justification of the methodological decisions, findings are reported. They are structured on two levels, personal involvement on the organisation and understanding of the government support, as explained above. The paper ends with a discussion and some insights for future research.

2. Background

2.1 Theoretical Background

This section presents the existing literature regarding SSE. As was pointed out before, is it possible to identify two polarly opposed conceptualisations of SSE, as philanthropy within capitalism or as an alternative form to market economy. However, there is a third position in between these two, which understands SSE as a bridge through which excluded people could be included back in the current economic system.

Broadly speaking, SSE is a sector of the economy that “organises economic functions primarily according to principles of democratic co-operation and reciprocity; guarantees a high level of equality and distribution, and organising redistribution when needed; and satisfies human basic needs, in a sustainable way” (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005). Therefore, what defines SSE is its own rationality, which is distinct from that of the market and government sectors; namely: social justice, competence and redistribution respectively. Three different -even opposed- rationalities put these three sectors apart. Particularly, SSE rationality draws on forms of exchange that take into account social justice and equality (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005) through relationships based on cooperation and association. All the theorisations of SSE share the idea that it is the impulse of

association that lies behind this form of organisation. SSE relies on an autonomous social process in which cooperation, reciprocity, trust and plurality take a central place (Albuquerque 2004a; Albuquerque 2004b). It appears as a collective response to intolerable situations which the dominant economic structure is unable to solve (Coraggio 2004). Shared values create solidarity between organisations; trust and reciprocity is built up into co-operation and collaboration, which becomes the basis of formal and informal networks (Pearce 2005).

Importantly, a study of the literature demonstrates that the vision of the role of SSE often glosses over an important dichotomy regarding its alleviative or transformative role. On the one hand, some authors have emphasised the importance of the increasing interdependence between private and public sectors (Kaufmann 1991) in the provision of social services. This is the case of philanthropic associations that, along with government, aim to improve human well-being (Nickel and Eikenberry 2010), which would suggest a change in both government and philanthropy roles, as public policy was a sphere previously dominated only by the state and philanthropic organisations used to worked independently. This is the case in many societies where governments have recognised and supported philanthropic organisations as partners in welfare provision, and created social acceptance of the involvement of extra-state organisations in the delivery public services (Anheier 2004).

On the other hand, other scholars have suggested the idea that SSE is the way through a different economic development, which takes into account individuals, families, and communities and produces society along with economic utilities (Coraggio 2002). Following this line, Amin et al. (2002) consider the prime interest of SSE is building social capacity, covering under-met needs and through this process, creating new forms of work. Thus, producing economic services and goods are not what makes SSE stand apart, rather it is the way they organise and manage this production (Molloy et al 1999). Although this trend recognises the different rationality of SSE and market economy, it acknowledges that SSE organisations might be run as successful business.

A position between the palliative and alternative poles is the one that proposes SSE as a bridge between exclusion and mainstream economy that operates from a local base, and offers a way out to social exclusion (Cohen 2011; Nyssens 2006). In this sense, other authors have highlighted that the role that SSE has played in restructuring traditional forms of political and economic life and creating a new conceptualisation of citizenship (Tsuzuki et al. 2005) and as an effective tool to help poorly qualified unemployed people to integrate into society through productive work activity (Borzaga & Loss 2006). Moreover, the beneficial effects of SSE in generating employment in a broad sense have been acknowledged widely, as well as its role in helping the most disadvantaged members of society who are most at risk of exclusion (Nyssens 2006). However, this does not mean that SSE only supports the unemployed; on top of that it also helps these people to overcome this condition (Borzaga and Loss 2006). These theorisations do not place SSE on the alternative either palliative side.

Apart from the academic interest, SSE was identified by many governments as a sector that might offer solutions (Kurimoto 2005) due to its presence in three key sectors: welfare services, work

integration and local development (Spear et al. 2005). In that context, the importance of SSE grassroots experiences for the regeneration of social ties (Aiken 2006) was largely supported by governments, particularly tackling structural unemployment and exclusion in a context of state and market restriction (Nyssen 2006). Moreover, the re-discovery of SSE as a welfare provider immediately showed that these organisations could work as substitutes for the state (Kendall 2005). In order to improve state's welfare services provision, SSE appeared as a more direct option as a consequence of their local articulation, interpreting directly the needs of the communities and reducing the enormous state apparatus, bureaucracy and intermediaries (Murray 2013; Smith 2010).

