

POPULAR COOPERATIVE ENTERPRISES: A PROCESS OF (RE)EDUCATION¹

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is just to focus on one of the production options with income generation, denominated: Popular Cooperative Enterprises or Work Enterprises, that emerge from the workers' organization in the sense of rescuing, by means of their work, their human dimension and to conquer citizenship. We intend, therefore, to focus only on the necessary procedure in this kind of enterprise, in order to induce a mentality change in the worker, by means of a process of (re)education that makes (s)he to produce, abandoning the individualized perspective acquired along years, and internalizing the collective work dimension.

Key-words: cooperative enterprises, work, education.

INTRODUCTION

The scenery of economic globalization has been provoking a profound transformation in the productive base and in the employment relations, with unemployment indices in all economies, mostly in countries such as Brazil.

Besides the unemployed contingent, both in the public and private sectors, that increases gradually, the socially excluded is also found, that survive, as ever, in the informal market and had never had the right to citizenship. They are the structural unemployment heirs and, therefore, do not participate in the formal workers sector.

Several options arise to try and solve the problem that reaches millions of unemployed workers. In this context, there are discussion about a new economy model, denominated Solidarity Economy, a network of initiatives in the popular field, that in its varied forms of acting, aims to insert in the market, a large share of excluded through income generation programs. The European literature uses the expression "social economy" to refer to these organizations, formally dissimilar that, however, introduce certain common essential determinations. The term solidarity economy has been raising, in the intellectual domain, a terminological debate. For Vainer (1999), it must not be employed, since it brings in itself a contradiction. According to him, the Economy can never show Solidarity.

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“The economy is the place of the competition, of the war . The solidarity spaces are those dominated by other ends, by other values and by others practices. Thence the perplexity in face of the expression “solidarity economy” (...) “Then, ... I would say: a wide , comprehensive solidarity project is inseparable of a criticism of the economy” (p 47)

Singer (1999: 63-64) disagrees with this point of view. For him, this position translates a liberal ideological vision. Answering exactly Vainer’ s words, he affirms that in the liberal vision the people are autonomous, rational, they know exactly what they wan, *“they are able, then, of entering in equalitarian relations in the market, buy and sell and, through this, to reaches an optimum state.”*

Further on, Singer (1999) will define the Solidarity Economy strategy:

“The solidarity economy is less inconsistent than the capitalist economy. Because it places, open and directly, the solidarity as the organizing principle of social economy instead of the competition. The solidarity economy ideology is collectivist.”(p. 68).

The objective of this paper is not to raise a polemics in an academic discussion concerning the several experiences identified as Solidarity Economy. We intend just to focus on one of the production options with income generation inserted in it, taken by the form of workers’ organization, in the sense of rescuing by means of their work, their human dimension and to conquer citizenship. That is, to focus only the necessary procedure in a cooperative productive, in order to induce a mentality change in the worker, by means of a process of (re)education that makes (s)he to produce, abandoning the individualized perspective acquired along years, and internalizing the collective work dimension.

1 - POPULAR COOPERATIVISM: IDENTITY AND CONSULTING

The cooperativism, among others associative forms that compose the Solidarity Economy resurrects, as a big hope for a lot of workers at the margin of the formal market. It is the excluded population itself, allied to compromised sectors of the society, in which the Public University and the Unions stand out, that come to defend their right to work and to income.

We have to recognize that in the current Brazilian context, following a developing economies tendency, that seek for alternatives of economic reconstruction, work co-operativism comes up as an important instrument in the unemployed workers’ action, autonomously organized. In Brazil, many are the initiatives born from workers’ experiences, in the sense of facing the increasing unemployment and exclusion. These cooperative initiatives remind very much the first initiatives that happened two centuries ago, that also were also born in times of crisis. We can, then, agree with Singer’ s statement (1999), when referring to the co-operativism origins:

“It is interesting to note that when dozens of thousands of workers were expelled of the market by the new machines and by the new capitalist

industries, they organized independently, collectively, in cooperative companies. It was in this way that they arose, in the attempt, naive at that time, to replace the unequal and explorative capitalist company by modern industrial companies, democratically auto-managed by their workers. This is the origin of cooperatives”(p 84).

