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Women as subjects of ecological and social transition?

An epistemological and theoretical proposal

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“RAMA / Rede agroecológica de mulheres agricultoras / Campo e cidade / No Vale do Ribeira / As mulheres se uniu / Com o trabalho da agroecologia / As portas se abriu / A saude melhorou / E o clima agradou”

(RAMA / Agroecological Network of Women Farmers / Countryside and City / In Vale do Ribeira / Women have united / Through working in agroecology / The doors have opened / Health has improved / And the climate has become pleasant)

Taken from a song composed by Jane Aparecida de Sousa Santos, woman farmer and member of RAMA, Vale do Ribeira, Brazil

Introduction

RAMA - BRANCH - in Portuguese is a network of about 70 women farmers in Barra do Turvo and other municipalities in the Vale do Ribeira region in south-eastern Brazil. Located in an area of Atlantic forest - the largest continuous one of this tropical forest biome in the world, representing about 1.2 million hectares (Bim, 2012) - RAMA aims to promote agroecology, and in particular agroforestry, as an agricultural production technique integrated into the forest ecosystem. An older local agro-forestry organization, Cooperafloresta, has existed since 1996

¹ I thank my IRD colleague Isabelle Guérin for her comments on a first version of this text.

as a result of the need for inhabitants of the area to generate an income and to demonstrate their ability to preserve the forest, in the face of pressure from environmental protection authorities (Steenbock *et al.*, 2013). Building on the legacy of Cooperafloresta, RAMA has the particularity of being composed exclusively of women and aims at their autonomy as well as the development of agroecology. Its origins date back to 2015, when a feminist NGO based in São Paulo, SOF - *Sempreviva Organização Feminista* began to mobilize women farmers as part of the federal policy of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension, of which it was the executing entity in Vale do Ribeira. The NGO team - agronomists and environmental engineers, all feminist activists - aims to respond to the production and commercialization needs formulated by these women, as well as to the multiple social and political issues that they raise, such as domestic violence, difficulty in accessing social policies, conflicts and insecurity of land tenure. Thus, the NGO articulates agroecological assistance, the creation of alternative marketing channels (e.g. groups of responsible consumers and organic shops) and the organization of women farmers, from local to regional and national levels, as a basis for the transformation of gender relations.

Through their participation in these processes, women members of RAMA have affirmed themselves as subjects of ecological and social transition, understood here as the process of change guided by the twofold objective of sustainability and emancipation. At the same time, these women are constantly repairing the damage caused even in their own families and communities by the penetration, in particular of banana monoculture and buffalo farming. Sometimes they are themselves involved in these activities, which are lucrative in the short term. By maintaining the Atlantic forest, whether cultivated or “virgin”, some of them also sell certificates on the carbon markets, which compensate for deforestation caused in other areas of the country by large-scale livestock and monoculture, timber exploitation, mining, construction of hydroelectric dams or fires. In this sense, the social and environmental care work provided by these women also allows for the reproduction of capitalist production relationships, that are potentiated by an increasingly financialized and generalized market system. In this sense, they paradoxically contribute to the reproduction of a system that constantly devalues their social and environmental care work and that attempts to reassign them to their biological, maternal, and supposedly a-political because natural function. The challenge of their quest for autonomy and the enhancement of their work is that it serves to transform this system and not to reinforce its paradoxical logic, yet the two processes are, in practice, inextricably linked.

The argument that I defend in this paper is that **such contradictions are intrinsic to ecological and social transition**. Indeed, they are not just two opposing trends that clash in a political contest of power, but the very experience of the subjects of the transition, intertwined and lived out in their daily livelihood strategies. Thus, I consider these two propositions to be true at the same time: RAMA women farmers are subjects of ecological and social transition and instruments of the reproduction of the market and patriarchal system. Therefore,

one cannot analyse “purely” one proposition without taking into account the other one (Frère and Laville, forthcoming).

Since 2016, I have accompanied as a researcher the development of RAMA and SOF projects in Vale do Ribeira. Through action research methods and surveys based on observation, interviews, focus groups and questionnaires, I have contributed to the production of knowledge on the conditions of women’s empowerment in agroecology. This production was based on many exchanges with the SOF team and with RAMA members, and subsequent adjustments. It took the form of specific communication supports (videos and texts) for local actors as well as contribution to academic debate (Hillenkamp 2019; Hillenkamp and Nobre, 2018; Hillenkamp and Lobo, 2019). Faced with the contradictions experienced by women farmers in RAMA, my point of view has thus been situated: my work consisted in analyzing the conditions for women in RAMA to participate in the social and ecological transition, without losing sight of the mechanisms of reproduction of the market and patriarchal system.

The aim of this text is **to contribute to the development of an epistemological and theoretical framework for analysing the ecological and social transition**, taking into account the irreducible contradictions illustrated by the RAMA experience. To do so, I argue, in agreement with many colleagues from political economy, feminism, ecology and socioeconomics (see parts I and II), that the interactions between the economic, political, social and ecological dimensions of processes, institutions and practices must be taken into account. To separate them, as standard economic theory and academic disciplines division do, is to adopt the intellectual reduction that attempts to justify the alleged autonomy of the market system over the rest of social life and the Biosphere by obscuring its social and environmental linkages.