However, scholars have pointed out positive and negative interpretations of this state of affairs. While some authors consider the SSE and its institutions in parallel to capitalism, others consider it as an alternative, a symbol of post-capitalism based on solidarity and sustainability (Amin 2009). Regarding the government's role and interest in SSE, some authors consider it as a way to reduce dependence on the central government (Tracey et al. 2005) and a means of tackling social exclusion, while others describe SSE organisations as co-opted by government in a process of lowering the cost of welfare provision in the context of neoliberal governmentality. According to these more critical academics, SSE organisations have colluded in the establishment of a partnership that has facilitated the extension of neoliberalism to sectors previous thought of as the natural territory of the state, a process matched by a continuing delegation by governments of the risk and responsibility for welfare provision (Peck and Tickell 2002; Williams, Cloke, et al. 2012).

Having presented the discussion, the division in the literature regarding the role of SSE is clear. While some authors consider SSE as a philanthropic mechanism for redistribution (Nickel and Eikenberry 2010) others understand it as a way to challenge an unfair social order (Amin 1999; Amin 2009; Laville 1996). Moreover, on the one hand, the partnership between government and SSE has been theorised as positive, because it allows a more effective and efficient public services provision (Murray 2013; Smith 2010). However, on the other, it has been pointed out as a form of privatisation of the public services, with the intention of limiting government's responsibility over citizens (Tracey et al. 2005; Peck and Tickell 2002).

In conclusion, SSE is a field of disagreements and tensions in a variety of forms. While some authors consider SSE in parallel to capitalism, others consider it as an alternative; moreover, some scholars understand government interest on the field as genuine, whereas others are more cautious. This leads to a question regarding the role of SSE. What is its final aim? Should its main objective re-introduce disadvantaged citizens into the formal economy? Or should it work outside the capitalist logic? Is the SSE an ambulance that provides an urgent temporary treatment but not a cure? Or should it act as a doctor and cures the illness?. This paper aims to answer these questions. In order to do so an historical account of the SSE is necessary, as the historical features of a country shape SSE differently. So, after presented SSE theoretically, we will move into the particularities of the case, exploring how actually SSE was structured in Argentina.

2.2 Historical Background

After presenting the theoretical threads within the field of SSE, the historical particularities of the sector in Argentina are discussed in this section. A feature that changed definitely Argentine society was the two immigration waves the country received between 1890 and 1920, doubling the size of the population (Novick 2008). These immigrants, who came mainly from Italy and Spain, were unionised workers, who had a vast political militancy, mainly in anarchist, socialist and communist parties, which consequently embedded the emerging Argentine working class. In this sense, SSE emerged as a dependant element of working class formation at the end of 19th century, due to the influence of international migration, bringing the political and social ideas that were predominant in Europe by that time (Schujman 1984; Arzadun 2011).

It is widely accepted in literature that mutuals and mutual aid societies responded better to the urban workers' needs whereas co-ops emerged as a way small farmers had to cope with larger, more powerful companies (Campetella et al. 2000; Schujman 1984; Teitelbaum 2011; Ressel, Silva et al. 2008). During the first half of the 20th Century, co-op movement increased significantly (Montes and Ressel 2003). In general, it was an strategy taken by those who needed to solve a problem based on collective action, solidarity and a sense of social vindication that aimed to reduced economic concentration and to some extent, work as a counterpointing element in the economic struggle (Schujman 1984). In other words, people who reported tough situations joined themselves through solidarity ties seeking not only do solve the problem but also social recognition.

When J. D. Peron took the office in 1946, the IWW was recently finished. Peronism¹ was a turning point in Argentine society (Adelman 1992) due to the social transformations it provoked in many aspects of society, and SSE was not an exception. Although it is not widely agreed among academics, Peronism saw SSE as a third way to tackle the limitations economy was facing both regarding monopolistic concentration and local bureaucratic bourgeois (Elgue & Cieza 2005). Thus, SSE was understood as an innovative alternative for enhancing a national bourgeois, that would lead to economic development with social justice, constraining market forces as well. So, rural and consumer co-operatives were promoted in the two five-years economic plan in 1946 and 1952 (Levin & Verbeke 1997).

