Solidarities and economic integration: from the economic to the domestic sphere

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Postdoctoral research project within the postgraduate program in Development Sciences of the University Mayor of San Andrés (Bolivia) and the Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Economic Sociology (LISE, Paris). With a grant of the Swiss National Scientific Foundation. April 2010-July 2011.

Summary: Many societies, especially in Western Europe and Latin America, are based both on democratic ideals and on market logics. These two social orders rely on the affirmation of freedom and equality between individuals, without agreeing on the modality of achieving these principles. This inconsistency must be compensated for by systems of solidarity, otherwise threatening political or economic freedom. The study of these systems of mediation, based notably on family, community, civil society and State solidarity represents therefore a major theoretical and political issue. My research is part of this analytical effort, focusing on solidarity located in practices of production, exchange and financing. It is based on a case study of Bolivia, a country characterized by discontinuous and generally regressive State benefits, community structures weakened by rural migrations, increasing responsibility attributed to family solidarity and so-called “solidarity economy” (economía solidaria) significant within popular economy. Empirically, it is based on qualitative fieldwork with producers of solidarity economy organizations of El Alto, a migrant city of around 900,000 inhabitants in the outskirts of La Paz.

After studying these solidarities in the sphere of economic practices, the originality of my postdoctoral research is to address them considering their position at the intersection of the economic and domestic spheres. This perspective reveals a risk of instrumentalization: when seen from the economic sphere, reciprocity within solidarity economy organizations appears as a democratic counterweight to market logics. Seen from the domestic sphere, its possible contribution to the system of domination based on gender and race which allows the reproduction of poverty and inequalities becomes obvious. Particularly women’s solidarity economy organizations may help indigenous women of popular sectors to be integrated into the new monetized and marketized productive sphere, while still providing almost all the reproductive work. These organizations can finally contribute to reproducing the segmentation of the labour market and the imbalance of a system of solidarity excessively relying on families and on self-organization of popular sectors. At the theoretical level, these observations call attention to the reconfiguration of the relationship between production and reproduction as a central element through which the integration of economy in society must be studied. They also enable to critically characterize the principle of “householding” proposed by the Hungarian economist Karl Polanyi to describe the circulation of goods and services within a domestic group.

Keywords: market; democracy; solidarity; domestic sphere; gender; Karl Polanyi; Bolivia.