

Notes on the alternative geopolitics of Solidarity and Cooperation Economy

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Abstract

Scholarly work typically employs the term “geopolitics” to describe a theoretical focus on the behavior, relations, and competitions among states. However, this term is largely state-centered, emphasizing state power and its maximization through national consolidation, and ultimately undermining the interests of human subjects and the planet itself. In this article, we take a critical approach that utilizes the framework of political geography to develop an alternative perspective on collective action, drawing from the world justice movement. Specifically, we argue that the Solidarity and Cooperation Economy (SCE) represents a field that generates alternative geopolitics through the context of solidarity. We examine how the SCE brings together communities that may be geographically distant from one another, thereby expressing a distinctive geopolitical viewpoint. To illustrate this point, we analyze the case of “Syn Allois,” an employee association in Athens, and the “Second Euromediterranean Workers’ Economy Meeting” that was held in Thessaloniki in 2016.

Keywords: *Geopolitics; Alternative Geopolitics; Social and Solidarity Economy; Employee Cooperatives; Contemporary Social Movements*

Introduction: The traditional geopolitics with a focus on the state

The embryonic form of geopolitics, viewed as the political interest inherent in a geographical position, has been a topic of human thought since the time of the ancient Greek historian and geographer Herodotus. This is evidenced by the international curricula in the fields of Political Science, International Relations, and Military Schools of War, where his historiographical writings are used as sources due to their significance in the modern “geopolitical chessboard.” However, the term “geopolitics” was coined by Rudolf Kjellén (1864-1922), a conservative member of the Swedish parliament. During the interwar period, his ideas gained traction and were influential in fascist regimes in Europe, particularly in Germany. Kjellén’s fundamental idea challenged the exclusive legal nature of the state and argued that states are dynamic organizations that compete internationally (Tunander, 2001). He laid the groundwork for the German geopolitical school, whose basic principles continue to define geopolitics to this day. The emphasis is on the competitive exploration of state capabilities with the goal of maintaining stability, maximizing power, or achieving universal hegemony.

The state-centered dimension of geopolitics relies on assumptions that are used as tools to shape global decisions, depending on political circumstances and the correlation of interests.

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For example, by examining the geopolitical analysis of the Cold War between the USA and Russia, the orientalist perspective between the West and the East, the “Third War,” terrorism, and climate change, we can identify political narratives that have influenced the future of national foreign policies. These conceptual frameworks are based on state “concerns,” such as security, territory, national groups, and national identity.

However, the monopolistic nature of the state-centered focus of geopolitics marginalizes society and the planet in the interpretive process. Historically, colonial modernity and its legacy have resulted in numerous wars and massacres, refugee and migration flows, social insecurity, global nuclear threats, and catastrophic extraction. Given this, we ask the following question: is there an alternative geopolitical approach that prioritizes the harmony of humanity and the natural environment while challenging the notion of a Competition State? In this context, I argue that the “Solidarity and Cooperation Economy” (SCE) (Gkagkelis, 2021; Psimitis, 2018) provides an area in which we can shift our perspective on political geography and focus on examples that promote a sense of solidarity.

Towards the memory of an alternative geopolitical approach

The movement for world justice

As we search for an alternative geopolitical perspective, we can navigate through the meteor of the 20th and 21st centuries and turn our attention to the movement for global justice. This social movement offered an alternative vision to the effects of neoliberal free-market policies and the collapse of the welfare state. In particular, its key features emerged from the struggle against neoliberal globalization, taking shape through transnational forms of protest and direct action aimed at re-politicizing meaning (Della Porta, 2020; 2005). This dual dimension of the movement created new ways for networking and global events which supported a different “bottom-up” globalization (Bandy and Smith, 2005; della Porta and Tarrow, 2012).

During the 1990s, new forms of collective action emerged through novel formations of social movements, which expanded through the decade that followed. One notable example is the call made by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in 1996 in the Chiapas region of Mexico, for the first intercontinental meeting “for humanity and against neoliberalism.” This event led to the creation of a transnational network of solidarity with the Zapatista movement (2004), which later expanded to include other groups. A year later, a similar meeting was held in Madrid, Spain, where activists from around the world discussed key areas for joint political action and international coordination (De Angelis, 2005).

