

Otra Economía, Otra Sociedad & Anthropology. A Perspective from Latin America in the 21st Century.

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What is specific about *la otra* economía in Latin America in the 21st Century? Is an anthropological perspective helping to make it visible? In so doing, what issues have been put to debate? Have these debates influenced changes in public policy?



Collective Assembly - cultural & artistic pacific protest. "Open Popular Comedor".

There are a wide variety of terms used to refer to *la otra* economía & sociedad in Latin America today. Several can be traced in a quick review of the literature: social solidarity economy; popular economies; diverse economies; alternative society and economies; workers' economy; *auto-gestión* (untranslatable term yet close to self-management); autonomous collectives; community-based economies, and *bottom up* economy.

This conceptual array may be thought of simply as a question of choice of words. However, identifying this variety has helped uncover an important underlying debate in the field: whether this set of practices and situated meanings conform a *different* system altogether, or whether they are —paradoxically— helping sustain a hegemonic, capitalist and exploitive system at play (Laferriere, 2007). Following this line of thought, anthropologist Riquelme has documented that in Latin America the term most used is *social and solidarity based economy*. Yet, he argues, using this term may be misleading since it puts into the same box ideologies and practices that are crucially different (e.g., market oriented and exploiting practices under the umbrella of social enterprise responsibility). Such an umbrella definition may leave untouched what is core when considering these practices as really *otras*.

What is then *la otra* economía?

An anthropological gaze helps put to debate that the economy is but a piece of a wider web of cultural practice and meaning. That is: economy is a social practice. The *otra* economía is a practice with specific characteristics.

As a result of ethnographic analyses three specific characteristics have been identified as *otra economía, otra sociedad* underlying orientation:

- 1) Critical and collective decision making power and processes. See [De Pueblos y Fronteras, Vol. 8 N° 16](#) for an analysis of such processes in Latin America.
- 2) Egalitarian and emancipatory social, political and economic relations based on direct participatory strategies. For anthropological analysis situated in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, mostly, see Reunión de Antropología Mercosur “Situare, enact and imagine South Cone Anthropologies. [Work Group 74: Collective political practices.](#)”
- 3) An awareness of the need to take care, fairly share and distribute natural resources. See [La Vía Campesina](#) for their latest international declaration, and see also the work of Domínguez in [Argentina](#) and in [Chaco](#) specifically.

Implicitly sometimes, explicitly some other times, these analyses are supporting organizations and social movements in Latin America. Recent events such as the [Segundo Foro Mundial de la ESS](#) (2013) or the [Mesa de Trabajo of the Argentinean Foro HACIA OTRA ECONOMÍA & SOCIEDAD \(2010-and ongoing\)](#) are showing that both collective practice, and its documentation and analysis, have had an impact on Latin American political processes.

Based on this perspective, several researchers have argued that the field needs to take one step forward: it is not only documenting, analyzing and getting to understand every day practices and their meaning. It is important to participate and push for establishing the conditions by which *la otra economía* is an orientation entire Nations or populations may choose to live by if they so wish and can democratically agree to it ([Azzellini](#) has been documenting the process by which collective workers’ initiatives question the government at municipal, state and nation-wide levels).

Thus, the anthropological gaze is also allowing other important questions to be raised when it looks at what is specific about *otra economía*. For example, what counts as *democracy* in our Region today, or who may be considered “the people”, and how may their perspective be acknowledged.

For example “[Producir para vivir](#)”, the compilation of works carried out by De Sousa Santos, portrays several different experiences in Brazil which have pushed the limits of public policy (at the municipal or state level).

In “[Miradas globales para otra economía](#)” Guerra documented how several experiences in Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador and Honduras have started to frame a different scenario for our Region.

[Rodríguez](#) has documented changes in Colombia, and has presented supporting evidence to argument for the possibility of *la otra economía* to go large scale.

Apart from the [IX Reunión de Antropología del Mercosur](#) (July 2013), also the [VI JEC](#) (August 2013) and the [VI Jornadas de Investigación en Antropología Social](#) have been addressing these issues as well, showing that *otra sociedad* is starting to translate its demands into large scale public policy.

Some of the works presented at these recent conferences are also pointing to the need to re think the impact of collaboration across anthropologists and participants (e.g. [Fernández Álvarez 2011](#) & 2013; [Heras & Burin, 2013](#); [Miano, 2013](#)).

Following the anthropological tradition in its recursive knowledge generation process, I pose new questions that emerge from this opinion column to be addressed in forthcoming pieces:

- Why do people insist on creating these types of organizations, where justice, solidarity, cooperation and freedom to critically explore every day practices prevail, even when they continue to be under attack?
- How is the work being done in the Latin American Region informing other parts of the world?
- How are other parts of the world listening to what Latin America has to say?
- What are the mutual benefits for anthropology-trained professionals to establish collaborative work with those who practice *la otra economía*?
- What shape does collaboration take when it is the initiative of those who practice *la otra economía* to cooperate with researchers?

In forthcoming columns thus I will address these questions from the point of view of *Otra Economía & Anthropology*, portraying, each month, a specific area such as Collective Knowledge Generation Processes; Public Policies and the Law; Self Management, Housing & Homeless; Education and Schools; Culture and Arts; Producing for a living (urban and rural work from *la otra economía* perspective), amongst the most important topics.



Dancing Collectively the chacarera at the Foro Hacia Otra Economía 2013.