

Education and Work in movements for different economies: new envisaged scenarios and grass-roots political practices¹

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Abstract

Lo studio che presentiamo approfondisce il dibattito sulle dimensioni educative dei movimenti delle “economie diverse” (Reti di Economia Solidale, Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale, Movimento della decrescita, ecc.). Queste realtà hanno sviluppato delle proprie pratiche e valori promuovendo nuovi stili di vita e nuovi modelli di lavoro. Questi movimenti rappresentano contesti informali per l’educazione degli adulti e ambienti di sviluppo per l’autoeducazione alla cittadinanza e all’impegno politico. Essi testimoniano la creazione di pratiche che mostrano una passione per l’apprendimento, la partecipazione, la giustizia e la responsabilità, operando una critica al modello neoliberista. Questo studio ha impiegato la metodologia qualitativa basandosi su Casi studio e Grounded Theory. I risultati mostrano che i lavoratori (in transizione) delle realtà di economie diverse stanno sperimentando nuove modalità educative e di lavoro in cui gruppi e singoli sono coinvolti in processi di auto-educazione.

We present a study that pertains to the discussion about the educational dimensions of different economies (Solidarity Economy Networks, Solidarity Purchasing Groups, the Degrowth movement, etc.). These organisations have developed their own practices and values that have given rise to new ways of living and new models of work. In terms of adult

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education, we ask under which conditions these informal contexts can be environments for self-education in citizenship and political engagement. Within these contexts, against a backdrop characterised by the rejection of the prevailing neo-liberal model, new practices have arisen that demonstrate an enthusiasm for learning, participation, justice and responsibility. This study employed a qualitative methodology based on Case Studies and Grounded Theory. The results reveal that workers (in transition) in different economies are experiencing new types of education and work in which the group involved, and the processes of self-education in question, all have a pivotal role to play.

Parole chiave: Educare alla transizione, Lavoro nelle economie diverse e alternative, Educazione degli adulti, Educazione informale, Decrescita

Keywords: Educating towards transition, Work in different and alternative economies, Adult education, Informal education, Degrowth

1. Theoretical context: the debate around different economies and social movements in transition

Ours is an age that is continually described as a time of crisis. Yet what we are witnessing is less a single crisis than a long list of *crises*: economic, political, social, educational. Nor should we forget the environmental crisis, climate change, and the struggle for gender equality and intergenerational equity. “A never-ending crisis” then, (Marazzi 2015), although a more suitable term, which would broaden our perspective, might be “transition”. This word evokes the “emerging viewpoints” which theoreticians in many fields and social movements around the world have posited in regard to the question of transition, and which offer a number of starting points for exploring beyond the model of continual economic growth that is thought to be at the heart of many of the crises we are witnessing. Transition towards what? Towards a civilisation of conviviality (Illich 1973/2005; Caillé et al.

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2013/2014), towards voluntary simplicity (Alexander & Ussher 2012) and a simple life (Bertell 2016), towards “degrowth” (Illich 1973/2005; Deriu 2016; Georgescu-Roegen 2003; Bonaiuti 2013) and social justice (Sen 2009; Nussbaum 2010).

These are experiments – economic, social, political, in work and in education – that test new approaches inspired by the compulsion to look beyond the omnivorous, violent beast of capitalism. As we transition from an economic model based on growth to an ecological model based on limited resources, all over the world we see movements that can be considered “rehearsals for the future”. The result is a number of practical and theoretical experiments that give currency to an alternative image of social change, and introduce a new paradigm. As Manuel Castells put it so succinctly (in a 2012 radio interview): “Some people start already living differently as they can – some because they want alternative ways of life, others because they don’t have any other choice [...] What I refer to is [...] people who have decided not to wait for the revolution to start living differently – meaning the expansion of what I call [...] ‘non-capitalist practices’, meaning they are economic practices but they don’t have a for-profit motivation, such as barter networks, such as social currencies, co-operatives; self-management, agricultural networks, helping each other simply in terms of wanting to be together; networks of providing services for free to others in the expectation that someone also will provide to you. All this exists and it’s expanding throughout the world”.

Beyond *homo oeconomicus*, we see new possible cultures, cultures of hope that have left the culture of fear far behind them.

