

## Art and Solidarity Economy: Enriching the Pluriverse

John Clammer<sup>1</sup>

The subjects of art and solidarity economy (and the wider questions of the arts in relation to sustainability) are rarely brought together. In relation to the creation and sustaining of the Pluriverse this is also the case, although it is not hard to argue that in any desirable future society culture will have to play a major role. This is presumably true both of the pathways towards the creation of such alternative societies and economies, and for living in them once created. But the subject is, as yet, little discussed in the field of solidarity economy, or that of its close neighbor, degrowth. To take just one example, the absence of such debate is signaled in the contents of an otherwise substantial and informative volume *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (Kothari et al 2019) where, in a collection of essays on almost every conceivable subject related to the achievement and nature of a pluralistic post-development world, out of more than ninety articles covering such topics as agro-ecology, solidarity economy itself, degrowth, ecofeminism, the gift economy, permaculture and many others, not one is devoted to any aspect of the arts – visual, performative, musical, architectural, design – or of the so-called crafts that form such an important part of many economies. Indeed, culture is hardly represented in that otherwise excellent and comprehensive volume, other than in the form of religion, or in indirect ways such as through an exposition of such ideas as *Buen Vivir*, conviviality, or gross national happiness. What accounts for this absence? Two explanations immediately present themselves: either that people concerned with the sustaining of the pluriverse are not at all interested in the arts or have never thought about them in that context (although personally they almost certainly read literature, enjoy and make music, go to movies, dance, and quite possibly paint, knit, make pots, and indulge in interior decoration. Or that the relationship between the pluriverse and one of its manifestations in solidarity economy has not been thoroughly theorized. Assuming the latter explanation, this paper will attempt to sketch out how that might be done, and to introduce into solidarity economy discourse the significance of the arts, both as a form of economy in themselves (but as a rather distinctive one), and as one of the most significant pathways for achieving the convivial, just and cooperative society that we seek.

### Making the Link: The Arts and Solidarity

In this essay I will concentrate specifically on the connections between art and solidarity economy. This approach will certainly have other implications – for example between art and degrowth, the latter now generating substantial interest and a rapidly growing literature (for a very accessible account, themes and definitions see D’Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2015). But

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<sup>1</sup> Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University, Delhi, India, [jrclammer@jgu.edu.in](mailto:jrclammer@jgu.edu.in)

these will be secondary to the main theme discussed here: the relationship between the arts and solidarity economy. At the most basic level it should be apparent that the arts collectively are an important part of most economies. Indeed, it has been shown that in the case of some major cities – Paris, New York, and London for example, and many smaller ones such as Weimar in Germany, the arts (music, cinema, theatre, galleries, dance venues, photography, art and music schools) and their supporting industries (publishing, book shops, film and dance studios) contribute a major portion of the total urban economy. It is fashionable now to talk of and practice “eco-tourism”, but “cultural tourism” has long been a major contributor, including its role in supporting the arts through ticket sales to galleries, sales of posters, postcards, books, reproductions (or the real thing), to local economies. Anyone who doubts this should attempt to visit any of the major art galleries in Paris without a pre-booked online reservation: the line for admission to the Centre Pompidou for example can stretch for several hundred meters, with a waiting time of up to two hours. UNESCO has now recognized this with its concept of “creative industries” and their potential or actual role in poverty reduction, creation of livelihoods, expanding economic opportunities and similar benefits (UNESCO 2013). In that report for example it is noted that Nigeria actually has one of the world’s biggest movie industries, but unlike say Hollywood or Bollywood, it is not based on large studios and a distribution mechanism through large cinema chains or streaming platforms, but is largely local, small budget and technologically simple, uses amateur actors, and films are distributed on DVDs via local markets and informal networks. The cumulative economic and cultural effects are significant, although the whole industry falls “below the radar” of most accounts of world cinema. The same can be said for many other art forms and crafts which, although they can rightly claim aesthetic qualities equal to those of work produced elsewhere, do not tend to appear in the galleries or theatres of the “developed world”, (or of they do in an ethnographic museum rather than an art gallery), and despite the fact that they are often a major part of local economies (de Jong, Aoki and Clammer 2021; Clammer 2015), although conventional neoliberal economics has long struggled with how to account for the role of the arts in their economic models, except in the cases where the arts become totally commodified, and as such a part of a larger consumer culture and economy.