As a consequence, co-ops doubled in number during the decade of the 1940s and almost doubled again in the 1950s (Arzadun 2011). Moreover, mutuals and mutual aid societies belonging to trade unions were sucked into the national health system under the scope of Unions, which remains until now (Campetella et al. 2000). Hence, SSE was mobilised from the state to give response to the demand of the lowest income sectors of society along with a consolidation of power (Coraggio 2002). Although in other historic periods SSE appeared independently, Argentina is considered as

¹ For more information, see James 1988; James 1990

a populist² example of SSE. Thus, although Peronism encouraged co-operatives formation, it merged them into the state sphere, constraining their independency. From 1955 until 1989, the period was shaped by the political instability, and not much attention was placed on SSE. (Levin & Verbeke 1997).

In spite of the quantitative increase the SSE accounted for during the 20th century in Argentina, by the end of the century it experienced a dramatic qualitative change. As a consequence of the populist model proposed by Peronism, a sector of SSE became highly bureaucratic and lacking of principles (Coraggio 2011). Moreover, in some cases the use of the co-operative form was distorted by avoiding taxes and uncovering precarious work relationships. Therefore, anarchist and socialist co-operative principles did not stand the test of time (Ruggeri 2011). Contrary, it is the case of *empresas recuperadas* (reclaimed factories). In the wake of biggest economic, social and political crisis at the end of 2001, when unemployment rate stood at 25% and poverty at 45% (INDEC; Lindenboim et al. 2000; Beccaria and Mauricio 2005), many collective actions emerged. Moreover, workers soon understood that their best chance to tackle it was from within the workplaces (Raffaelli 2013). Workers, facing previous owners neglect for deliberate action or economic failure, decided to occupy their factories and make them produce again (Rebon & Caruso 2004; Saavedra 2003; Elgue 2007; Ruggeri 2011). The role that solidarity has had in this process is widely recognised (North & Huber 2004), however not co-operation. In its origins, the use of the co-operative legal form only served the final aim; but along with the settling down of the company and the construction of a social group that could handle it, they developed the necessary co-operation, and therefore, fully adopted the co-operative form (Raffaelli 2013).

Finally, the current government, in an attempt to reduce unemployment rate, included SSE in public policies. For instance, the '*Manos a la Obra*' ('Let's do it') plan sought for social inclusion through productive ventures based on associative and self-managed values (Villar 2004). Moreover, the microcredit policy, which will be referred back on the findings, was focused on supporting solidarity small business and articulating them with the economic structure (Manzanal 2003). Although this type of policies show an alternative view to the legitimised economy, the strength of top down initiatives is uncertain as these policies contradict the central principles of SSE, namely the freedom of association (Hopp 2011). Furthermore, this reinforces the idea that Argentinean SSE is fully embedded in populism (Coraggio 2002). Despite the fact that SSE has become part of the policy agenda, its scope remains limited. Hence, as Coraggio (ibid) points out wisely, SSE should be recognised as a fundamental part of the economy in developing countries due to the large significance of informal sector in the satisfaction of needs, which gives as a result a three sectors mixed economy.

² Populism is a leadership style characterised by a strong leader who links himself straight with the masses rather than through institutions, provoking their weakening (Conniff 2012).

3. Methodology

Within the broad range of poststructuralism, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) proposes a critical approach to a socially constructed reality in order to uncover the power relations that support social structure and look with favour on social change. CDA analyses how language is used by individuals in particular social context and how people understand their social practices and the world (Dick 2004). Moreover, discourse is constrained by regulatory and ideological functions, therefore to some extent it reproduces or challenges hegemony (ibid). The selection of CDA as the research paradigm allows to uncover power relations and situate contra-hegemonic practices. A critical paradigm challenges the taken-for-granted understanding of neoliberalism and the production of contra-hegemonic discourses. Thus, through the discourse of the SSE participants, an analysis of to what extent participants and organisations have become embedded within the neoliberal discourse and whether they consider their actions as a palliative or an alternative to capitalism will be made.