The construct of “transition” can be thought of as the confluence of different theories developed over the last four decades in a range of disciplines: Georgescu-Roegen’s theory of limited resources and zero entropy – a foundational model for those who seek to live (produce/consume) by a different set of values – which introduced the idea of a world of finite resources; in *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi (1944/2000) had already denounced the dangerous fallacy of economism, reserving particular scorn for the market’s capacity for self-regulation; also significant is the contribution of ecofeminist thinkers Maria Mies (2008) and Vandana Shiva (1988/2010), who expose violence against the earth and

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violence against women as the result of the patriarchal nature of science; and the scenarios developed by Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (2003) who reopen the debate over redistribution of wealth and recognition of difference, thus restoring questions of justice to centre stage.

2. Different-economy movements: workshops of justice and social connections

It is interesting to consider these movements as laboratories of social-justice practice and informal forms of adult education and self-education. In recent decades, scholars have begun to grasp the risks associated with democratic education: as with almost every sphere of life, neoliberalism has had a pervasive influence on education. In the field of adult education especially, academics have identified a shift towards more informal contexts in education in democratic citizenship and political engagement (Mayo & English 2012). Among these new settings are groups involved in political consumerism (Jubas 2013). Indeed, such organisations have become important locations for adult education, especially in urban contexts. New practices are being developed around a shared passion for learning, participation, justice and responsibility – both within and outside of social movements.

This is a step in the direction of the model of “social connections” proposed by Iris Marion Young (2006), which offers a theoretical roadmap for understanding the justice-driven activities of certain critical-consumerism and ethical-production movements. These seek to connect the spheres of society, politics and the economy by rediscovering their economic agency as part of a more active involvement in society and the denunciation of the structural and social injustice engendered by continuous growth and globalisation. Marion Young argues that we are witnessing a “structural injustice” in which large sections of society are dominated and deprived of resources, while a large section of the population is offered a wide range of opportunities. Structural injustice appears as the consequence of the actions of individuals and institutions – generally taken to further their own objectives and interests – inside a system of shared norms and

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rules. Every person that is directly or indirectly involved in these processes is responsible for them, inasmuch as he or she causes them. This is not a direct responsibility; rather, he or she (or it) is responsible as an originator of social actions in an interconnected structure.

As a consequence, the last thirty years have witnessed a growing mindfulness – linked to critical consumerism and ethical production – which, adopting the paradigm of economic growth as a source of social injustice, brings the system itself into question. Unsurprisingly, numerous social movements, both local global, focus their actions on questions of consumption.

3. An overview of research on different economies

March 2012 saw the beginning of a study funded by the University of Verona's "Joint Projects" research fund entitled *Il lavoro nelle economie diverse. Uomini e donne al lavoro per una nuova qualità del lavoro* ("Work in different economies. Men and women working towards a new kind of work"), which built on a previous study, *Economie diverse. Processi educativi e sociali nelle pratiche economiche emergenti* ("Different economies. Social and educational processes in emerging economic practices").

Although the emergence of new lifestyles inspired by principles of informed choice and critical consumption has been studied extensively, the adoption of alternative approaches on the production side of the equation – i.e. by workers – has not been examined in equal depth. Given the shifting landscape of the world of work, it is timely to explore the actions of people who make unconventional work choices against a wider backdrop of different economies, the body of practices and theories that, having evolved from the mutualistic economies of the late nineteenth century via the subsidiarity models of the last century, today find expression (and new-found radicality) in initiatives like *Reti di Economia Solidale* (Solidarity Economy Networks), *Gruppi di acquisto solidale* (Solidarity Purchasing Groups), *Economia dei beni comuni* (Economy of Common Goods), and the *Decrescita Felice* (Happy Degrowth) and *Bilanci di Giustizia* (Budgets of

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Justice) movements in Italy. Such movements originally developed as a challenge to the prevailing model of consumption, but they have since developed their own practices and values, which in turn have created new ways of living. The relationship between consumption and production has shifted: the supply chain has become more direct, and the individuals involved in production receive greater recognition; their choices, challenges and enthusiasms are made visible. Organic farmers, bakers, winemakers, jam makers, pasta makers, cooks, baristas, bookshop and B&B owners, libertarian educators, even engineers are discovering new value in their status as workers within different economies. From invisible, interchangeable “bodies” they have become figures of responsibility who bring the promise of informed choice and change.

4. The study: learning on the job in a different economy

In 2010, the TiLT² group set up a research project exploring the emerging phenomenon of different economies. The researchers adopted an interdisciplinary approach, focusing specifically on building a knowledge base around education practices in different economy networks (Bertell, Deriu, De Vita, Gosetti 2013). The project employed a qualitative methodology and research instruments such as focus groups and in-depth interviews. It emerged that questions relating to learning and grass-roots activities fell into two macro categories, one related to consumption, the other to work/production. However, although the subject of critical consumption has been explored in some depth, there remains great scope for investigation in the areas of work and production, of educational practices within the work context, and especially, of self-education.