The economic contribution, while very significant, is not the only dimension (and to argue otherwise would be to fall back into the very economism from which solidarity economy and other non-utilitarian or anti-utilitarian approaches to economic alternatives seek to escape) (Romano 2015). The arts collectively confer identity, dignity and cultural autonomy on their producers. The very definition of any given culture centers on its distinctive arts as much as on its language, ethnic make-up or social structure. To think of the nature of any future sustainable society is to very much think about its cultural make-up: what would its arts and architecture be like (and be compatible with sustainability)? What forms would leisure and entertainment take? An excellent (fictional) example of these concerns is Ernest Callenbach’s now classic novel *Ecotopia* (Callenbach 2004), in which not only is the cultural and artistic life of its citizens discussed in some detail, but so are issues that are often ignored in alternative visions of the future, including the critical questions of aggression and violence, and how potentially these may be not so much as contained (it being unlikely that they can be eradicated), but channeled in culturally acceptable directions. Here Callenbach draws on the

much neglected (from the point of view of solidarity economy and social futures) source of anthropology wherein the ethnographic record can be found myriads of examples of societies that have built sustainable and ecologically balanced economies, and have of necessity had to deal with questions of aggression, social inequality, and the other difficult questions that any society must face if it is to be successful (Clammer 2016a).

### Cooperation, Conviviality and Solidarity

Returning for a moment to the subject of economics, it can be argued that artistic production *is* already a form of embodied solidarity economy. It often involves cooperative labor (it is difficult to put on a play or dance performance without the input of many others than the performers themselves: set designers, costume makers, lighting and sound technicians, front-of-house staff, make-up people, and more). As Shannon Jackson has rightly argued, while arts activism has often been critical and deconstructive, it can equally be cooperative and constructive, contributing to public and social well-being (Jackson 2011) and also contributing (despite the commodification of so much art) to creating forms of production outside of capitalist economic relationships. As others have pointed out, much art-making and circulation is much closer to that of a gift economy than it is to a capitalist one (Sansi 2015, Hyde 2019), and often involves convivial social relationships much in the form of those proposed by advocates of a convivial economy and society. Among the features of the contemporary “art world” are the increasing number of collaborative, cross-cultural and multi-national art projects that ignore conventional political and geographical boundaries to produce cooperative and shared work that defines the old notion of the artist as lone individual working in isolation (Kester 2011). Indeed, in its “pure” form, artistic production is for its own sake, impelled by creative impulses that may have little or nothing to do with economic outcomes, but represent non-alienated labor, or, especially in the examples of an art form such as dance, immaterial labor: the “product” is the performance itself of which nothing remains in a material sense (unless perhaps the event has been filmed) except memory and emotion, and the tired but hopefully satisfied bodies of the dancers themselves. Even attempts at dance notation – in the form of something like a musical score – have never been entirely successful: the medium escapes its permanent representation in ways that even music itself does not, being preserved in the printed score and in recordings on tape or disc. Quite long ago, Georges Bataille (1949/1993) discussed this very point, albeit from a slightly different point of view: the arts comprise a form of “surplus” value mostly not captured by any utilitarian calculation, and representing “immaterial expenditure” that is culturally necessary, but hard to catch in any of the categories of conventional economics. Intrinsically a painting by Picasso is worth almost nothing but the cost of a piece of canvas, some oil paints, and maybe a frame and the heating bill for a chilly Parisian studio. Its current “value” has to be measured by cultural standards quite other than those prevailing in standard economics which has no way within its own categories of measuring the “worth” of any art form, other than in crude forms such as the ticket sales for a show, or the number of books of a work of fiction that have been sold, a “best-seller” then being more “valuable” whatever its artistic quality, than a brilliant but rarely read work by an “unknown” author.