Clearly, it is at the moments of crisis moments that more alternatives flourish in face of traditional enterprise forms, such as popular cooperatives. Rech (2000) in a recent revision of his work, *Cooperative: An option of people organization*, already verifies this reality:

“The work co-operativism experience seems to consolidated mostly at the economic crisis moments when the job possibilities exhaust. It is significant its presence in Europe in the last century (in the industrial Revolution crisis) and it tends to become a great subsistence option in the countries in reconstruction that seek development.”(p. 44-45)

That occurs because, among other factors, in face of this exclusions context, a resistance movement arises within the popular layers, that wants to rescue the citizenship and workers' dignity.

However, in face of the globalization scenery, that paradoxically privileges the individual in detriment of the collective, such initiatives suffer great internal and external pressure.

Of the internal point of view, there is a great resistance to a true work re-education, departing from the individual to the collective. The individual brings internalized values, that no matter how much they inhibit his(er) development as a whole, camouflage this evidence and let him(er) at the mercy of the dominant ideologies, that has nowadays individualistic character.

Of the external point of view, such initiatives suffer the boycott of countless sectors that are hostages of hegemonic policies and neoliberal interests. Thus, there are countless challenges to be won, and the largest is the formation and reeducation for associativism and specifically, for a cooperative way of life inside the capitalism.

The University presence with its physical structure, its technical body, teachers and students and its representation as a higher education Institution are factors that can come to recognize it her, in front of the community, as a dialogue and reference channel to be integrated in the formation process of cooperatives and other kinds of work and income generation initiatives.

For that, it is necessary a consistent methodology and a systematic and continued follow-up of the formation of cooperative and others income activities generators, that can carry to the consuming market, services and products with an acceptable quality standard in the conventional market, incorporating, thus, a share of the excluded population. It fits to the University to assume its role in this context and to position itself close to the populations where its assistance is needed.

This is the big challenge, as Singer (1999: 86) tells us, “transform the work crisis in an opportunity of developing a kind of work anti-capitalist organization, democratic and equalitarian.” This proposition is not easy. In Singer’s words “The Cooperative is a socialist company. All of its principles are totally different of the capitalist company principles”. That ca not be born in an artificial, superficial way. It is necessary to

impregnate workers with these values and principles before any other thing. Life many times does that, it is not necessary the presence of an academic teacher so that it happens, neither many lessons are needed, however, it is important to reinforces them through courses, lectures and workshops.

We could then think about how this assistance must be organized, structured so that it can introduced in a way that is both innovative and congregating, that encompasses several interests.

We well know that joining people can seem easy. Mainly, if that involves matters related to their survival, if the situation of these people is critical and if there is a possible solution multiple common problems. In a first moment, in face of possible life conditions improvement, a big demand can arise. However, as soon as difficulties start to appear, the group starts to disintegrate, sometimes hopelessly. And this generally happens at moments when the joint effort and the persistence are mostly needed. The big difficulty is, therefore, in the lack of capability and, mainly, persistence of the group members in continuing the enterprise. In these cases, what can be noted is the absence of a stronger link among members of the group.