My contribution to the development of such a framework starts from the large-scale analytical and historical perspective introduced by Karl Polanyi and of the exegeses who have updated and extended his work. I consider that the significance of the myriad subjects of transition, of which RAMA is an example, must be considered in the long time span of institutional and environmental change and the interlocking levels of social determination. I further argue that the Polanyian analytical framework, focused on market system, needs to be complemented by feminist critique at different moments in intellectual and activist history, which articulate this framework with the reproduction of patriarchy and the recognition of women’s work.

Thus, my theoretical proposal combines currents coming from different disciplines, the critique of market system and patriarchy and a dual, empirical and historical, grounding. The first part of the text situates the issue of women (farmers) in ecological and social transition in the history of the market system since the nineteenth century and, in particular, in financialisation since the end of the 1970s. I propose elements of characterization of this system, of its current crisis, and I hypothesize the existence of two concomitant outcomes - sustainable and democratic on the one hand, ultraliberal and (proto-)fascistic on the other -

of which I give examples in Brazil. The second part is analytic: based on theory grounded in Brazil's history and current situation that emerge from the first part, I propose an economic analytical framework for ecological and social transition.

I. Women in social and ecological transition from historical and critical perspective

1. The crisis of the nineteenth century civilization and the *Great Transformation*

Karl Polanyi's *Great Transformation* provides a wide-ranging interpretation of the two World Wars as consequences of the crisis of what he calls the "nineteenth-century civilization": the one that gradually imposed on almost the whole world the economic system based on the market and the gold standard, and the political system based on the liberal state and the Great colonial Powers. It is in the social and ecological deadlocks of this civilization and in the political damage it caused that Polanyi places the origin of the wars, departing as much from the theses on the supposedly cultural nature of fascism, as from that on the downward trend in the rate of profit.

Starting from these premises, Polanyi has sought in England's long history the sequence of political and economic transformations that led to the crisis. It began with the rise of a merchant class, which accompanied the invention of sophisticated machinery at the end of the eighteenth century, when "industrial production ceased to be an accessory of commerce" (Polanyi, 2001 [1944], p. 78) and became the object of costly investments. This reversal of the production-commerce relationship, Polanyi argued, would have a masterful effect on labour, land and money: they had to become commodities in order to remain available for industrial production, thus ensuring the continuity of commerce, which in turn became necessary for the viability of investment and the survival of the new merchant class.

The failure of the law of Speenhamland (1795-1834), developed at length by Polanyi (*ibid.*, chapter 7), illustrates the new imperative of creating a labour market and the "incomprehensible" misery that this law, which attempted to oppose it, brought about. Under the new conditions of market expansion, this law paradoxically led to making the poor unproductive and unworthy. There was then no choice but to repeal it and to allow the formation of a labour market, which in turn led to pauperism. In the same way, the commodification of "nature" had become as destructive as it was inevitable:

"Land is only another name for nature, which is not produced by man [...]. Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighbourhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted, military safety jeopardized, the power to produce food and raw materials destroyed" (*ibid.*, p. 75-76).

The thermo-industrial revolution, to which critical scientists and historians trace the origin of the new climate regime and whose contingent character they stress – "[...] a political failure, a choice made during the nineteenth century in Europe:

the choice of firepower” (Cochet, 2018, p. 51²) – corresponds to this moment identified by Polanyi. As for money, its commodification produced price fluctuations that, depending on their direction and amplitude, had deleterious effects on the very market production that it was supposed to foster, whether during the nineteenth-century gold standard system or during the attempt to re-establish it in the 1920s. The scope of Polanyi’s analysis lies in having linked the social, environmental, and economic contradictions induced by the market system through the triple commodification of labour, land, and money. He then investigated the consequences of this process on several levels.

His thesis on the place of the economy in society and disembeddedness first showed how the utopia of market self-regulation required “nothing less than the institutional separation of society into an economic and a political sphere” (Polanyi, 2001 [1944], p. 74). This utopia was based on a major transformation in thinking reflected in political economy: that of affirming the existence of market laws that would guarantee its autonomous functioning and that should not be hindered, under pain of disasters such as the one caused by the law of Speenhamland. This reduction in thinking has resulted in the obscuring of the negative social and environmental “externalities” of the market, i.e. the consequences of the commodification of labour and land, as well as the non-market share of the economy. “First-wave” feminism, contemporary to Polanyi, focused on women’s suffrage and institutional reform, rather than criticism of the market. However, the share of non-market and undervalued (usually free) work essential to the reproduction of this system was, from that time on, largely performed by women (Tilly, 1986).