These considerations also point to at least two further considerations, both non-trivial. One is the nature and content of leisure in a future solidarity and non-growth economy. Proponents of the idea of a universal basic income (for example Bregman 2018) and its closely associated idea of guaranteed employment (for example Unti 2015) have always had to fend off the idea that such a regime would lead to laziness, failure to work, and unproductive (in a cultural sense) use of leisure (for more extensive reviews of the literature on this theme see Schmelzer *et al* 2022). For the most part they have been successful in answering such objections, but the issue does raise the question of the fruitful use of leisure in a degrowth economy where such free time would have grown. While the basic income promoters are undoubtedly right that for the most part we are creatures who would want to use additional leisure creatively, the question of actual non-coercive cultural policies to promote such a situation is almost totally missing from alternative futures discourse. I remember asking a distinguished Gandhian scholar, in the question time after a lecture that he had just delivered on the many virtues of a Gandhian way of life and livelihood, the question “If indeed we all become Gandhians, return to a largely self-sufficient, non-violent, village life, what will we do in the evenings?”. At first he thought that this was some kind of a joke, until it dawned on him that he had no answer. Gandhi himself was not much interested in the visual arts and totally uninterested in cinema and evidently theatre too, and was only really attracted to music, and even then because he could link it to the independence struggle and not as an expressive form in its own right. What then might be the cultural life of a Gandhian village or ashram? In Gandhi’s own ashrams the answer was nothing except hymn singing and spinning, although he did encourage his acolyte the economist J.C. Kumarappa in the promotion of village crafts, including the production of *Khadi* or home spun and woven textiles, again in part as a protest against the flooding of the Indian market with Manchester and Bombay industrially made textiles (on Kumarappa and his influential notion of an “economy of permanence” there has been a recent revival of interest as a sort of proto-solidarity economist: see for example Govindu and Malghan 2016).

The second issue is that a solidarity economy requires for effective functioning a solidarity society and economy. Issues of trust, transparency, democracy (in all areas and not just the political), social and gender justice, equality, absence of corruption, and access to social resources (education, medicine, jobs) are essential because no economy floats free of its social moorings: all are embedded. This embeddedness is itself largely cultural – for example the question of consumption, the promotion of the consumer society and the ecological footprint that entails – is a key instance of this. Without changes in cultural perceptions and practices, sustainable society and economy become mirages (Clammer 2016b). The achievement of a widespread solidarity economy requires an appropriate culture. While the arts are only one part of the total cultural complex, they are an important part the formation of a society not only of survival, but of all round flourishing.

### Imagination and the Conceptualization of Alternatives

The distinguished Mexican poet and Nobel prize winner Octavio Paz once rightly noted “Imagination: a faculty of our nature to change itself” (Paz 1990: 78), a point elaborated by the leading French sociologist of art Jean Duvignaud: “The imagination, therefore, is much more than the imaginary. It embraces the entire existence of man. For we do not only respond

with feeling and admiration, but participate, through the symbols offered by a work of the imagination, in a potential society that lies beyond our grasp” (Duvignaud 1972: 209). Our role of course is to make that potential society actual. The arts are one of the few, or perhaps the only, legitimate areas of free imaginative exploration in society. Unlike religion or even science, the arts are for the most part not bound by rules and prohibitions, and while as a result they are often the locus of controversy, they represent the zone in which almost anything is possible: charting new forms of perception and awareness, formulating utopias, navigating the realm of the emotions (much ignored in the social sciences), exploring possible relationships between culture and nature, making the body a central motif, and in many other ways expanding the realm of human consciousness, perception, empathy and sensitivity, while in many cases creating new forms of collaboration and community, in many cases critical ones since new ways of seeing imply new forms of being, knowledge and activism. This places considerable responsibility on artists themselves: not all art is sustainable, contributes to the positive transformation of society, or feeds the spirit. Historically much art has been essentially propaganda for the state, the aristocracy, a none-too-liberal church, for militarization and for the generation of stereotypes of the “Other”, points made in art criticism by John Berger in his classic book and television series *Ways of Seeing* (Berger 1977) and from the point of view of literary and art scholarship, by Edward Said in his equally classic book *Orientalism* (1978).

