Commentary for S&P Author Meets Critics: Brendan Murtagh's Social Economics and the Solidarity City

Exploring the role of 'the public' in social economics: public ownership and the solidarity city?

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Brendan Murtagh's (2018) *Social Economics and the Solidarity City* addresses key questions for alternative economics in times still marked by the 2008 financial crisis, subsequent austerity politics, and a lurking 'zombie' neoliberalism (Peck, 2010). Progressive alternatives that speak to novel ways of organising the state, markets, and civil society, are very much needed and Brendan's work lays important intellectual foundations for this project. In this brief commentary, I discuss two related interventions for Brendan's social and solidarity economy (SSE): what is the role of 'the public', or the state, in social economics? And what are the conditions of solidarity on which a social economy is built? For lack of space, the terms 'the public' and 'the state' are used mostly interchangeably here, whereby 'the state' also functions as an umbrella term for the democratic public control of services and infrastructures which can be located at federal 'state', regional, or municipal government level. As with most academic interventions both of my questions are closely linked to my own work, and as such, are not criticisms of Brendan's scholarship but rather aim to build on the valuable discussions in his recent work to synthesise his ideas with related approaches. As a researcher of public ownership, I was particularly interested in how *Social Economics and the Solidarity City* approaches the question of public governance, and more specifically, how democratic public ownership can contribute to an understanding of what constitutes social economics and relations of solidarity in a particular place.

Regarding my first intervention on public ownership I generally agree with Matthew Thompson's introductory commentary in the series. Matt observes that the state is "conspicuously absent" from Brendan's otherwise strong conceptual writing, noting that an "investigation into how such markets are constructed by state institutions should be firmly on

the agenda" (Thompson, 2020). Matt highlights recent examples of a 'new municipalism' (see also: Russell, 2019) in cities such as Barcelona and Preston, which are important examples of cities seeking to expand relations of solidarity within and beyond their bounds. I would like to add to this, and discuss in more depth examples of a wider, long-standing public ethos that still exists in many former social democratic states, such as Germany, Austria, as well as the Scandinavian countries, and is being rediscovered there and elsewhere.

In the German-speaking context the term *öffentliche Daseinsvorsorge* deserves some attention. Difficult to translate, the term is best interpreted as 'public (well-)being provision' (Wollmann & Marcou, 2010; Cumbers & Paul, 2020)[1], which in itself is a strong indicator of what the public ethos in Germany and wider German-speaking regions still entails. *Öffentliche Daseinsvorsorge*, more so than the English 'public services' or 'public management' signals strongly to the responsibility of care that a state or local government holds for its citizens. To provide a more tangible example, I will draw on findings from a recent research visit to Thuringia, Germany, as part of a European Research Council project on the global phenomenon of remunicipalisation[2], which describes the process of taking previously privatised assets, infrastructures and services back into public ownership (Cumbers & Paul, 2020).

A growing number of German municipalities take up (once more) the task of public governance of a wide range of sectors and services, going beyond the oft-cited cases of energy remunicipalisation in Germany (Cumbers & Becker, 2018). The cases studied in Thuringia alone include nurseries, swimming pools, energy provision, street lighting, waste management, public transport, and housing. The rationale given in most cases studied was to adequately and effectively provide key services to the citizens of the respective municipality, a task which stakeholders understood as best delivered outwith the profit orientation of private and commercial provision. Equally, the twin concerns of trust and transparency were at the heart of the local public discourse about service provision in Thuringia. To illustrate, the rural district Ilm-Kreis, located just south of the state's capital Erfurt, offers two enlightening examples of remunicipalisations. The Ilm-Kreis district first saw a

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[1]   The literal translation of *öffentliche Daseinsvorsorge* is closest to "public being-in-the-world provision".
[2]   For more information, see:
https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/business/research/centres/entrepreneurship/globalremunicipalisation/

remunicipalisation of waste management in January 2015, followed by the remunicipalisation of bus services in July 2019, a process that had been a decade in the making. Both remunicipalisations were reactions to changes in law (EU legislation and German federal legislation respectively), which in turn offered the rural district government a range of legal options for the private or public management of services. In both cases, the stakeholders chose public provision. The decision-making processes were far from straight-forward and involved public and political debate, a citizen referendum on waste management with a strong pro-public result, and, in the case of bus services, a lengthy legal battle with the private provider who ultimately lost.

The state, of course, has also often been, and still is, a perpetrator of neoliberal governance. Citizens almost everywhere in Europe have experienced the bleak realities of austerity measures eating into their public and social provision. Nevertheless, where the state can rightly be criticised in its compliance with neoliberal market logics, there also is an argument to be made about the state's (and local government's) unique position to 'care for all' by design[3]. The cases of remunicipalisations in the Ilm-Kreis, for example, speak to the idea of public well-being provision, in this case of waste services and transport, as a 'citizen solidarity project' for those living within a municipality. The government of the Ilm-Kreis actively chose to take up its responsibility to provide effective, high-quality and cost-efficient services for all citizens when the 'free' market threatened to deliver them at higher cost and lower quality. Both services have since seen dedicated investment for innovation and modernisation, and are well-received across the district. As such, citizen solidarity can be understood as "in-built" in local or municipal government tasks, in Germany as elsewhere, which is arguably more comprehensively designed than what could be offered through a as yet rather disjointed social economy. The relationship between public ownership, public governance, and solidarity thus merits constructive discussion in relation to (Brendan's) SSE.

Ultimately, this discussion of universality and 'citizen solidarity' forms the basis of my brief second intervention, which aims to probe the conditions of solidarity in an SSE. Reading Brendan's work, I often wondered what a solidarity city would look like; on what terms is solidarity enacted, and who is the beneficiary of solidarity in the city and social economy?

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[3]   While acknowledging that universal access and care can still be exclusionary for those that hold contested citizenship status, e.g. undocumented migrants or unregistered homeless.

Many of Brendan's examples challenged my own understanding of the possibilities and limits of relations of solidarity, and while I pose many questions here I do not have answers to them. One important question I keep returning to, however, is: can a city economy built on cooperatives be in solidarity with all its citizens when exclusionary aspects, such as financial capital necessary for shares, or access based on professional qualification (in worker coops), foreclose universal access? Here, I instinctively return to my first intervention to conclude that while many states have not fulfilled this role for some time, be it due to austerity measures or aspirations towards neoliberal asset management models, the public sphere in form of the state and local government are uniquely positioned to create sustainable relations of solidarity for and among its citizens, and already provide vital public, social, and cultural services. Exploring democratic public ownership and public service provision alongside the social economy that Brendan so insightfully portrays would be a worthwhile exercise.

References

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