Another important development during this time was the founding conference of “Peoples Global Action” (PGA) in 1998, in the context of the “Second Encounter for Humanity and against Neoliberalism” which aimed to coordinate social movements through international campaigns and direct actions of resistance (Marcellus, 1998). The PGA organized the “Intercontinental Caravan for Solidarity and Resistance”, an example which aimed to compose an international campaign and immediate action, which toured around Europe, creating areas of resistance and protesting against multinational corporations and organizations.

Aspects of this alternative globalization were expressed, on the one hand, through mass and transferable protests and on the other, through the establishment of meeting spaces for collective reflection and the production of alternative proposals against the hegemony of



capitalism (Bandy and Smith, 2005). It can be seen as a project of ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ where local and national movements collaborate with each other in transnational networks (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2012). A typical type of networking that was nurtured through the collective action patterns of the 1990s is the annual World Social Forum (WSF) meeting that counters the hegemonic policies of the World Economic Forum (WEF). The World Social Forum (WSF), which was first held in Brazil in 2001, covers a wide range of social issues, including the environment, the economy, work, equality, and human rights (Fisher and Ponniah, 2015). The SCE has been a key topic of discussion among activists in this context. In fact, during a meeting of the Solidarity Economy Working Group in Quebec, Canada in October 2001, it was noted that:

“[...] The solidarity economy is based on a collective economic, political and social plan that introduces a new way of conducting politics and the creation of human relations, on the basis of consensus and the development of citizens.” In particular, it focuses on “[the] production of integration, participatory production and consumption, networking and communities.” Also, the activities of the solidarity economy build through horizontal processes “[of] collective property and autonomy from the State” (Fisher, Ponniah, 2015: 91-92).

The aftermath of anti-austerity movements and alternative economic and political practices

Continuing into the second half of the first decade of the 2000s, the global financial crisis that began in 2007-2008 sparked strong protests around the world. In late 2010 and early 2011, a wave of protests and uprisings erupted in the Middle East and North Africa, highlighting demands for democratic reform and social justice (Esposito, Sonn, and Voll, 2016). In the spring of 2011, anti-austerity demonstrations emerged in the streets and squares of several European countries, including Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece. In the early fall of the same year, activists in the United States occupied Zuccotti Park in the Wall Street area of New York City. Within a few weeks, the Occupy Wall Street movement had spread not only to cities across the United States but also across the Atlantic Ocean and into the United Kingdom, drawing hundreds of thousands of people in attendance. In 2013, the destruction of Gezi Park in Istanbul triggered an anti-government movement that took on the characteristics of an uprising.

At first glance, it may seem that the protest movements that emerged from 2010 onward have no structural connection between them mainly because of their diverse social, economic, and cultural contexts. However, according to Della Porta (2013), the transmission of protest forms and the implementation of social practices of direct democracy highlighted a global stream of social struggles that shared and communicated their social practices through communication channels. This global wave of struggles, much like the movement for alternative globalization, converges in its critical stance on neoliberal policies, producing practical practices of solidarity and emphasizing demands for justice due to the decreasing political trust towards institutional policies and the reduction of resource distribution from the state to society (Della Porta, 2015).

Thus, in the context of the economic, political, social, and humanitarian crisis experienced primarily in Southern European countries, new forms of organization and collective action have emerged with the aim of strengthening democratic processes through a variety of

participatory social practices (Gritzias and Kavoulakos, 2016; Polleta, 2014). While these movements demand changes from the state and its institutions, they also present alternative proposals through their own actions. Their alternative activities focus on ways of organizing politics, economy and safety while attempting to claim their autonomy from the state. In particular, social practices adopted by the grassroots movements oppose the politics of recession (2020). This prefigurative dimension of collective action (Brown, 2020) rejects the dominant capitalist way of life and seeks to introduce alternative lifestyles based on solidarity, ecology, and autonomy.

The relationship between the Social and Solidarity Economy with alternative geopolitics

Unquestionably, the transition to the 21st century marked, among other things, a significant moment in history as the “global justice movement” emerged in opposition to dominant neoliberal globalization, which spread capital and the market-form through worldwide routes as the foundations of economic and political organization. In this context, new-Marxist scholars recognized that this transformation led to the development of new forms of state relations that extended beyond borders, determining to a great extent, the presuppositions of hegemony for the interstate encapsulation of the capitalist class. Among them, William Robinson and Jerry Harris (2000) identified the emergence of a new transnational capitalist class that represents international capital, the owners of the world’s leading means of production, international organizations and companies, as well as private financial institutions. This process is characterized by the transnational integration of national economies, capital mobility, and the global fragmentation of accumulation circuits. The protagonists of this transformation adopted and developed a post-colonial logic based on a geopolitical standpoint.