4.1. Methodology: from cases studies to grounded theory

That first project raised a number of issues associated specifically with producers and their work and choices that merited further research. Our exploration of work in different economies comprised two distinct phases

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that were implemented in Sardinia and the Veneto. The first saw the use of Case Studies (CS)³ (Bertell, de Cordova, De Vita, Gosetti 2017). In the second phase, which built on the first, we analysed the data using a grounded-theory approach (Bertell 2016).⁴ As we worked, it became apparent that we would have to relinquish our initial hypotheses. To understand the process set in motion by those who choose to work and produce within different economies without bending it to fit prevailing theories and concepts required a blank slate, so to speak. A number of elements had emerged from the recently completed first phase. It turned out that the method we had chosen was particularly fruitful for an initial survey of the phenomena, and for developing a theoretical road map to orient ourselves: using our CS, we had been able to map out the conceptual landscape. However, this approach left a number of avenues unexplored. We considered which instruments might be best suited to sustaining further research to identify patterns that could provide the basis for a theoretical, if context-specific, model. Our conclusion was that grounded theory, with its potential for constructing theories from the ground up, would prove to be the best option.

4.1.1. Case studies

Case studies formed the basis of the chosen methodology (Niero 2001, 2008; Yin 2003; Corbetta 2004; Gerring 2004). In this case we adopted a multiple case model, in other words, the study of multiple, parallel cases (four on this occasion), all handled with the same procedures.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, the group selected a research design based on the standard steps of the case-study method (Niero 2001): identifying the problem(s); determining the research question(s); identifying the system, its limits, the units of analysis and, for multiple case studies, the sample; designing data-collection protocols.

At this stage, we were seeking answers to a number of typical case-study questions: How does an enterprise in a different economy actually work? Why choose to work in a different economy? What sorts of learning process are brought into play and exchanged in the relative communities of practice?

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Does what is learned lead to changes in everyday subjective and relational experience, organisational innovation and new developments?

The CS is one of the most suitable research methods exploring *how-* and *why-*type questions, provided the researchers are able to access real behaviours – in the sense they are happening at that moment – even though they have no control over events. The defining feature is the opportunity for direct observation.

The CS phase was designed as a multiple case study. For the purposes of this project, it was decided that we needed a sample that would clearly demonstrate the differences between the cases, which were selected from situations with the potential to offer previously unknown information. Taking our lead from Niero and Yin, we chose to talk in terms of “replication” rather than “sampling”: the introduction of additional cases was intended primarily as a means of verifying (or otherwise) the observations that had arisen from the earlier set.

The data collection methods were as follows: 1. meetings with network “gatekeepers” and focused discussions with the wider research group; 2. sessions of participant observation at workplaces; 3. in-depth interviews with the owners of the businesses; 4. semi-structured interviews with individuals in the “orbit” of these businesses (“satellites”).

4 in-depth interviews and 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The cases studied were: 1. Marisa (organic farm); 2. Umberto (organic bakery); 3. Silvano (organic bread cooperative); 4. Giandomenico (organic farm).

4.1.2. What educational processes? What did they lead to? What was learned? Case-study results

By analysing the data collected, we can start to form a picture of different aspects of this emerging context:

- One important theme is that of “change starting with yourself”. This is a path towards change that takes small, everyday parts of our lives into

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consideration. “Starting with ourselves”, we revisit global and universal issues. Change is manifested in practical gestures with a radically transformative creative potential (Gaggioli & Valer 2011). The expression “starting with yourself” comes from Italian feminism (Libreria delle donne di Milano 1988; Diotima 1996) where it connoted the idea that changing the world begins with changing our own relationship with the world: if the problem is identified as capitalist forms of consumption that conceal the exploitation of workers and the environment and give rise to social justice and inequality, the solution is to change our own patterns of consumption.

- “Starting with yourself” creates relationships and gives rise to groups. This communal, group dimension is particularly interesting. Practices emerge from relationships with other people, adults learning through informal methods and training themselves in critical thinking and new forms of political participation. The groups and communities involved display a strong vocation for learning. Taking nothing for granted, they study their subjects thoroughly. Politically literate, they unmask the dynamics of capitalist domination and suggest positive steps to bring about change.