Polanyi’s thesis on the essence of fascism, whose rise he observed in the 1930s, also asserts that it is a result of the contradictions of the market system. Opposing Marx’s economism, he argued that the formation and disappearance of social classes is a dynamic process that responds to individuals’ need for social recognition and protection, and not only pecuniary interests. Departing from determinism, he insisted on the role of contingencies, especially external ones, be they political, climatic, technological, etc. This approach to social change led Polanyi to focus on the multiple political visions, alliances and confrontations generated by the contradictions of the market system. In particular, he highlighted the opposing demands for social protection that have been engendered by market society, especially those relying on socialism, demanded by workers, and the ones geared towards return to feudalism, desired by landowners.

The impossibility of preserving the “human substance” of society in the face of such tensions signed the impasse of liberal capitalism, of which the “fascist solution” was one of the outcomes:

“The fascist solution of the impasse reached by liberal capitalism can be described as a reform of market economy achieved at the price of the extirpation of all democratic institutions, both in the industrial and

² Translations of quotations in French or Portuguese are personal.

in the political realm. The economic system which was in peril of disruption would thus be revitalized, while the people themselves were subjected to a reeducation designed to denaturalize the individual and make him unable to function as the responsible unit of the body politic” (*ibid.*, p. 245).

Democratic socialism, called for by Polanyi as the path of the Great Transformation for the post-war period, means “the requirement to extend democracy to economic life, but also the imperative to build a culture, a vision of the world that the economic organization must embody” (Cangiani and Maucourant, 2008, p. 16). It constitutes another possible way out of the impasse of liberal capitalism, which departs from the deprivation of freedom in fascism as much as from its illusory conception in economic liberalism. It presupposes another relation to work and the environment and in this sense it may constitute an ecological and social transition.

It should be stressed that Polanyi’s contribution to the analysis of this period is both historical and theoretical, providing valid analytical keys beyond the period examined: the double social and ecological dimension of the crisis of the market system; the necessary reduction of thought in this system; the contradiction inherent in the processes of change triggered by liberalism; the fascist drift of liberalism; and the possibility of a democratic and sustainable outcome.

2. Fordist compromise and regulated citizenship: de-commodification of money and labour *versus* environmental rent and invisible work

To a certain extent, the post-war period up to the first oil shock constituted a social transition of the market system in the Western world and, to a lesser extent, in the countries then known as the Third World, particularly Latin America, which will be taken as an example here. The Bretton Woods agreements were the foundation of this transition: signed in 1944, under the notable influence of Keynes, they redesigned the international financial system by creating a currency under political control (fixed exchange rates) and sheltered from market speculation (control over capital movements) (Postel and Sobel, 2013).

From this de-commodification of money, that of labour became possible. In Western countries, the mobilization of workers, particularly in the industrial sector, and political negotiations led to the so-called Fordist regime of regulation of capitalism: in exchange for their submission to the “scientific” organization of labour, which ensured the continuity of production and productivity gains, these workers gained access to stable employment, not exposed to market fluctuations, to wages indexed to productivity gains and to social rights (Aglietta, 1997; Boyer and Saillard, 2002).

In Latin America at the same period, a similar logic of regulation emerged, with the difference that the share of protected workers remained much smaller. Brazil, under the presidency of Getúlio Vargas (1934-1945 and 1951-1954), played a pioneering role in the institution of this system of “regulated citizenship” (Dos Santos, 1979), based on the social protection of formal sector employees only.

In that country, as later in Argentina, Mexico and other countries in the region (Bayón *et al.*, 1998), the holding of a labour card became synonymous with access to social benefits, while the masses of informal workers on the urban fringes and in rural areas continued to sell their labour force without any protection. Regulated citizenship became the historical form through which progressive and populist Latin American governments conciliated the stabilization of labour necessary for capitalist accumulation with certain aspirations for equity in otherwise highly unequal societies (Goirand, 2003).

The shift of these societies towards military regimes in the 1960s had complex causes, linked to the specific relationships between pro-democratization forces, populist governments, revolutionary movements and the market versus centrally planned economy model in the context of the Cold War. Understanding these relationships, and their variations in the region, is far beyond our focus, which is on the protection of workers. In this respect, although military dictatorships obviously removed any democratic dimension from the regulatory regime, they nevertheless kept the pact with the workers holding a labour card, which was essential for the growth of the industrial sectors on which their power was based. In Brazil, for example, industry, driven by automobile production, grew at an average rate of 23.6% between 1968 and 1973 - an “economic miracle”, which illustrates the strategic character that this sector had for the military regimes, as well as the hope of non-status workers to gain access to it.

However, this promise should not obscure the fact that in these countries, and to a lesser extent in Western countries, a large proportion of work relationships have remained outside the social protection system. This includes, on the one hand, informal labour based on class, race and gender relations; on the other hand, unpaid work within families and communities. In the first case, women workers, in particular, suffered from the violence of unregulated market relationships, coupled, in the case of domestic employment, with woman employer-woman employee hierarchy that subtly relies on emotional ties behind the closed doors of the home (Brites, 2007). In the second case, exploitation relied on the myth of the gift of women’s work, in the name of maternal love or a sense of family and community responsibility. Rejection in the private sphere concealed the underlying relations of domination, admittedly not market based, but no less violent in terms of gender assignment.