On the other hand, among the practices adopted by the modern social movements we find a core humanistic reevaluation that defines anew the concept of dominant geopolitics. The new forms of collective action prioritize a political vision centered around the future of humanity and the planet. Here another world is at stake which challenges traditional scales of geographical analysis through conscious efforts to create new spaces for an alternative geopolitical concept that redefines economy, politics, and society.

Various alternative practices have emerged since the beginning of the 21st century, challenging the foundations of the capitalist model and giving rise to a new form of cooperative that diverges from older types. This distinction is mainly due to the fact that cooperatives have emerged as a direct response of workers to the effects of neoliberalism, with no connection to past cooperative movements. These new cooperatives prioritize daily life, horizontal processes, and the empowerment of the communities to which they belong (Vieta, 2010). In this context, the principles of the SCE can be immediately applied by modern social movements, in the light of emerging new forms of collaborative action, which frame a twofold goal.

On the other hand, it is an example which presents an alternative to capitalism and, on the other, it includes processes which can transform the people, networks, and communities that frame it (Nardi, 2012). The actors involved in these types of collective action are being developed within a framework of contingency and moving away from the strategies of



revolutionary movements in the 20th century that prioritized correctness (Gritzias and Kavoulakos, 2015:17).

Therefore, modern social movements have created an interpretive vocabulary that records the practical forms of collective action. Thus, those movements create a palette comprised by new terms which attempt to cover the context of collective action and highlight the social practices of actors, including concepts such as “cracks” (Holloway, 2010), “autonomous geographies” (Pickerill, Chatterton, 2006), “alternative spaces” (Gibson-Graham, 2006), “commons” (Boilier and Helfrich, 2012), “policy of action” (Day, 2004, 2005), “direct action” (Graber, 2002), “everyday life” (Cox, 1999), and “heteropolitics” (Kioupiolis, 2020).

Although these approaches differ in their focus on the role of the state and its effects on collective action, they converge on the assumption that the SCE is a field for radical transformation of economic, social, and political relations. This transformation is achieved mostly in natural spaces, creating territorial forms of resistance to the hegemony of capitalism. These spaces can be cultural constructions that develop communication of social relations around everyday life.

The practices of SCE determine new spaces that redefine the relationship between the economic and the social, based on trust, reciprocity, redistribution, and community development (Gibson-Graham, 2006). This approach emphasizes that while capitalism is the dominant expression of economic relations, different forms of economic relations are being composed (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 618) competing with this form of dominance, which attempt to function prefiguratively through forms of organization. The form of labor in a workers’ cooperative is not established in an abstract way, as it is in the dominant organization of work. On the contrary, it is a defined form of work which promotes social self-determination (Holloway, 2006: 474).

In this context, the horizontal form of SCE practices has micro-political impacts at the grassroots level, providing concrete solutions to individual thematic issues concerning key aspects of life (Day, 2005: 51). This varies according to the forms of collective action which have developed in their process of differentiation from the state and the dominant economy.

In this process, alternative economic and political spaces have been created (Gibson-Graham, 2008), which beside the material dimension of production and the economy, include a wide range of social relations that exceed the structured capitalist relations (Lee, 2010). These new social relations promote different values, which give rise to social meanings that guide communication and evaluation criteria for the social world. These values derive from principles of solidarity, cooperation, reciprocity, democracy, and autonomy, and their interaction leads to a transformative process that creates a competitive framework opposing the dominant capitalist relations (Kioupiolis and Karyotis, 2015:10; Lee, 2006).

The actors driving this social change have incorporated employee cooperatives through the immediate implementation of these alternative practices, which in turn transform social, economic, and political perceptions of issues such as organization and the development of daily life. These practices place the human subject and nature at their core, generating alternative cultural codes and representations of space (Gritzias et al., 2015: 34) aimed at recovering some of the material and intangible resources necessary to social reproduction (De Angelis, 2007: 238–247).

