

# THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL CRISIS AND THE SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY <sup>25</sup>

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*“Taking care of body and soul is not a task for either governments or for profit-driven commercial organisations”.*

## A LONG PROCESS UNDERWAY IN THE WESTERN WORLD: INDIVIDUATION

There is one crisis that we have not talked about yet, as it does not play a direct role in the great crisis of the late 2000s. It is sometimes referred to as the “anthropological crisis” because it concerns the most fundamental aspects of human life in society. It can be summed up by the following two most obvious factors: solitude and ageing. Countries in the “old” Europe are particularly affected by both.

If we take a closer look at the situation, we can see that they both derive from a process that has marked human progress in the western world: individuation. In other words, the individual and self-fulfilment are increasingly taking precedence over community ties. From a historical point of view, this progress, accelerated by the Ancient City and Christianity, may even lie at the origin of Europe’s success. Societies of free individuals, who are linked by contractual relationships, have progressively replaced the old order, which was organised on the basis of community rules and in which everyone had a place. These contractual relationships have gradually evolved into two forms: either a relationship with the State – which itself is conceived as resulting from a social pact – or a market relationship between producers, employees and consumers who exchange goods and services for money. Connected in this way by the State and the market, free individuals, or at least some of them,

became free entrepreneurs. It is the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy (the Age of Enlightenment) that systematised this representation of society. The materialist sociologists (in particular Marxists) on the contrary argued that this ideology was generated by the development of a class of urban entrepreneurs (the bourgeois). We will not enter into this chicken and egg debate. The fact remains that in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the lower classes began to protest against the perverse effects that this glorification of individual freedom was having on them. Some called for a return of the old organisation and community-based solidarity of *Ancien Régime* society. But little by little, whether from disgust or necessity, most turned their backs on the ancestral ties created by the family and the church<sup>26</sup>.

Rejecting State, market, family and church, these new urban activists – who were members of the wage earning classes – invented a concrete Utopia: voluntary free association. This was manifested in several forms: trade unions for protesting, mutuals for daily living, cooperatives for producing and consuming, and associations for debating and taking action. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the main social issue was paid employment, and “worker associationism” was part of the “working class struggle” to find its own forms of production and social life.

Nowadays, excessive individuation combined with the disappearance of this socialisation through work

<sup>25</sup> This text is an excerpt from the book by Lipietz (A.). 2012. *Green Deal, The Liberal-Productivism Crisis and the Environmental Answer*, Paris: La Découverte, reproduced with the kind permission of the author.

<sup>26</sup> The same communitarian – indeed clerical – reaction to the excesses of bourgeois modernism is now being seen again with the same vigour in countries that have long held on to their traditions but are now being turned upside down by rapid urbanisation, proletarianisation and individuation. This identity-driven reaction is particularly present in Muslim countries and in India. Naturally, the return of religious fervour among urban political Muslims (and of Pentecostalism in the rest of the world) has little to do with community ties within families and traditional villages. It is more like an extra soul sought by a group of individuals in need of a collective meaning. Fascism in 1930s Europe was also a pseudo-communitarian reaction (volkish) by individuals who had lost their bearings.

(the company environment having become “intolerable” as a direct result of excessive liberalism) is driving many people to recreate this associationism in mostly urban-based citizen movements, but this time without any links to business. But such movements – both today and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – are aimed at providing the absent community with the services it needs, and which neither the State nor the market is able to provide. The new associationist movement, like the old one, represents both a productive alternative and brings new forms of social ties, operating on a voluntary basis.

Individuals need to establish these new ties to overcome their solitude. A solitude that is not just psychological but is a real feeling of bewilderment and isolation in the face of a deteriorating situation, of “problems that just pile up while nobody does anything about them.” By “nobody” is meant the State or any of the companies in the market. Plus of course the family and the church. The very success of secularism in driving back the church and entrusting children, sick people and the elderly to the care of the State, and of feminist movements in liberating women from the “natural” obligations imposed by the patriarchy (caring for children, the elderly and convalescents, and looking after hearth and home) is now therefore working against individuals, damaging their material situation and undermining their feelings of safety and belonging. The Fordist welfare state did what it could to “take care of it”, but was criticised for its bureaucratic behaviour and subsequently destroyed by liberal-productivism<sup>27</sup>.

### MOVING AWAY FROM ISOLATION WITHOUT LOSING FREEDOM

Even if the temptation to react in a communitarian manner is strong (as illustrated in particular by the social groups that have most recently engaged in the individuation process), it is likely that most people in the 21st century will try to hold on to their individual freedoms through self-fulfilment, while recreating, through voluntary work, the warmth of a freely consenting community.

One of the sectors most fought over by the family, the church, associations and the State is undoubte-

dly the provision of care for the most vulnerable: the sick, children and the elderly. In France, the distribution of responsibilities has led to the introduction of several founding laws: recognition of associations, separation between the church and State, removal of religious congregations from hospitals and schools, debate as to who should replace them, competition between associationism and the growth of the public service. The post-1945 reconstruction period saw the institutionalisation of a complex compromise, in which the State entrusted the implementation of its social policy to associations and mutuals, while taking care of the purely redistributive aspects itself through a tripartite agreement with trade unions and employers. Associationism was thus sidelined by the State. The handful of cooperative sectors that survived the turmoil of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century gradually became standardised under a rather particular corporate status.