Feminist intellectuals of this period denounced this “domestic mode of production” and its invisible and unequal articulation with the capitalist mode of production (Delphy, 1998 [1970]). During the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave of feminism spread to politicized civil society groups in major Latin American urban centres that participated in resistance to military regimes. In Brazil, these groups gave great importance to women’s work, in addition to the issues of the body, sexuality and criticism of the institution of the family, and affirmed the need to socialize domestic work and claim co-responsibility of public policies in this area (Pedro, 2013).

Finally, during this period, the de-commodification of money and the even limited de-commodification of labour were not accompanied by a similar movement in relation to the environment. On the contrary, the unrestricted exploitation of raw materials, especially in Latin America, as well as in newly decolonized Africa and Asia, continued to subsidize capitalist accumulation. The weakness of the regulations issued by the States during this period allows to speak of an institutional form, specific to Fordism, “consisting of a quasi-environmental rent taken from nature in order to reduce the cost of production of goods and services” (Postel and Sobel, 2013, p. 115). The construction of the Trans-Amazonian Highway in Brazil from 1970 onwards, which allowed the exploitation, both legal and illegal, of huge tracts of forest, is a striking illustration of this. In general, this period was marked by warnings, issued by scientists (Carson, 2002 [1962]) and emerging environmental movements, about the damage of the industrial production model due to the dual depletion of resources and the capacity to absorb waste (Lipietz, 1999).

The limitations of the social and ecological regulations of the capitalist market system during this period make it possible to understand the common role that the ecological and feminist movements had to play: that of denouncing the irreducible contradictions of this system for the sustainability of life and the Biosphere.

3. The comeback of neo-liberalism: women and the environment in the era of financialisation

A new era began with the return to a commoditized currency in the 1970s. Between the suspension of dollar-gold convertibility by President Nixon in the United States in 1971 and the Big Bang in the City of London in 1986, fifteen years passed during which a floating exchange rate system replaced the control system resulting from the Bretton Woods agreements and international financial flows were completely deregulated. The oil crisis of 1967-1974 and the subsequent disruption of the relationship between energy and democracy (Mitchell, 2009) was a major factor in this political turnaround, leading to slower economic growth and difficulties in capital development, especially for the United States, whose currency was overvalued. This was compounded by the accumulation in European banks of petrodollars from soaring oil prices in search of lucrative investments and pressure from retirees, still in the United States, to increase the profitability of pension funds. The external public debt crisis of the “developing” countries, whose mostly military regimes had become over-indebted to petrodollar recycling banks in the 1970s, was a result of these processes. It led to widespread financial and trade liberalization of developing countries in the 1980s and 1990s, under the leadership of the Washington institutions instituting the new structural adjustment plans (Chesnais, 2004).

The re-commodification of money at international level led to the re-commodification of labour and a new front of commodification of nature, as necessary resources for financial valorisation. The establishment of an international money market has in fact led to a sharp rise in interest rates, which,

combined with the slowdown in productivity gains, has led to a compression of the share of wages in added value. Despite differences between regions, this compression continues to the present day: the overall adjusted share of labour in added value income dropped from an estimated 53.7% in 2004 to 51.4% in 2017 (ILO 2020, p. 67). Capital liberalization has furthermore led to competition among workers at the international level and to the “flexibilisation” - i.e. commodification - of labour as a response of companies and States to shareholders’ pressure. The erosion of the wage condition has been accompanied by an increase in women’s participation rate in the labour market. In Brazil, this rate rose from 28.0% in 1976 to 52.4% in 2007, at the same time as the labour market was segmented between “a mass of women workers concentrated in precarious, less valued tasks, whether paid or unpaid” and “a small, though growing, group of highly qualified women (...) who follow prestigious careers” (Lombardi, 2012, p. 90). Precariousness, inequality and the continued sexual division of domestic work (ibid.) continue to shape the experience of most women workers in Brazil and many other countries.

At the same time, the commodification of nature has continued to spread since the 1980s, through the patentability of life, new property rights, e.g. on genetic resources supposed to protect biodiversity, or the institution of markets, e.g. the carbon market supposed to limit global warming. The Rio Earth Summit in 1992 instituted market-based environmental management at the international level in many forms, maintained, despite limited effectiveness, at the subsequent Conferences of Parties (COPs), the most important of which took place in Kyoto in 1997, Copenhagen in 2009 and Paris in 2015.