Based on the above, it can be argued that workers' cooperatives are part of the somewhat exaggerated notion of "autonomous geographies" introduced by geographers Pickerill and Chatterton, inspired by the practices of modern social movements. However, the term "exaggeration" is used in order to show that achieving autonomy, in its rigorous meaning, represents a field of competition between social movements and the hegemony of capitalism (Bohm et al., 2010:28). In the process of achieving autonomy, the alternative ventures created are characterized by relative or absolute heterogeneity, depending on the relationship they develop with the state and its official institutions (Jonas, 2010). These alternative spaces could be defined as geographies which aim to create autonomous spaces and are, therefore, defined by the conflict between radical logics and the system's attempt to incorporate the direct result of those logics (Psimitis, 2017:328). Consequently, these geographies present forms of resistance against the dominant capitalist environment and interact with each other on a scale that includes the local, regional, national, and global levels through the alternative networks that participate and develop within them. These networks represent a geopolitics of solidarity, forming a narrative that deconstructs the dominant geopolitical thinking of unequal geographical development.

The geopolitics of solidarity as an example

While searching for concrete geopolitical examples, one can look to initiatives like the "Syn Allois" cooperative of solidarity trade workers in Greece, as well as events like the "Second Euromediterranean Workers Economy Meeting" held in 2016 at the occupied VIOME factory in Thessaloniki (Greece). These SCE initiatives offer an alternative take on of political geography, highlighting the potential for building international solidarity networks based on participatory democracy, creative resistance, alternative consumption, and ecological consciousness.

In particular, "Syn Allois" is a workers' cooperative that started operating in Athens in the fall of 2011. The members of "Syn Allois" came together through their previous participation in a cooperative project called "Sporos" (meaning "seed"). "Sporos" (2004 to 2012) was a voluntary community of people who promoted coffee directly from the Zapatista movement in Mexico, using the legal form of a non-profit cooperative. The collective promoted a different model of product distribution with the main objectives of fair trade, democratic organization of collective labor, and the promotion of alternative models of participatory consumption (Varkarolis, 2012: 67).

Thus, the collective "Sporos" was quite influential for modern social movements in Greece, as it was the first domestic example of SCE and served as a model for developing initiatives and collectives that adopted its principles and mode of operation. The legacy of "Sporos" is evident in the creation of the work collectives "Pagkaki" (meaning "bench") in 2010 and "Syn Allois" in 2011.

The members of "Syn Allois" share a vision of fair and solidarity trade. This perspective is based on the idea that the circulation of products should not rely on purchasing and sale of anonymous objects and exchange values, but on a chain of human relations that considers the impact on the environment and takes into account producers, distributors, and consumers. In this context, the workers' cooperative has put this vision into practice by working with coffee producers' cooperatives in Chiapas, Mexico, associated with the Zapatista movement. The cooperative imports and processes in Greece coffee produced in the Lacandona jungle using



ecological methods. As a result, coffee is bought at a significantly higher price than local intermediaries, and 60% of the total value is pre-paid months in advance during the harvest, in order to avoid dependence on usurious loans. The terms of alternative trade are constantly discussed and updated between the coffee cooperatives and the solidarity network of European cooperatives “RedProZapa,” depending on the specific circumstances of each year (according to an interview with Elias, an employee of the cooperative)².

The employee cooperative also imports products from other cooperatives and producer movements in the Global South. For example, it collaborates with the Libero Mondo social cooperative in Italy and the El Puente organization in Germany to import sugar and cocoa. This chain promotes fair compensation for the producers, the provision of quality products to consumers at the most affordable prices, the sustainable and democratic operation of distribution organizations as well as the protection of the natural environment (according to an interview with Elias, an employee of the cooperative). These relationships are built upon long-term reciprocity and trust among different communities around the world who share similar goals.

Moving on to the “Second Euro-Mediterranean Meeting of the Workers’ Economy,” held in Thessaloniki in 2016, we observe that it successfully established a common space where workers from occupied factories and cooperatives could share their experiences concerning collective labor and self-management. The meeting was initiated by European and Mediterranean occupied and cooperative companies, and was modeled after an institution in the world of self-management of work that was first organized in Argentina in 2007. Its aim was to create a space for employees in occupied and cooperative companies, activists, trade unionists, and academics to meet and exchange experiences. In Europe, it was held for the first time in 2014 at the occupied “Scop-Ti factory” (formerly “Fralib”) in Marseille, France.