- “Change” and “learning” are two key words that can help us better understand the capacity of a community or practice group to generate and test new processes. Such experiments abandon the paradigm of “Change with a capital C” – whereby one reality is simply replaced with another – in favour of devising and testing a “small c” variety of change, one of “small, everyday revolutions”. This entails a fresh start, in which we attempt to leave worn-out thinking and learning behind us and learn to map out paths to re-localise not only the economy, but also political action and the spaces we use for learning. By doing so, we aspire to make women and men conscious of their potential, and to use our experiences of society and our creativity to combat the capitalist pedagogy that has rendered us powerless and passive (De Vita 2009).

Economic actions can thus be read in political and social terms: economic action takes on a political dimension as it contributes to the creation of a new social domain that is independent from the coercive dynamics of the dominant economy. What emerges is the link between the attempt to engage in a different economy through work and the search for a

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better working experience, which is itself a significant act of self-determination.

The analysis process leads us from the cases to a number of categories of meaning. In the event, we found that clear categories emerged from our data that intersected with the themes we had already identified as pertinent: knowledge, recognition, sustainability, relationships. Whether we were dealing with the principal participants or “satellite” figures from the same networks, the process of work/production assumed a distinctive character. Indeed, whether by voice or everyday action, these individuals seemed to declaim something very different from the typical experiences of small business owners.

For the participants, work is in itself an existential condition, an expression of pleasure, freedom, self-reliance, importance, risk-taking. All four of the enterprise “owners” studied had tried other career paths that were more in line with their prior studies. It was not until they explored these “second” careers in a different economy setting that the search for meaning and enjoyment became a factor.

How do they explain their decisions?

They are a means of expression and a way to retain the connection between work and life; they give them pride in themselves, in what they are capable of; they are an attempt to find meaning in life through work.

What drives them to make this existential investment is getting to grips with what they have to learn in order to make the project a reality. This aspect of knowledge and learning is important, both on an individual level and as an act of sharing. Knowledge and learning become both an instrument of work and the meaning of work itself.

By “getting to grips” with nature at its most real, we learn to manage difficulty without relying on the dominant thinking of conventional production processes. In the accounts, you can almost hear the tension melting away as *just-in-time* time frames are replaced by one measured in the passing of seasons. The job, and the ability to do the job, is something you teach yourself. It is in this process of learning that we identify the element of self-determination that informed one of the research questions. Growing crops or making bread becomes an adventure, the search for

treasure. Only here, the gold is the product, a discovery brought to light entirely by our own efforts.

4.2.1. Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory (GT) is a qualitative research methodology. Characterised by adopting the data themselves as the starting point in generating theory, it is generally described as one of the two faces of qualitative analysis, the other typically identified as ethnographic research, which favours the accurate description of social phenomena (Tarozzi 2008).

Clearly, this methodology represents a change from the earlier case-study approach, not least because it requires the researchers to abandon the theoretical baggage that they might otherwise bring with them. And compared to the previous phase, the grounded-theory methodology inevitably entailed numerous steps backwards and a few sideways: the results of the CS phase allowed us to identify the symbolic and cultural aspects and meanings of learning in a different economy, but they were less useful in uncovering the underlying processes set in motion by the new (or renewed) meanings and cultures associated with work and (self-)education at work. In other words, we were able to identify the motivations of the workers involved in these different economies, but we were not able to describe exactly how they responded.

To ensure that the emergent categories had a solid foundation in the data, the collection and the analysis of the data needed to be carried out contemporaneously. This was made possible using a theoretical sample and proceeding by means of induction.

The new research question gradually became more defined as the data were collected and analysed. We started with, “what happens when you work in a different economy?”, a particularly generic, open-ended question with a wide scope for development that emerged from the case studies used to define the thematic area of research, i.e. worker self-realisation and self-education in different economies.

In keeping with the standard grounded-theory process, the interviews were subjected to theoretical sampling as, little by little, categories capable

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of supporting a suitably robust theoretical model emerged from the phases of analysis and codification. In this way, 25 interviews were administered and analysed using NVivo 10 software (which also offers traceability) (Coppola 2011).

4.2.2. Results: new emerging categories

What does happen, then, when a person decides to pursue a career in a different economy? What is the learning process involved?