At the same time, this period saw the emergence of rural women’s organisations opposed to commodification, of which the Chipko movement in India was an emblem, but which also relied on multiple forms of local organization such as RAMA. Brazil has played a pioneering role in this respect in Latin America. In the 1980s, rural women first organized in autonomous regional movement to demand their rights as workers (Jalil, 2017), an organization that would later expand through alliances and entry into networked mixed movements such as the Landless Workers Movement. Through these processes of politicisation, these women gradually articulated their concrete experiences of gender and class oppression and environmental injustice into a systemic critique of the environmental and social damage of the market-based capitalist system and patriarchy (Guétat-Bernard et Prévost, 2016; Nobre and Hillenkamp, 2018). In the 2000s, they converged towards the defence of agroecology and the value of their work (Telles *et al.*, 2018), they organized large mobilizations of rural women (Marches of the *Margaridas*), they created intermediate public spaces (the Women’s Group of the National Agroecology Articulation) and they obtained the inclusion of gender in the policies for family farming of the governments of “Lula” da Silva and Dilma Rousseff (2003-2016) (Butto, 2017; Filipak, 2017). Their position, initially built around the critique of the sexual division of labour and the demand for rights, has thus evolved to affirm the existence of specific peasant

women's views, knowledge and subjectivities with regard to environmental management and sustainable development (Siliprandi, 2015).

This evolution has been concomitant with that of feminist thought, towards the recognition of care, eco-feminism, and the diversity of women's experiences, which has itself been nourished by the multiple experiences of women in different countries. These new points of view were part of the challenge to Western "hegemonic feminism" initiated by post-colonial theorists in India (Mohanty, 1986), Black Feminism in the United States (Hooks, 1992; Davis, 2011) and black activists such as Lélia Gonzalez in Brazil. This protest has been considered as the starting point for a "third wave" of feminism. By emphasizing the diversity of women's experiences and the intersection of gender, race and class, it gave space to subordinate rural women, who sought to re-signify and value their invisible work of caring for "nature" and members of their families and communities.

The Brazilian women who today participate in the agroecology movement have come to these ideas through practice and the complex organizational process that began in the 1980s. Drawing on the multiple spaces they have created as well as on popular education, they disputed gender relations, from the family and community level to that of mixed organizations and public policies. They achieved advances in the recognition of their work, participation and political representation. However, they have met with constant resistance at all levels, to silence their voices and reassign them to a role subordinate to the market system and male domination. They were also confronted with the contradictory and pervasive effects in their own lives of the commodification and financialisation of daily relations and access to basic goods and services (Guérin, 2015).

The contradictory games of alliance and repression against these women have become clearer since the political turnaround of 2016-2018, which brought Jair Bolsonaro's government to power. Practices are intensifying or coming to light, such as that of large companies and their political supporters, who see the work of these poor women as a way to resolve at low cost their legal obligation to compensate for their CO₂ emissions or deforestation³. The recognition of socio-cultural diversity, including gender diversity, which had been allowed by the end of the Brazilian military dictatorship in 1985, is facing a violent ideological upheaval. It notably takes the form of an attack against teachers, accused of ideologically indoctrinating students, and organized since 2003 under the name of "School Without Parties" within institutions dedicated to the promotion of neoliberalism. This initiative has found allies in conservative Catholic and Evangelical currents who have criticised gender ideology, targeting both the LGBTI and feminist movements (Souza Júnior, 2018). Since 2015, these networks have found a powerful political voice in the deputy Flávio Bolsonaro, son of the current president, whose campaign they then supported in the 2018

³ See the critique of green capitalism in "Mudar a vida das mulheres para mudar o mundo. Mudar o mundo para não mudar o clima!", <https://www.sof.org.br/mudar-o-mundo-para-nao-mudar-o-clima>, July 2019.

elections. These processes are producing a general pressure in Brazilian society to reassign women to their traditional and subordinate roles as wives and mothers, useful in caring for the environment as long as they do not challenge the established order.

Far from being accidental, this evolution revives the fascist outcome of market society identified by Polanyi in the 1930s. The Brazil of the 2020s thus illustrates the “troubling convergence between liberalism and fascism”, once the agent of both standard economic theory and authoritarian regime must become the automaton of “a universe without otherness” (Postel and Sobel, 2013, p. 112) i.e. without socio-cultural diversity. The restitution over time of the joint evolution of the economic and political system is necessary to grasp the contradictory place of women in the social and ecological transition, as illustrated here by the RAMA: at once political subjects through their collective organization, their work and their emancipatory project; instruments of the reproduction of capitalism and patriarchy; faced with the contradictory effects of the financialisation of domestic life; and targets of repression that derives from the return of a deregulated market system.

II. Towards an economic analytical framework for ecological and social transition

The history of the (de-)regulation of market systems shows that the interactions between economic, political, social and ecological processes form the complex matrix in which the analysis of the economy and the possibilities of transition must be embedded. In other words, it is by drawing the theoretical lessons revealed by history about these interactions that we can propose a realistic framework for analysing the conditions for change, attentive to the potentialities as well as the obstacles and contradictions it entails. To move in this direction, I propose three criteria that such a framework should meet.

1. A plural approach to the economy, attentive to unpaid work and to inter- and eco-dependencies

The denunciation of the reduction of economic thinking to market mechanisms and behaviours and to paid work alone is the point of agreement of most critical currents.