The 2016 Euro-Mediterranean Meeting of the Workers’ Economy was held at the occupied factory of “VIOME” in Thessaloniki, Greece. In 2013, during the multifaceted economic, social, political, and humanitarian crisis, this factory became the first in Greece to be taken under workers’ control. The meeting brought together self-managed factory workers from Italy, Turkey, Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia, as well as representatives from organizations in Argentina, England, Spain, Mexico, Colombia, Great Britain, Poland, and the Basque Country. Members of other cooperative projects from Thessaloniki, Athens, and Crete, including employees of “VIOME”, also participated³ in the meeting.

During the discussions and reflections on self-management, the participants agreed on the need to create a common fund for self-managed factories that would serve as a support mechanism for projects facing financial difficulties and would provide an alternative to seeking financial assistance from dominant institutions like banks and the state. Even though the proposal has not been implemented to date, the idea of finding alternative financial resources remains of interest to workers in the Greek SCE movement.

In addition, during the meeting, the assembly of employees agreed to set up an international network to support the distribution of products from self-managed factories. In this context, the decision was made to establish bilateral contacts between several small cooperatives, initially from Greece and Italy. The decision to set up an international distribution network is

² The audiovisual material of the interview [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7b-fH2rwko>].

³ The information comes from the personal record of the author.

based on the idea to integrate control over the entire production stages of a product, including production, distribution, and consumption. This approach achieves economic viability and autonomy for the production and distribution enterprises by creating mechanisms that act as intermediaries in the distribution of the products. Additionally, consumers are informed that the products they consume are created through a fair economic chain. However, the idea of a distribution network between occupied factories and worker cooperatives from different countries is still in its infancy.

Short conclusions

By examining the two examples above, we can firstly argue that, in a time marked by the rise of nationalism, far-right governments, and escalating international relations, the ventures of the SCE offer an alternative approach to political geography by way of designating international solidarity networks based on democracy, creative resistance, alternative consumption, and ecological consciousness. The SCE networks pertain to an economic and political transformation movement that resists the political implications of neoliberalism and works towards building a fairer and more sustainable society, replacing exploitation and social exclusion with values reflected on cooperation and political participation. These are alternative spaces that walk the line between the global and the local community. On this basis, a set of people share, in fact, common beliefs and values that form a sort of symbolic integration. Through their solidarity practices, the SCE networks challenge the boundaries of national and state borders, creating a field of symbolic integration. The narrative of solidarity acts as an awe-inspiring rival to the narratives of “terrorism” and “climate change” that have dominated modern geopolitical discourse.

In particular, the Solidarity Economy Cooperative “Syn Allois” serves as an example of geopolitical solidarity that aims to empower marginalized communities, defend basic labor rights, promote environmental protection, and overcome intermediaries. Through its participation in solidarity product networks like Zapatista coffee, “Syn Allois” allows for communication and cooperation among teams, cooperatives, and consumers from the local to the international level and back to the local again. The operation of such networks is crucial in creating communities that overcome the strict geographical demarcation of the nation-state, turning each locality into part of a larger whole that addresses global challenges. “Syn Allois” operates as a hub within a network of solidarity trade, among other modes, which include productive cooperatives, solidarity groups, consumer cooperatives, and cooperative coffee shops. It is a dense network comprising of many centers in different countries and cities, creating a decentralized network that finds cracks in the hegemony of the capitalist system and dominant forms of exploitation.

Similarly, the “Second Euro-Mediterranean Meeting of the Workers’ Economy” was originally a common networking and meeting place for workers and activists from the wider Mediterranean region to establish a framework of cooperation and reciprocity between cooperatives. From this meeting, two objectives emerged: the establishment of a common fund and distribution network. These goals are part of an alternative narrative and redefinition of geopolitics that promotes workers’ solidarity and challenges unequal geographical development. Although these goals have yet to be fully achieved, we can argue that this general networking effort is one of the performative processes followed by modern social movements seeking to construct their own geographical representation.



In conclusion, the questions that arise regarding the practices that define the geopolitics of solidarity emphasize mainly on the scale of action. A first question that arises, is whether SCE's networks are being transformed locally or globally? Also, another question focuses on interaction between SCE networks with state institutions? The interaction between a local example of cooperatives with regional, national and global solidarity networks also needs to be explored. Finally, there are still many questions about the impact of these networks on the participants, the cooperative ventures, and the participating communities. These questions are still open and their answer will give us more information about adopting an alternative geopolitics that does not focus on competing organizations but on geographies that identify the means of action with their aims, promoting in the present practices which actualize a postcapitalist society.

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