Rech (2000), in a work already cited, raise an issue that can help us in the search of a better way to follow when we are inclined to give consulting services to these enterprises:

“... it would be important to question us about which would be the ideal mobile that could keep the very strong and permanent link between associates of a cooperative: the origin, the interests, the ideology, the religion? It is certain that a simple decision of taking part in a cooperative en in its foundation day is not enough. It is necessary to build an absolutely essential meaning that channels through the associate's life to allow his permanent participation and to impede him of finding easy excuses that deter him from the initial goal”. (p. 67)

Another important issue that we ought to raise while partners and consultants in work cooperative enterprises formation is how to preserve their autonomy in face of the technical knowledge that the University holds, through its multi-disciplinary consultants. Stimulating the cooperative identity formation, answers Schneider (1999)

“Today, when the cooperative autonomy has been incorporated to the cooperative action principles, it is necessary to foment it, among the cooperatives associates and directors. In order to autonomy to be assured, it is necessary to exist a wide and profound notion of a cooperative identity, of the values, of the principles and of the methodology, that assure the cooperative movement's specific character. With a clear vision of what the cooperative and the movement are, it is possible to build useful partnerships with the public power, with other society's entities, without possible manipulation of the former by the latter”.(p. 142).

This is a matter that we will have to face, because the commonest is the dependence attitude of the potential group for the enterprise formation regarding the technical advisers.

This work must link technological/practical knowledge with intervention attempts among the already existing cooperative groups or in formation, so that they can walk by themselves and to solve the hindrances of their everyday life. This attempt summarizes itself in a work of (re)education. It does not mean to consider it just as differentiated, but to denote it as a mentality change regarding individualized work for which, workers have always been prepared, for the collective work. It would not mean training, but utilization of the “simple know how” added to basic instructions for group work, that leads to, among others things, to the rescue of citizenship.

“It is related to unleashing a process of moving from alienated work to conscious work (that can be used as a support to the liberation process) and from this to a transforming creativity, where the person decides with autonomy and freedom”. (RECH, 2000: 101)

But how to lead the group to develop, amidst its members, a convergence and solidarity sense that allows it to remain united even when facing adversities, and beyond that, to collaborate for its growth with ideas, in solving problems that invariably arise?

There seems not to exist ready solutions. However, this is a fundamental challenge so much for the group, as well for those who dedicate to offer assistance to it. To solve this problem or to find answers is vital its your continuity.

As we already had the opportunity of exposing, the capitalist culture generated an individualistic, skeptic society regarding cooperative and collective work. It is difficult to work the idea of knowledge socialization inside the groups. There were centuries of favoring the individual over the collective, of distrust in the other. We live in a competitive world, where the knowledge, in the format of power, impedes that information be serenely collectively shared.

In this sense, the joint effort of both groups in formation and consultant teams is immense and must be constant to revert this picture that impregnated individuals' conscience to transform the other in a rival, never in an ally. It is necessary, as says Rech (1999) to rescue this interaction capacity and to seek forms of making functional the mechanisms that indeed comprehend the human relations and manage to do a synthesis between inevitable contradictions entailed to personal behavior, to the subjectivity, to the existing differences between people that take part in these collective initiatives. In other words, to manage the differences, not denying their individual aspirations, but accomplishing their form wishes in a joint way, in cooperation.

1.1. COOPERATION

It is necessary to rescue a number of more including concepts of cooperation. According to Souza (1995: 44), citing Marx *“A work form where many work plannedly side by side and jointly in the same production process or in different processes, but related, is denominated cooperation”*.

The cooperation gains political and economic force when the cooperative actor acquires conscience of his(er) collective effort. In these cases, it can be understood second Oliveira, citing Sales (1987), as:

“... collective contribution for a final product. It is understood as a final product the production and circulation of goods and services, the production of knowledge, the administration of a certain society, for example. As an economic force it increases the work productivity and as a political force it contains the collective action power” (p 21)

All of us elaborate, a priori, a concept about cooperation. It appears under several forms in people' s everyday life, in community activities, work teams, church actions. The community and cooperative acting prevails humanity experience. However, this idea is still restricted. ON the other hand, the cooperative project is wider. It leads to new postures, to the transformation of practices and to a transformation in social relations.