In order to overcome this reduction, Polanyi (1957) drew the well-known distinction between the formal and the substantive approach to the economy. He showed the role that the former plays in the utopia of the self-regulating market, by creating a fictitious separation between the economic sphere reduced to the market and the political sphere. He defined the latter as “man’s dependence for his living upon nature and his fellows” (Polanyi, 1957, p. 243). In order to go beyond the formal and reductionist approach to the economy, Polanyi opposed Adam Smith, denying the supposedly universal nature of barter and bargaining as a principle of behaviour, which he analysed instead as the result of the

historical institution of market society. At the same time, he rehabilitated the principles of reciprocity, redistribution and householding, identifying institutional models in world history prior to the nineteenth century that gave rise to them, such as symmetry, centrality and autarchy (Polanyi, 2001 [1944], chapters 4 and 5). He thus provided the cornerstones of a plural approach to the economy, which has been used, among other things, to theorize solidarity economy (Servet, 2007; Laville, 2013; Guérin, Hillenkamp and Verschuur, 2019).

Pointing at male domination as a constant in the history of capitalism, materialist feminists have, for their part, focused their critique on the reduction of the concept of work to paid work alone. They have argued that this reduction has served to hide and devalue the unpaid work performed mainly by women and which is indispensable to the reproduction of capitalism. On this point, they challenged both the neoclassical economic theory and Marxist theory, which considers this work as “unproductive”, suggesting therefore that it has no economic value (Delphy 1998, [1970]; Federici 2012 [1975]). In the 1990s, North American feminist economists (Ferber and Nelson (eds.) 1993) further criticized the androcentric bias of their discipline, drawing attention, like Polanyi, to the reduction of the field of analysis to the market sphere and of behavioural models to the “separative self” – the supposedly autonomous, selfish and socially un-interactive being of neoclassical theory (England, 1993). They also advocated for broadening the analysis to the non-market sphere, pointing out the gender inequalities existing in each sphere, as well as those resulting from the articulation between the two spheres, market and non-market, thereby joining materialist feminists. In addition, they developed a complex model of human behaviour that integrates the relationships between autonomy and interdependence, individuation and relationship, reason and emotion (Nelson, 1995).

Complementary to all these currents, ecological economics has denounced the way in which capitalism feeds on a reduced social, political and cultural thinking, which aims at hiding the contradiction and the threat posed by the extraction of natural resources and the production of waste, for which it intends neither to pay the price nor to respect the limits (Herrero, 2016).

This overview of critical proposals, which is obviously not exhaustive, suffices to identify their common point in broadening the field of economic thought to include the **interdependencies** (social relations) and **eco-dependencies** (between humans and their environment) that condition the economic process and which are in turn forged by it. The degree of equality of interdependencies and the degree of sustainability of eco-dependencies interact permanently with the economic system. Standard economic theory has denied all of these dependencies, thus obscuring the two great contradictions of capitalism: that of social reproduction and that of the reproduction of the Biosphere. To this end, this theory has long claimed that all social interdependencies are concentrated in market mechanisms alone (Gide and Rist, 1959 [1909]) and has rejected ecodependencies as (generally negative) environmental “externalities”. An economic framework for ecological and social transition must consider inter and

eco-dependencies and assess their nature from the normative perspective of transition.

2. A normative analysis of ecological and social transition geared towards empowerment and sustainability

By drawing attention to inter- and ecodependencies, critical theorists have not only broadened economic analysis to its interactions with the social, political and ecological spheres, but they have also challenged the liberal conception of freedom reduced to the absence of constraints (i.e. dependencies) towards human and non-human environment. Accordingly, the Polanyian theory of the fascist drift of liberalism in the 1930s has as its key point “Freedom in a Complex Society”, which is the title of the last chapter of *The Great Transformation*. According to the author, the deprivation of freedom is the fascist response to the deadlock in which liberalism found itself regarding the issue of real freedom for the greatest number, given the power relations and inequalities inherent to a market society.

In the face of inequalities born of the market system and other systems of oppression, **emancipation** remains an absolutely relevant and timely goal of social transition (Frère and Laville, forthcoming). I argue that the ways to achieve it require the inflection of existing inter- and ecodependencies towards more egalitarian and sustainable relationships, and not their negation or the illusion of a total break. As feminists have pointed out (Fraser, 2011), some oppressions are embedded in social relations, particularly gender and race relations and not necessarily in the market system. In this case, the market can be an instrument of emancipation, according to liberal theory. However, few of the oppressed are able to achieve empowerment on their own. Research on and with women’s initiatives shows the difficulty of radically opposing oppressive power relations and the importance of solidarity and spaces for deliberation, where these relations can be debated and negotiated, through complex and sometimes timid, even ambivalent strategies (Guérin, Hersent and Fraisse, 2011).

In other cases, oppression comes from the commodification of labour, nature or money. In such cases, egalitarian and mutual protective solidarity against market violence is necessary for emancipation (Hillenkamp and Lucas dos Santos, 2019). Emancipation is therefore not systematically on the side of marketization, as the liberals believe, nor on the side of social protection, as Polanyi claimed (Fraser, 2011). Social transition towards emancipation requires articulating these two processes – access to the market and social protection - in configurations that are generally tense and complex (Guérin, Hillenkamp and Verschuur, 2019), far away from the mechanistic paradigm of market equilibrium.

