New York City: Struggles over the narrative of the Solidarity Economy

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ABSTRACT

The solidarity economy in North America has received growing attention at multiple scales in the past ten years. As worker cooperatives in New York City enjoy newfound municipal support, narrative struggles emerge between actors within the solidarity economy space. The solidarity economy may be theorized as capitalism’s feminized ‘other’: malleable, unfixed, local, and difficult to quantify. This feminization extends to both its workforce, a majority of whom are women, and the labor it produces, primarily domestic work. It is for these reasons that solidarity economy work is often overlooked as a political economy capable of structural transformation, and the discomfort with its breadth has lead movement leaders to uphold and advocate for more ‘formal’ models like cooperatives and deploy ‘poverty alleviation’ and entrepreneurship narratives to stabilize the fluid field. I argue that this project blanches the radical edges of a movement, minimizing not only those whose labor accounts for the majority of solidarity economy work, but ignoring the transformative potential of sites where such work happens. Based on a series of qualitative interviews with solidarity economy practitioners, this paper argues that the dominant narrative of solidarity economy work in New York City ignores where most of this work occurs and by whom, erasing and undermining those efforts. Counter-narratives emerge in those ‘forgotten’ spaces and thus transform them into sites of radical, anti-capitalist organizing. In so doing, this paper poses a question for geographers about how movements may continue to challenge our assumptions about space.

“As many other regions, states, and countries have done before us, now is the time for New York City to embrace the worker cooperative as a powerful tool to ameliorate poverty.”

Worker-cooperative developer, submitted testimony for the New York City city council, 2014

“I don’t see those spaces as being about change. I see them as being very fad driven and very much about individual organizational messaging and branding and really just behaving like corporations in that way instead of being about. ‘Hey let’s move this f——g thing forward’ and by the thing I mean, how are we killing capitalism today?”

Solidarity Economy organizer, interview, New York City, 2015

1. Introduction

On February 24th 2014, members of New York City’s cooperative community including allies, organizers, incubators and worker-owners themselves, crowded into the 16th floor Committee Room of City Hall to make their testimony. The Committee on Community Development’s public hearing, “Worker Cooperatives–Is this a Model that can Lift Families Out of Poverty?” invited all those related to worker cooperatives to speak on the economic benefits of the model for workers and for the city. The hearing was a result of efforts from organizers at Green Worker Cooperatives—a worker-coop incubator in the Bronx—along with Maria del Carmen Arroyo, the Bronx city council representative. Other worker-coop organizations like the New York City Network of Worker Cooperatives (NYCNoWC) joined these efforts soon after.

These organizations solicited support from city council members Arroyo, the chair of the Committee, and Helen Rosenthal, who would later act as the prime sponsor for later worker-coop legislation. For weeks over email lists, leadership from NYCNoWC and additional worker-coop incubators rallied worker-owners and others to guarantee high turnout; ‘Worker Coops for New York City’ t-shirts were made, carpooling was organized, and thirty people were able to submit their testimony regarding the need for city-supported cooperative development.

This effort marked a turning point for those working in the cooperative sector in particular, and for the Solidarity Economy movement writ large. Though the number of worker-coops in New York City has grown significantly over the past ten years, this hearing was the first time that the city seriously considered these cooperatives as ‘poverty alleviation strategies’ (WCBDI, 2015). Prior to this moment, the roughly 2000 worker-owners were connected either socially, more formally through membership organizations like NYCNoWC, or through
the community-based organizations and worker cooperative organizations like The Working World and the Center for Family Life that often incubate cooperative businesses. Local worker coop networks were loosely managed prior to city council interest. Cooperative advocacy—worker or otherwise—was at this point largely facilitated through national and international cooperative networks like the US Federation for Worker Cooperatives (USFWC), the ICA Group, the National Cooperative Business Association, and others, and all functioned as the institutional framework for the US cooperative movement. Today, NYCoNoWC, which had only existed for five years by the time of the committee hearing, functions as the local branch of USFWC, and connects NYC worker owners to their services.

Overall, collective networks in general and worker-cooperative organizing in particular are still in their nascentcy in New York City. In fact, New York City can be considered ‘behind’ in comparison to other cooperative coalition networks in North America, like Cooperation Jackson in Jackson, Mississippi (Akuno and Nangwaya, 2017) or the Chantier de l’Économie Sociale in Québec (Neamtan, 2005). Despite this, New York City’s cooperative efforts garnered significant local attention (New York Women’s Foundation, 2014). The Committee hearing in 2014 channeled momentum towards worker cooperative development. Efforts to integrate worker coops into the city’s Small Business Services (SBS) agenda has been instrumental in growing the movement in New York City. Though many see such developments as a sign of progress, there is, nevertheless, more nuance to the story, which complicates this success.