Contrary to the objectivity proposed by the positivist paradigm, this work is centred on understanding to what extent hegemonic social structure is present on those practices that are presented as contra-hegemonic. Moreover, this research is not able (and does not aim) to provide statistical generalisation, rather analytic one (Baxter 2008). This paper does not intend to propose a fixed definition that can be used universally, as this idea neglects the historical configurations social processes have. Rather, a holistic interpretation will be developed in order to embed the history and culture in the definition.

This paper is focused on a printing worker co-op located in Buenos Aires City downtown, which is currently made up of 12 workers between 21 and 35 years-old, some of whom have started the co-op up five years ago. Moreover, the co-op is part of the Argentine Co-operative Graphic Network Federation (Raffaelli 2014), an interactive network that brings economic, political, social and cultural factors together and combines and maximises both economic and non-economic resources (Camagni and Gordillo, 2000). For conducting this research, a quasi-ethnographic approach was taken, and two weeks were spent in the selected organisation. Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews with all the members of the co-operative, key informant interviews and non-participant observation. The selection of these data collection forms allowed to triangulate (Jick 1979) the information, an important element in qualitative research for achieving validity. Key informant interviews were conducted with members of the administrative council and representatives in other organisations, such as the Network or FECOOTRA (Cooperative Federation of Workers). Organisationally, the co-operative has three productive departments: printing, media and design. In order to respect respondent's privacy, all the transcripts on this paper are referred as a single one.

4. Findings

Qualitative analysis was conducted following Fairclough (1992) three dimensional analytical framework. It states that discourse is made up of three layers: the *text*, the *discursive practice* and the *social practice*. The *text* refers to what the discourse is trying to achieve; the force of the discourse. The *discursive practice* examines the context in which the text of the interview is produced and the constriction that the interpretation of the questions produced on the interview. Finally, the *social practice* examines the statements made without being challenged. They are considered to have an ideological root; that is statements being taken for granted from a dominant discourse (Fairclough 1992). They operate as social constructions that have regulatory effects over the participants. The analysis that follows is solely focused on the social practice level, and this decision was made based on two reasons. One the one hand, there is no enough space to develop the three level analysis; on the other, this paper only aims to answer the question regarding whether SSE is a contra-hegemonic form to capitalism, and the answer to this is found at the social practice level.

From the transcripts of the interviews it is possible to identify two contradictory discourses. They refer, as the hypothesis of this paper, to SSE as an alternative to capitalism or a means of ameliorating its worst effects. However, meanwhile the literature recognises them as ideal types of different type of organisations, in practice, both discourses coexist within the co-op, but at different levels. Moreover, these two discourses have two dimensions each, the economic and political, as they are crossed by these two elements. SSE is presented as radical both in political and economic terms. It proposes a radical labour form, not based on the capitalist diasctintion between employees and employers, and a different form of economy, not focusing on profit maximisation, rather taking into account social justice. However, it is also referred as palliative in political and economic terms. The partnership between governments and SSE as a way to reduce responsibility and pseudo privatise public services is an example of the political utilisation of the SSE that have been made. Moreover, the understanding of SSE as philanthropy or the usage of mutuals or co-ops legal form without having a commitment with its values represent the economic dimension of the palliative side.

		Discourses	
		Alternative	Palliative
Dimen sions	Economic	Economy with social justice	Philanthropy / utilisation of the legal form / economic dependency
	Political	Labour & organisational forms	Partnership with the state

As was mentioned, both dimensions of the radical discourse are present at the individual level regarding the motivations for involvement within the co-op. Moreover, they are extremely intertwined in practice, as one reinforces the other. Participants consider that SSE should propose a different economy, and pursue a more just society. They build up the co-operative based on their

own values, and they might get involved with different organisations that challenge mainstream economy and politics, such as underground radios, voluntary organisations. They genuinely believe that they have to act themselves in order to change the reality in which they live. Therefore, they understand that a more equal society is not possible within capitalism, and that is the reason why they prefer other labour relationships.