Moreover, the normative horizon of emancipation must be combined with that of **sustainability**. To this end, ecological economists (Herrero, 2016) and feminists (Carrasco, 2014) have pointed out the need to reintroduce the materiality of life and the limits of the Biosphere into economic analysis. Opposing the myth of infinite economic growth, they integrate the regeneration rates of energy and

material flows (water, oxygen, phosphorus, waste, etc.) and stocks of resources (minerals, fossil fuels, etc.) necessary for the economic process. Against the illusion of the autonomy of economic agents, they highlight the finiteness and vulnerability of living beings, starting with human bodies. Sustainability lies in this consideration of materiality and of the limits of living beings (human and non-human) and of the Biosphere.

An economic analysis framework for social and ecological transition involves combining the two dimensions of emancipation and sustainability thus defined.

The ethics of care contributes to this elaboration by linking these two seemingly remote dimensions. Through surveys in the United States, Carol Gilligan (1993 [1982]) has highlighted the existence of a “different voice” from the dominant patriarchal morality which values reason and autonomy. Her surveys show that this other ethic is characterized by its resistance to the dichotomies between reason and emotion, self-autonomy and interdependence. In a patriarchal society, this different voice is therefore heard mainly among women. But there is nothing natural about this state of affairs: in a democratic society, the ethic of care would be universal and not reserved for women (Gilligan, 2012). Pursuing this proposition, Joan Tronto drew attention to the common vulnerability of our bodies and our world, defining care as :

“a species of activity that includes everything we do to maintain, contain, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web” (Tronto 1993, p.103).

The work of care expresses and concretizes the inter and eco-dependencies that arise from the materiality and vulnerability of living beings. The possibility of sustainable economic processes depends on care work. Whether it is oppressive (e.g. care work devalued and assigned to women) or democratic (e.g. care work shared between the sexes and generations and recognised as essential) depends on whether these processes are also emancipatory. The ethics and the work of care are thus at the crossroads of the two dimensions of emancipation and sustainability, from which the ecological and social transition can be defined.

3. An institutional analysis of the economy, open to complexity and contradictions

How, finally, can we integrate the normative analysis of inter- and eco-dependencies, from the twofold point of view of emancipation and sustainability, with that of the economy?

The analysis of institutions, conceived as the expression of values, vocations and social memory (Juan, 2006), is a necessary starting point. It should be noted that this conception differs from the neo-institutionalist approach, according to which institutions are created by individuals to fulfil certain functions, such as reducing transaction costs. Institutions are conceived here not as the result of functions of the economic system, but as the expression of norms that transcend individuals,

while being able to evolve. We thus recognize the weight of the established institutions, as much as the existence of collective capacities of instituting new values and norms, that may arise from the State *and* from organized civil society (Laville, 2010).

This perspective makes it possible to understand Polanyi's approach to empirical economics as an "instituted process" through which it "acquires unity and stability, that is, the interdependence and recurrence of its parts" (Polanyi, 1957, p. 250). The institutions that "integrate" the economy, giving it unity and stability, constitute the fixed normative points at a given moment (although always politically reformable) that condition the form of the double dependence of humans on each other and on their environment. *The identification of the institutions that integrate the economy, of their normative content and of the differences and tensions that may exist between them*, therefore constitutes the core of an institutional analysis of the economy, open to complexity and contradictions.

This identification must take account of the fact that only the market principle creates its own institutions, which then have the specific function of instituting bargaining and profit-seeking behaviours. In other configurations, the institutions that integrate the economy can simultaneously perform "a variety of political, military, religious, or economic functions, indiscriminately" (Polanyi, 2001 [1944], p. 60) and, we might add, social and ecological functions. Polanyi (*ibid.*, pp. 50-54) gives the example of the institutions that sustain the sexual and territorial organization of society among the Trobriand Islanders of Western Malanesia, creating behaviours of generalized reciprocity and redistribution by the headmen. We can consider the institution of RAMA, guided by the values of caring for others and ecosystems and women's autonomy, as an institution that integrates the economy of women farmers in the Vale do Ribeira, generating behaviours of reciprocal obligation and encouraging production for the use of families and communities according to the principle of householding.

The analysis of non market economies is therefore complex in that the institutions that integrate them are embedded in the relationships between the economic and non-economic spheres and can be located at different levels and approached from different normative perspectives. Polanyi focused on the broadest level of economic systems, and on the market as a normative perspective, even when studying non-market systems, to show that it is not a constant in the history of humankind. *Other levels and points of view are possible and necessary*. The ecological and social transition is one possible point of view, and women members of an organization like RAMA, a necessary level of analysis to make visible and bring out the multiple local initiatives and political subjects contributing to this transition.

Starting from these premises, I propose the *identification of tensions and contradictions as a key point of institutional analysis*, from a conception of the economy as a process under permanent pressure, different from the equilibrium paradigm in neoclassical approach. Applied to the women of RAMA, this method

leads to situating them at the centre of a triangle made up of three institutional logics in tension: that of RAMA, oriented by the values of care for others and the ecosystems and women's autonomy; that of the peasantry; and that of the market.