The formulation of alternatives requires just such imagination – a “social imagination” if you will, one not devoted simply to the generation of fictions, but one in which imaginative capacities are directed at inventing, imagining and making concrete social and economic alternatives. One of the major sources of such imaginative interventions is art. This also puts great responsibility on artists – to produce work that is “authentic” and which, without falling back into some kind of sterile socialist realism, does genuinely address current issues, including ones such as climate change, which the novelist Amitav Ghosh argues, fiction writers in particular (including himself) have not done (yet) (Ghosh 2016). Many other artists, and especially visual ones, have now begun to respond to these challenges (for example Obrist and Stasinopoulos 2022, Lack 2017). By by-passing conventional political forms of discourse, the arts have ways of touching emotions and inspiring involvement and fresh perceptions of the world that no other medium has. This alone should make them central to any discussion about alternative futures, genuine sustainability and life in the kind of societies that we might desire and work towards creating. One of the areas in which this has to some extent been done is actually to attempt to relate art to the environment, and to the broader question of sustainability (see, for example, Curtis 2017, Clammer 2016b, pp. 46-57), which suggests, given that both solidarity economy and degrowth theory are centered to a great deal on the question of the environment, that this issue presents itself as an important interface between the arts and solidarity economy.

Perhaps the closest approach to these issues is the book by Arturo Escobar (one of the editors of the pluriverse volume cited at the beginning of this essay), not on art, but on its close relation, design (Escobar 2017). The argument of the book is too rich and complex to summarize here, but to a great extent Escobar himself draws a set of clear conclusions about the significance of art as a (potentially) socially transformative tool. These include what he

considers to be the essential elements of “the ontological approach to design”. Among its main features, which apply equally to the field of art, are the claims that, in a very real sense, we are all designers (and are all designed through interdependence and inter-relationships), that design [art] “Is a strategy for transitions from Enlightenment (unsustainability, defuturing, deworlding, destruction) to Sustainment (futuring, reworlding, creation). It embraces ontologically futuring practices, particularly those involving the bringing into being of relational worlds and humans, brings together imagination and technology”. It is not a(bout) straightforward fabrication but about modes of revealing; it considers forms of making that are not merely technological, and, while embracing new creations “promotes convivial and communal instrumentations”, including those between humans and non-humans; “It involves the design of domains in which desired actions are generated and interpreted; it explicitly contributes to creating the languages that create the world(s) in which people operate”; and is pluralistic, draws on both Western and non-Western traditions, and, in fostering autonomy, autopoiesis, “heterogeneous assemblages of life”, and non-dualism, and so, “At its best, discerns paths to (greater) mindfulness and enables ontologies of compassion and care” (Escobar 2017: 132-34). Simply replacing the word “art” for “design” throughout the book, indicates powerfully the contribution of art to the creation and sustaining of the pluriverse.

Escobar’s book is not about economics, but at many points his argument, especially when he discusses degrowth, actually relate the discussion of design very organically with that of solidarity economy. As he succinctly puts it “As some degrowth advocates provocatively put it, degrowth is not about doing ‘less of the same’ but about living with less *and* differently, about downscaling while fostering the flourishing of life in other terms” (Escobar 2017: 146), the latter presumably including the cultivation of culture and the arts. While such a vision in one sense involves the decentering of the economy and economics as the core of representations of society, in another it implies the transformation of the nature of the economy and its re-theorization into directions that are humanizing, ecologically friendly (indeed integrated with ecology), equal and just (as suggested and illustrated in Schmelzer, Vetter and Vansintjan 2022 for example).

### Theorizing the Link

While practical and pragmatic relationships between art and solidarity economy can then be discerned, and most certainly between the arts and the creation and sustaining of the pluriverse, there are also more theoretical issues involved. I suggested earlier that, at least ideally, artistic creation is one of the few existing examples of non-alienated work. In a future, ideal economy, of course all, or as much as possible, work would be non-alienating. This raises the interesting question of the nature of artistic work, or what Brahma Prakash, in a study of Indian folk theatre, calls “cultural labour” (Prakash 2019). In the book he cites the work of another theatre and alternative development scholar, Dia Da Costa who has argued that theatre work (and by implication other forms of artistic creation) should be brought within the orbit of labour historiography, since in her view, cultural work is very clearly a space of political economy. Not only is ‘cultural labour’ a genuine form of “real” labour, but a particularly interesting one in that what she calls “activist theatre” is not meant for the

production of surplus value for capitalism and that artistic and cultural work is not (fully at least) subsumed into capitalism, and remains a place both of contested meaning, and where meaning is contested, that being the reason for its activism (Da Costa 2012).