“This co-op is linked with the world where my life is developed. I work here, but also in a co-operative magazine and a co-op radio. (...) We are strongly committed with the community and have supported many processes of reclaiming factories. (...) I don't want to die with the capitalist conception of life. This (the co-op) is more related with my own values. (...) We truly need to incorporate the 7 co-operative values in order to make the world a more habitable place. (...) I can't imagine myself working for a media company. Here I have the freedom to choose the news I consider important and there is no one saying to me what I should write about. I have my own voice, I own this place”.

However, the palliative discourse is present at the organisational level. Regarding the economic dimension, co-ops have to trade in a capitalist environment and need to flow through it; they cannot protect themselves against capitalism. One expression of this is their position with respect to the government support, in which they do not challenge the status quo. They perfectly understand the need to make themselves economically sustainable and independent from government's money, however also acknowledge this as difficult to achieve. Moreover, they do not think there is a common ground between government's motivations that might have had for supporting SSE and them. Indeed, they consider these policies do not attempt to empower SSE, despite the fact that they think government support is beneficial for the sector. Moreover, sometimes government's decisions in terms of economic development slow down co-op movement growth.

“Although borrowing money from the government might be useful in the short run, it might end up being a two-edged sword. That's why we are trying to pay back all the money we have borrowed. We have to be sustainable in the market by our own and pay our debts back (...) We are currently growing, however, economic instability impact on us because affects our buyers, and therefore, impact on us as well. Also, it slows co-op movement down. (...) I might get wrong, but I don't think government is thinking on strengthening SSE as an alternative economic form. I don't think the policies, even though the good ones, are thought bearing in mind that SSE can hold the same GDP proportion than market economy.

The political dimension of the palliative discourse is given by the fact that the co-op has worked in partnership with the government. Government has launched a policy of microcredit a few years ago, for collective productive projects based on a communitarian guarantee. The co-operative resulted in the middle institution between government and small business that allocated the founding. They understand this policy was a way to get access to founding to people that would not have had it through the financial sector, as they are small business without guarantee of paying it back. Moreover, they acknowledge that it has been a usage of co-operative form by the

government, although not in negative terms. Finally, they do not know to what extent it provoked a change for whom received the founding, but they see it as a way to strengthen the links with the community, work for them, and spread the idea that another economy is possible.

“Microcredit policy was instrumental, because it allowed people who can’t borrow money from the bank, to get it. And this was our link with the community, helping them to get access to the founding they need to start their own business. However once this was done, I don’t really know to what extent they are convinced that another economic form is possible. (...) I think government used the co-op form, not in negative terms though, because it is something that works. But it came up to save a situation that was a neoliberal heritage, and a consequence of the bankruptcy of national industry and many other policies that do not sought for teach rather than give out”.

The final level of analysis refers to the populist form of Argentinean SSE. From the government perspective, it encourages co-operatives formation, it merges them into the state sphere, constraining their independency. From the co-ops point of view, they recognise there are many policies that have SSE as a focus, but not based on co-ops principles. Therefore, they ask for policies that change the situation, but they do it to the same actor that is not fully acknowledging their values. This is contradictory but embedded on the Argentine understanding of the state and the role of government.

“Government should to start to genuinely encourage co-ops. There has been done many, but there are other missing. For instance, according to the Education Law, the co-operative principles ought to be tough at school. And this does not happen. The government owes us public policies that change the situation”.

In practice, the two discourses are present at different level of analysis. On the one hand, the radical discourse is present at the individual level. Participants state that they have joined the co-op because they believe another form economy is possible. They practice on a daily base another form of economy, taking into account social justice. Moreover, they put in practice a form of economy that challenges the capitalist labour forms, being all equals among them. On the other hand, the palliative discourse become visible at the collective level because the co-op cannot stand radically apart from capitalism nor government support, getting involved in the status quo. This is mainly expressed in its political dimension, as they worked in partnership with the state in the provision of public policies. In this particular case, although it aimed to expand SSE, they have no certainties that had provoked a radical change in the mind set of those who were the target of the policy.