In the cooperation exercise we can find two great exits aiming at a larger social reality participation and transformation by the own actors involved in the process. The first would be the income division, that in the cooperative exercise is democratically distributed among those that effectively produce it. The second would be the power division itself, once the participation, exercised democratically drives, in Oliveira (1999) words, to a socialization of information, knowledge, know-how and administrative political space. Assuring the parity among cooperative members, that exercise their right through the vote, that has an equal value. The cooperative member in this democratic exercise has equal possibilities to express him(er)self, to consider and to be considered in fact. This cooperative economy, therefore, can be possible.

2 – CONSULTING METHODOLOGY AND (RE)EDUCATION OF COOPERATIVE GROUPS

It is related to an exchange of experiences that leads the cooperative groups to solve some hindrances of the everyday life, and motivates researchers to elaborate, from theoretical knowledge, a differentiated practice.

What is being searched is a healthy knowledge exchange, to unite “scientific knowledge” with “popular knowledge” in an attempt of transforming everyday practice, breaking the old values established by the traditional company.

The group of multidisciplinary researchers acting like agents inside the community expect to contribute with it and to feed from the rich experimental material that it detains.

The ways that the solidarity enterprises that are raising must run through in order to obtain success since its formation, imply in following a number of orientations for its administration.

2.1. FORMATION STAGES OF COOPERATIVE ENTERPRISES

Regarding the formation of the workers' group that intend to begin a cooperated work it is necessary to follow a number of stages. These ca not be run over or inverted, since the enterprise success or failure will depend of its exact following.

1st Stage – Meeting of individuals with a common goal - Identification of potential groups for the creation of cooperatives.

. Sensibilization and motivation

. Analysis of work experiences and potential of cooperative members (qualification)

- . Discuss with the group about market economy operation, work opportunities, products market, social needs, advisers' professional acting with multiple abilities and others that may be needed.

2nd Stage – Preparatory Process

- . Practical strategic and operational planning
- . Training, monitoring and formation
- . Economic viability

3rd Stage - Cooperative Foundation (Statute and Internal Bylaws formatting)

4th Stage – Registration of the Cooperative (Record of Minutes, Charter concession etc)

2.2. IMPORTANT POINTS FOR CONSULTING

CREATE A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

To work the image, to create an identity that leads them to valorize themselves as human beings, independent of the origin location. The individuals must be led to assume themselves as a class, and to face the stigma that this can represent. Many times, what happens is a denial of his(er) condition, the worker denies his(er) origin, because s(h)e feels that could be harassed by the visibility of his(er) origin. In this case, what happens is the repudiation of the image, in detriment of his(er) capacity. The necessary self-esteem has to be recovered so that the cooperative member can exercise her new functions inside the enterprise.

Valorizing the individual identity, through the capacity and not of the image, rescue the citizenship sense. From it, we will be forming the collective identity, that we have previously mentioned. This collective identity is born from the union of the several individual capacities, from cooperative work accomplished collectively or through different processes, but related.

TRAINING AND HABITS READEQUATION

It is necessary to discuss the work to be executed, because in a lot of cases, the people that decided to form these cooperative enterprises, almost always lived in the informality, executing their work individually and, thus ignoring some basic rules for its operation. There is the need of these people to readequate themselves to regulations and schedules. It is necessary also, that there is a permanent training process, to enable changes at work. For so much, they need also of the basic and fundamental education.

SOLIDARITY

Another methodological direction to be adopted is the preparation of the group for a solidarity company. The solidarity is a fight instrument for the survival of the group.

To prepare the group for the solidarity company is another challenge, because it involves a collective vision and an intense participation of all of cooperative members, according to the equality principles. The task in this case is to demonstrate that there is no bosses, and that all of them the entrepreneurs. One can not think about a collective enterprise when the participants keep the mentality and behaviors of subordinates or do not have the minimum perspective of autonomy.