This places artistic work firmly in the camp of anti-utilitarian thought, contesting the hegemony of economistic ways of thinking and organizing society, in close dialogue with convivialist thinking, as an important practical part of Buen Vivir, as a cultural means of stimulating the social imagination and creating new forms of perception, meaning and values, promoting the “dematerialization” of production and consumption, and creating new senses of the commons, since in principle almost anyone can make art, and almost anyone can access it freely in one or another of its forms. In the past, art has played a major role in cultural, psychological and imaginative processes of decolonization by providing a new and indigenous vocabulary of symbols, new narratives, critiques of imported and culturally alien forms of art and architecture, and the creation of new or revival of suppressed aesthetic forms (in relation to India for example see Mitter 2007). This involves not only the decolonization of the imaginary, or the “decolonization of the mind” of which the celebrated Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o wrote in the 1980s (Thiong’o 1986), including in his case the decision to henceforth to write in his native language and Swahili rather than in English, but equally the creation of new forms of art, aesthetics and narrative that authentically reflect the new, post-colonial, reality: new stories, forms and performances that shape the future rather than simply reflecting the present or past.

This project has been nicely summarized by Cornelius Castoriadis in his influential book *The Imaginary Constitution of Society* (1987), in which he states:

[What] is required is a new imaginary creation of a size unparalleled in the past, a creation that would put at the center of human life other significations than the expansion of production and consumption, that would lay down different objectives for life, ones that might be recognized by human beings as worth pursuing....We ought to want a society in which economic values have ceased to be central (or unique), in which the economy is put back in its place as a mere means for human life and not its ultimate end, in which one renounces this mad race towards ever increasing consumption. This is necessary not only to avoid the definitive destruction of the terrestrial environment but also and especially in order to escape from the psychical and moral poverty of contemporary human beings (Castoriadis 1996: 143-4).

Leaving aside the rather patronizing tone of the last sentence, Castoriadis is right to argue that only by escaping from the capitalist/growth mindset can a sustainable future be imagined. The question is, where do resources for such a new imaginary exist? The argument here is that the answer is to a great extent in the arts, the major source of free imaginative thinking, writing and production left to us in a society of capitalist hegemony.

This poses an interesting challenge to solidarity economy. On the one hand it suggests that the economy itself is not the only or even main element in human well-being and as such is a critique of social and solidarity economics own form of economism. By drawing attention to

this, the arts suggest new ways of conceptualizing the economy, and of re-embedding it even further in its cultural matrix. In this way, the argument presented in this essay is a way of keeping solidarity economy “honest”, precisely by not allowing it to fall back on a form of seemingly progressive, but nevertheless invidious form of subtle economism. The whole point of degrowth theory is not to simply argue for a contraction of the economy, but to suggest that “less is more” (Hickel 2020) in a degrowth *culture* – one in which new values and lifestyles compatible both with the integrity of the natural environment and the flourishing of human beings are foregrounded. This brings culture back into a central place in any discussion of sustainability and alternative futures, including economic ones. As such, the arts constitute not only a challenge for solidarity economy (including that of fully incorporating cultural and creative work in the definition of what forms a fully rounded economy), but also an expansion of its range and enrichment of its content. A comprehensive solidarity or social economy should be one in which solidarity is not confined only to economic relationships, but extends to society as a whole, including its cultural manifestations. Seen in this way (as well as an important aspect of the economy itself), the arts provide much of the “content” of the convivial society, allowing imagination to roam free, human expressiveness to be allowed its full scope, and new forms of social and economic imaginary to emerge, which in turn will shape the ever emerging future, the shape of which will determine human survival and hopefully flourishing in the society that we pass on to our descendants.

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