It is important to highlight that these two discourses are intertwined in reality, showing that there is a hegemonic struggle between these two contradictory ideologies of the palliative and alternative discourses. These ideologies do not respond to different organisation’s forms, as the literature presents. Moreover, the validity of the identified discourses is given by the fact that they are similar to those that have been highlighted as contradictory understandings of the role of SSE in the available literature (intertextuality in Fairclough’s terms). Given space limitations, it is only possible

to refer to the two discourses, which are the focus of this paper, and put aside the analysis of their dimensions for a future project.

Finally, as another layer that makes the analysis more complex, the populist understanding of the SSE provokes a paradoxical relationship between the government and the sector. Co-ops do not challenge the constrained limits that the state sets for them and, contradictorily, they ask for policies that take their values into account comprehensively. This relationship with the state is not only particular of the SSE sector, rather is spread across the whole society.

5. Discussion and conclusion

After presenting the findings, it is time to discuss them. Firstly, the fieldwork shows that the identified discourses in the literature are intertwined at the organisational level. Co-operatives have traces of philanthropy, in less extent, and radical alternatives to capitalism, and they both clash one against the other at the individual and collective levels. They are complex organisations, therefore, it is not possible to present them as single-closed entities with no contradictions.

Regarding the particularities of the country, SSE in Argentina implied taking the bull by its horns and creating a solution. Indeed, associativity and self-management were part of the cultural capital workers had and it was developed in many different forms according to the needs (Raffaelli 2013). This was both during the emergence of the working class, and contrary to other social processes, it was also the case as response to the neoliberal doctrine. Thus, the history of the sector printed a particular structure on the local SSE, as a rebellious consequence. Moreover, these might come out as a consequence of the limitations of Argentinean market economy and welfare state.

Moreover, the idea of locating SSE in the limit of market economy (or what is generally considered the economy as a whole) allows us to think SSE in Poststructuralist terms. The will of truth of an era (Foucault 1980), in this case postmodern capitalism, exerts a power constraint over other discourses, in this case the discourse of SSE, transforming the definition of 'economy' into an endless struggle between market economy, SSE and government. Uncovering that other form of economy is possible challenges the sense of truth and the stability imposed by the market economy. Hence, SSE reveals it is possible other ways to commercialise, trade, produce, establish labour relationships, and more deeply, other rationality that goes further profit maximisation and includes individuals.

However, it is important to take into consideration that a narrow understanding of SSE might lead us to a misleading analysis. On the one hand, SSE ventures should thrive as an alternative to capitalism operating within a capitalist context, which is entirely inviable. On the other hand, SSE political activism decreased during 20th century up to the point of being theorised as non-political. Therefore, the separation of social, economic and political claims has led to a narrow understanding of the potentials this economic sector might bring to the whole society (McMurtry 2004). SSE organisations can act as agents of social transformation, cultural resistance, and emancipatory alternatives. Moreover, they are driven by social justice values, inclined towards

sustainable modes of production (Mellor 1997) and empowering disadvantaged communities through democratic social relationships (Amin 1999). Finally, they are democratic organisations that build up contra-hegemonic identities, based on all these features (Dobrohoczki S/N). Therefore, SSE is understood as an element of social innovation in terms of institutional innovation (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005).

Considering this discussion, SSE is a field of disagreements and tensions in a variety of forms. First, there are three antagonist expectations about the role the sector should play in society. The most conservative, understand SSE as philanthropy; the position in between considers SSE should operate as a bridge between market economy and social exclusion, proposing a way out of poverty; finally, the radical view understands SSE's role should overcome this tension and aim to propose a post-capitalist alternative. Therefore, in academic terms, definitions of SSE are diverse and, to some extent, incommensurable. Second, governments across the world have shown different interests and have lent different support to SSE. Thus, this clearly shows SSE is a contested field, for which a holistic understanding is required.

This paper was a first approximation to the dichotomy that can be found on the available literature. However, in practice, it is not a polar division. SSE organisations are not completely radical nor entirely palliative. They are a mixed of both of them present at different levels. Moreover, given that they do not exist independently of the capitalism, they are transversed by the capitalist discourse of what SSE is; they have this dimension in its own and they operate from this position when they need to articulate with other organisations that allocate this role to them, such as the government. However, within this constricted framework, they propose an alternative. In order to produce a more accurate approximation, more research needs to be done.

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