Peasantry as a historical institution in Brazil can be characterized by the defence of autonomy from the capitalist mode of production, mainly represented by large-scale farming and agrobusiness. Despite differences between regions, types of communities and families, the institution of peasantry can be described as having a common basis in paternal authority as a moral value, the family as a supposed community of interests and as a unit of production (Wanderley *et al.*, 2013) and access to land and agrarian reform as constitutive conflicts. The political agenda of agroecology appeared more recently in the discourse of peasant movements such as *La Via Campesina* (Sevilla Guzmán and González de Molina, 2013), in reaction to the environmental damage associated with agribusiness and as a strategy of autonomy that claims peasant knowledge as foundation for sustainable resource management. In this sense, the peasantry as an institution admits householding (production for its own use) as the dominant principle of economic integration, without excluding redistribution (notably through public policies to support family farming), market (agricultural markets) and reciprocity (between families, communities, etc.). Its values are in line with those of RAMA in terms of autonomy from the capitalist mode of production and, in some cases, sustainability. Yet they are opposed in relation to women's emancipation, since peasant autonomy in no way means women's autonomy, but rather their submission to the head of the family and community leaders (Da Costa and Marin, 2018).

As for the market as a principle of economic integration oriented by the value of gain, it takes effect in the lives of the women of RAMA through several institutions, namely agricultural markets, labour markets, and markets for natural resources and ecosystemic services. Several of these institutions - agricultural markets in particular - are not sustainable, since maximizing gain leads to ignoring the environmental and human costs of production, as numerous cases show (***) ref). Market for ecosystemic services (e.g. carbon sequestration) are instead aimed at environmental sustainability, but not necessarily social justice - they often work to the detriment of farmers who are duped by opaque contracts and unscrupulous brokers (see section 1.3 above). Finally, labour and agricultural markets have ambiguous effects on women's emancipation, which they may maintain in exchanges with very unequal terms while allowing them to generate an income that may increase their financial autonomy.

Faced with the opposed logics of these three institutions - RAMA, peasantry and market - with regard to emancipation and sustainability, women farmers may follow several paths, which coexist in practice although they may be contradictory.

- Politicization as subjects of ecological and social transition is a first path. It consists of collective organization, here within RAMA, to contest male domination

in peasant and other institutions and the unsustainability of market logic in agriculture.

- Alignment with peasant institutions as a protection against the social and environmental damage of the market is a second path. This alignment can take the form of a strategic alliance, which remains subordinate to women's objectives; but it can also slide into submission, in which case women's care work plays the function of repairing market damage and finally reproduces male domination.

- Finally, women may choose to enter certain markets for very different reasons: because they need an income to implement changes or access new spaces (e.g. to get a driving licence), but also because the resources derived from agroecology may at times be insufficient to support themselves and those they care for, especially for women heads of households. They may accept contradictions (e.g. the coexistence of agroecology and conventional agriculture or recurrent stays in the urban periphery for work) and in some cases they may even abandon agroecology to devote themselves to short term income generating activities.

Conclusion

The case of RAMA illustrates that the contradictions between politicisation, the search for protection and integration into the market are intrinsic to the process of ecological and social transition. These contradictions arise from the tensions between the logics of the institutions that integrate the economy, which themselves represent different positions and power relations in society with regard to the two, non-aligned, dimensions of emancipation and sustainability.

In order to properly analyse these contradictions, and to avoid simplification and the underestimation of the difficulties faced by the subjects of the transition, I have proposed a framework that is attentive to the inter and eco-dependencies that underlie the dimensions of emancipation and sustainability and that focuses on identifying the institutions in tension that integrate the economy. I added that far from being limited to the level of large-scale economic systems, this type of framework can and must also be used for analysing the configurations experienced by the subjects of the ecological and social transition from local level.

The current historical moment at global level, marked by the extension of capitalist relations of production *via* an increasingly financialised and generalized market system, is producing strong pressure on these subjects. Contemporary Brazil illustrates the authoritarian drift of this system, which is also present, albeit to a generally lower degree, in many other countries. In such configurations, the subjects of ecological and social transition have entered into resistance in the face of political, economic and environmental offensives that may be violent. And many of them are rightly in need of protection and income that can often only be generated on some markets.

At the same time, spaces of politicization, built at different levels over the last four decades - the beginning of financialisation – and even longer, have allowed the accumulation of experiences, shared theoretical and political analyses, human relations and organizational capacities. A network such as RAMA continues to draw strength from support of the SOF as a feminist NGO; from the links forged with groups of responsible consumers who buy its products; from connexion with women's movements such as the World March of Women and the March of Margaridas; with peasant movements such as the Landless Movement and *La Via Campesina*; and with intermediate public spaces such as the Women's Group of the Brazilian Agroecological Articulation. The path of politicization and ecological and social transition continues to be built by these long-time organized actors, but it is crossed by powerful counter-currents, which incite us to the greatest realism and attention to tensions and contradictions.

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