As we illustrated in a previous paper (De Vita 2017) it emerges that the process is set in motion by the decision itself. Frequently, there is a shift – from job “1” to job “2” – driven by a set of values that effectively reject the capitalist model. This decision to undertake a change of job, and lifestyle, is driven by the pursuit of individual autonomy. The process manifests itself in various forms of self-expression. To an extent, the decision itself is also an expression of recognition: recognition of a personal journey, a personal choice, personal values, worth. In a similar fashion, the autonomy that represents the ultimate goal of the processes set in motion by these individuals’ employment choices is a form of expression and self-education. Autonomy is something you learn. What we see, in these cases, are choices that are not based on the conditions normally in place at the launch of a new business: necessary expertise already in place; a business plan assessing sustainability/potential risks; finance from banks or capital grants. What we see, instead, are individuals choosing change, a choice that invariably correlates with specific pre-conditions: a solid value system, strong convictions, a sense of enterprise, a yearning to find meaning in work that is conducive to fullness of life, and disappointment and dissatisfaction with existing employment (in terms of self-expression and a need to test oneself).

The decision to pursue employment in a different economy does not come with the pre-condition that you “know how”. “Can do” and “it can happen” are both far more important. Reliance on prior training that can be used as a “down payment” on the viability of the enterprise gives way to forms of expertise and training that are part of the process of work, as though there were a virtuous cycle of factors that bolster the individual’s

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commitment. The self-reinforcing quality of the process lies in self-education, the exchange of knowledge, and an inclination for ongoing self-improvement and the refinement of what is produced. What we are witnessing, then, is the creation of communities of practice by women and men who, in doing so, are also giving rise to informal routes to education among adults.

The underlying aims of this process are: autonomy from the system or from hierarchical powers, and autonomy as a form of self-expression and a means of achieving recognition as agents of a possible change that starts with the individual and the relevant community of practice.

The theoretical model that emerges from the grounded-theory analysis demonstrates the viability of a form of work that gives rise to new enterprises founded on a set of conditions which are different, and in opposition, to those of the majority of businesses. It is a form of work that is only possible with: decentralised income streams, with a principal (though usually meagre) income supplemented by other cash flows (e.g. other jobs/from family); varied forms of remuneration such as payment in kind, small batches of goods that help lower the cost of living (material remuneration) and even a return in terms of satisfaction which is perceived as a compensatory reward (non-material remuneration); useful relationships which, with the informality of employment arrangements and exchanges or offers of assistance in the work setting (e.g. from family members), offer meaningful assistance in the form of practices that are native to this particular context; finally, but fundamentally, the opportunity and attraction of simple living, without which the other considerations that determine the viability of work in different economies would be far less compelling.

5. Conclusions

The study presented here seeks to reveal the constant change that characterises a number of grass-roots movements, movements which originated in forms of critical consumption but which have since evolved to encompass theories and practices that reinterpret the act of working, in the sense of both how it is perceived and how it is carried out. There is a strong

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and intrinsic association between this different form of work and enthusiasm for education and self-education among adults. The numerous communities of practice that have grown up around these ethical producers evince a vocation for learning, especially learning acquired through informal forms and settings. The adults who constitute these communities have opened a rich seam of critical thought that, in turn, generates new practices and theories of equity, social justice, redistribution and recognition.

Venturing beyond the desolate landscape of neoliberalism, in which work and education are treated as commodities, eco-autonomous workers are asking, beginning with themselves: “What job?” and “What education?”, two questions that have been levelled at the field of adult education for as long as it has existed (Gelpi 2001/2002) and that today, in light of these new experimental practices, help us to address the politics of adult education with focus and incisiveness. We know that the neoliberal hegemony is a strong, visible presence within the entities that set the agenda for adult education in Europe, but we are also aware of a promising reawakening among (young) adults who, informally, and almost invisibly, are reshaping the landscape of contemporary citizenship and restoring questions of quality of life and dignity in work to a position of primacy over and above profit.

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¹ Antonia De Vita paras. 1; 2; 4.1; 4.1.2; 4.2.2; 5. Lucia Bertell paras. 3; 4; 4.1.1; 4.2; 4.2.1.

² TiLT/Territori in Libera Transizione – an interuniversity research group examining new forms of citizenship (Federica de Cordova, Antonia De Vita, Giorgio Gosetti and Lucia Bertell of the University of Verona). It has carried out research with a number of local and national partners since 2009.

³ This phase of the project involved a number of the TiLT team members, and took an interdisciplinary approach that saw the authors of this paper (Antonia De Vita and Lucia Bertell) collaborating with Federica de Cordova and Giorgio Gosetti.

⁴ This phase of the project was conducted by Lucia Bertell, who continuously reported back to the group to discuss the research methods and the analysis of the data.