However, with the Fordism crisis and the concomitant withdrawal of the State, associationism regained its strength, both in the creative domain (small cooperatives of skilled professionals) and in that of survival (integration enterprises, etc.). In the midst of all this upheaval, marked by a rather burdensome rivalry between the established associationist movement (large mutuals and social policy management associations on the one hand and young organisations in the independent alternative economy on the other), a sort of marriage of reason came about in the late 1990s: the social and solidarity economy<sup>28</sup>. “Social” here refers to a certain form of organisation of the economy into units governed by two principles: “one person, one vote” on management boards; and limited profitability (most operating profits, if they exist, must be used for the same social purpose). “Solidarity” is an adjective added to define the objective, the goal of the activity: community service.

In France – as in Quebec and Argentina – the “young solidarity economy” was able to rely to some extent on institutional and even financial support from the powerful mutual movement and century-long established associations, which could boast about the “inclusive and activist” nature of the former, using it to justify the special status they had inherited (parti-

<sup>27</sup> This destruction of the welfare state occurred sooner in the third-world countries that had followed Latin America’s import substitution model. In Muslim countries (Turkey after Atatürk, Egypt after Nasser, etc.), Islamic activists were experts in taking over from social action and hence very quickly acquired a large working-class following. In Latin America, the church no longer knew what to do and working-class associationism took over. But in the early 2000s, when social cooperatives in Argentina were faced with the task of ensuring the survival of an entire nation among the ruins of the shattered economy, they had to call a particularly reactionary church to the rescue.

<sup>28</sup> For information on the history and principles of the social and solidarity economy and on the means of developing it, see my report to the Minister of Solidarity of 2001.

cularly as regards tax) from their distant youth.

But are the subsidies and tax cuts enjoyed in so many countries by economic organisations such as associations and cooperatives justified? There would appear to be no real justification on the basis of their internal organisation. Employee well-being is strongly affected by corporate governance, be it charismatic, paternalistic, democratic or bureaucratic. It may therefore be legitimate to use the fiscal instrument to encourage companies to adopt the best organisational structure possible for the people who are going to spend a large part of their lives within their walls. However, regulations and experience sharing are much more appropriate in terms of ensuring the transition towards an industrious economy, based on the negotiated mobilisation of the knowledge of skilled workers.

## RECIPROCITY AT THE SERVICE OF THE COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE

On the other hand, “solidarity” enterprises provide a range of services that is not restricted to individual users and customers who can afford to pay. For example, the integration of unemployed people into the labour market benefits all potential national employers. Writing and rehearsing plays and music does not only benefit spectators who are willing to buy tickets for the first performances, but also others who might perform these plays or watch them in public places. Working for the community creates a “social halo” effect that cannot be rewarded through straightforward commercial exchanges. It is therefore logical and socially justifiable that the community that benefits from such services (in addition to individual users) should compensate the association that provides them<sup>29</sup>. This compensation may take the form of tax cuts, subsidies, public procurement contracts, etc.

However, one aspect of social life, i.e. taking care of physically vulnerable people, is regarded as an inevitable development due to the ageing of the population. An ageing process that itself results from individuation. The drop in the birth rate coupled with medical advancements, as well as social progress that reduced the workload first of those over 65 then of those over 60, have led to a significant increase in life expectancy that has not been offset by growth in the young population (except through immigration). And this increasingly elderly population is developing a craving not only for bodily care, but also for intellectual, leisure and cultural activities.

Even though the corporate sector is trying to cream off the more lucrative segments of these markets, it is extremely likely that reviving associationism will be the only way to meet the dual challenge of isolation and ageing in the future. Taking care of body and soul is not a task for either governments or for profit-driven commercial organisations. If we are to fulfil such demands, we will need active people who are able to incorporate a real desire to help others into the practical tasks assigned to them: a combination that can only be achieved through what Karl Polanyi (him again) called *reciprocity*. Reciprocity, the oldest value in human society (that of family), means neither redistribution through a central agency (the State) nor commercial exchanges between producers who are indifferent to each other. It is based on the following principle: “I am doing this for you because I hope that when I need it, someone will do it for me.” The social and solidarity economy is therefore destined to play a permanent rather than integrating role in the business economy, and a growing rather than residual role in future development. It is already adding a concern for common goods, notably the environment, to its core areas of interest (personal services, care and culture). There is nothing to prevent it from adopting the original aspirations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cooperative movement, i.e. the provision of local public services (such as lighting and transport), and why not on a wider scale? The criticism often aimed at the technocratically-run public service could be avoided by introducing new forms of organisation incorporating employees, users, lenders and perhaps voluntary workers into their management structures. A much more interesting prospect than simply renationalising that which was privatised under liberal-productivism: nobody wants to go back to the 1960s, when large, nationalised and technocratic organisations, such as transport and energy networks and even banks, acted like States within a State.

The social and solidarity economy offers several models. It also creates a few problems: bureaucracy among its elites, favouritism among associates, etc. But considering the solutions that it provides to flagrant wrongs and despite the inevitable perverse effects it will generate and that we will have to learn to control, the overall outcome will be largely positive. ■

## Bibliography

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