LEARN TO BE AN OWNER – THE KEY TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The barriers created by the alienation process, imposed to the majority of individuals that are not owners and that work on third parties' initiatives, reduce their own initiatives and develop a subordination mentality that almost makes impossible a real autonomous attitude. In the cooperative enterprise it is necessary to break with this gear, that is, there is no space in it for those who remain waiting to see what the others, the leaders, the technicians are going to decide. In others initiatives like associations or in a traditional company that is, yet, possible. Decisions can be attributed to the directors, since the ones that participate are not so much such involved in the results. But, in the cooperative enterprise that becomes almost impossible. It is necessary that each one participates, gets involved, intervenes, assumes, bets in the idea, finally, keeps efforts so that the enterprise be successful.

In this sense, it becomes fundamental that each one assumes an owner' s role and abandons the subordinate behavior. And that is an ideological matter to be overcome. It is, as we already mentioned, a difficult task, because it is linked to a complete change of mentality and attitude.

Gaiger (1994) confirms this, discussion the employee' s passage from a subordinate producer to an autonomous worker:

“No economic initiative, be in auto-management form or in the traditional managerial model, manages to survive without planing and to organizing its activities rationally, that is, becoming effective in view of the progressive increment accumulated capital. Thence to be important to understand the market laws, rules of management and administration, the marketing strategies, not to explore the others, but because all the modern economy works according to the forecast system, to measures that are anticipated to the future circumstances and try to mould them at once according to the interests at issue. It is not enough for that to learn some techniques. It is necessary to overcome life conception as a constant adaptation to the circumstances and to understand the human activity as a force that creates the situations and establishes the transformations rhythm”
(p. 40)

It can be seem contradictory to talk about knowledge of market laws, when what one is seeking is its transformation in a new economic form, the solidarity economy. But it is necessary to have in mind that the transformations happen in a slow and gradual

way and that before they occur, one can not disregard what there is already. It is to understand that they can and must occur inside the own system, through the creator and creative human forces.

FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY

Together, the cooperative members are owners of the enterprise. In face of this fact and always considering it, mechanisms have to be established so that their creative force is no inhibited. It is, therefore, the freedom and autonomy in the creation of their products and services that liberate them of the subordination liaisons determined by job relations driving them to the most elevated degree of organization and decision in the auto-management relations of cooperation.

The cooperative workers must detain the capacity of interacting with the rest in equality.

It must remain clear that the confidence factor confidence among members of the group is very important for the joint growth. In this case, the members need to avoid differentiation among each other, to reduce the ambiguities and to create a respectful environment. One has to impregnate in the cooperative members the idea of a mutual learning process.

CONCLUSION

The cooperative enterprises related to work and to production, that we have characterized work cooperative or popular cooperative, stand out today as one of the exits for the crisis that was established in the employment world. However, such enterprises need an adequate orientation so that they can achieve success in view of so many hindrances that they face.

The University through multi-professional technical advisers can play a forming role for these groups offering its scientific knowledge to the community.

A conscience transforming work is the way that has been sought to lead the worker in assuming an enterprising role inside an economy in constant transformation.

Therefore, for these cooperative enterprises to be properly managed, its administration must develop special abilities, because it is a question of managing a very complex human reality. For that we suggests that these cooperative enterprises:

1) Have an open and flexible administration:

The cooperative members must have an open mind and assume that they are owners and need to acquire capabilities permanently. They must admit, if that is the case, the presence of advisors of different specialties.

2) Create clear and precise rules:

The cooperative enterprises must rely on Statute, Bylaws, and clear and precise programs, that can be renewed and updated, with a certain periodicity, when needed. In order to facilitate their insertion in the enterprise

life, each one must have defined what is expected from them and from the others.

3) Foment the motivation of all:

A cooperative enterprise will only go forward and be successful, if besides the professional/technical knowledge qualification the cooperative members have motivation for their autonomy. "Motivated associates and leaders move by themselves, and exercise positively their necessary autonomy. An autocratic, authoritarian conduction, does not create conditions for the motivation. In such cases, the people execute the tasks, only under menaces or perspectives of menaces. Without motivation, tasks are accomplished routine and ritually. An adequate decentralization creates conditions for the motivation" (SCHNEIDER, 1999: 143)

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