It is in this context that questions about what ‘counts’ as legitimate collective work, where it occurs, and who are ‘legitimate speakers’, arise. For example, women are 98% of the worker cooperative labor in New York City and work in ‘feminized’ sectors like eldercare and housecleaning (Solidarity Economy Research Project, 2015). However, it remains unclear how these workers participate in the narrative construction of their work and how, if at all, they see themselves as part of a larger economic justice movement like the Solidarity Economy (SE), a framework that includes worker cooperatives in its analysis. In this paper I ask how different discourses of cooperation construct a geography of ‘movement space’ for workers. I define ‘movement space’ as a sense of belonging to a cohesive ideology or set of principles, even as tactics themselves are debated. In this case, I argue that the dominant narrative of cooperative work in New York City ignores where most of this work occurs and by whom, obscuring other efforts of movement building work.

Various cooperative actors contribute to this discourse and thus participate in a further obfuscation. Both worker-owners and professional worker-coop developers who are not in democratic workplaces themselves deploy a narrative of coops-as-antipoverty-solutions. This runs contrary to a Solidarity Economy perspective of cooperation that views worker-cooperatives as potential engines for radical political action. In this paper I argue that despite this process, counter-narratives emerge in spaces ‘forgotten’ by mainstream cooperative discourse. Many of these narratives are based in a Solidarity Economy—rather than a strictly ‘Cooperative Movement’—analysis, and because of this, they transform spaces like the home, social networks, and informal gatherings etc., into sites of radical anti-capitalist organizing. These transformations align with Gibson-Graham’s (2006) ‘feminist spatiality’, which prompts us to reconsider assumptions about how social change occurs and allows us to better understand the intersection between discourse and space in Solidarity Economy organizing. The Solidarity Economy movement in New York is able to attend to its own tensions. One way is in addressing the blind spots that inevitably arise by prioritizing values-driven organizing strategies. Doing so ensures the sustainability of the movement.

This work is a result of my own role as a participant in meetings and interviews with other women who are Solidarity Economy organizers and worker-owners in New York City. My informants are five members of an anonymous group called Everyday Solidarity for Everyday Sexism (ES4ES), which began as a supportive group for women and gender non-conforming people to gather. My work as an organizer granted me a degree of legitimacy, and my interviews with ES4ES members were based off of existing friendships that I had strengthened within that space. Because of this, I cannot divorce my roles as a researcher from that of an organizer and ally, as this paper is the result of each of those positions taken together. I did not interview developers who were not already participants in the ES4ES meetings but instead relied on transcripts of their statements from the city council meeting as well as their language in their yearly reports from the city council initiative. This allowed me to see how worker cooperatives package themselves to those ‘outside’ of the movement, and how that process then creates tension within it.

In this article I use a Solidarity Economy analysis to examine the transformative potential of New York City’s worker-cooperative initiative. First, I introduce the Solidarity Economy as the movement context for worker cooperatives. I then think through how this organizing framework is spatialized and gendered—both factors that influence narratives of cooperation in NYC—and ground worker cooperatives within those dynamics. I use testimony from the city council hearing on worker cooperatives and reports from the Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative to outline the dominant narrative of cooperation. I then discuss the consequences of this ‘mainstreaming’ and, finally, I use interviews I conducted with women Solidarity Economy practitioners between January 2015 and July 2016 to uncover the counter-narratives and counter-places of the movement. I ground these findings by joining several theoretical frameworks: understanding the Solidarity Economy as a spatial subject through Gibson-Graham’s feminist spatiality, a relational poverty analysis that helps contextualize the ‘mainstreaming’ of Solidarity Economy work, and a discourse analysis of the NYC City council grant itself. These points of analysis reveal both the divergent narratives of Solidarity Economy work and the particular spaces where certain narratives emerge.

2. What is the solidarity economy?

The ‘Solidarity Economy’ is often either used interchangeably with the ‘Social Economy’, or the two are understood as one ‘Social and Solidarity Economy’ movement as is the case in Quebec, Italy, France, and other regions in Europe. Despite their many similarities, there are distinct political differences that distinguish the two platforms. Namely, the Solidarity Economy as radical, anti-capitalist economic justice movement has its roots in the Latin American anti-globalization movements of the 1980s. Efforts to create a non-exploitative economy in regions of Brazil and Argentina, occurred alongside peasant and landless workers’ movements and were in reaction to the growing precarity engendered by neoliberal restructuring (Esteves, 2014).

The Solidarity Economy describes economic activity that abides by five general principles: mutualism, cooperation, sustainability, democracy, and justice (SolidarityNYC, 2016a, 2016b). Williams (2014) asserts that because of these guiding principles, the Solidarity Economy seeks to transcend capitalism and create an economy bound to, and guided by ethics, subordinating the state and ‘economy’ itself to the needs of humanity and nature. The Social Economy, while it may share some practices with the Solidarity Economy, typically includes non-profits, mutual benefit societies, cooperatives, etc., without the explicit goal of undermining capitalism. To Williams, “the social [economy] is an attempt to ameliorate the negative social effects of market economies in which states have retreated from their social welfare role…. contrast this with the transformative vision of the Solidarity Economy, which seeks to change the fundamental relations of power in a given economy and society. In short….the social economy is about social inclusion, and the Solidarity Economy about social transformation” (38).

The Social Economy’s parallel rise with neoliberal policies meant many of its models like cooperatives, were used to shift the
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