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Heras Monner Sans, Ana Inés.

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Ethnographic Understandings

Ana Inés Heras

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On Creating and Learning. (Or “Why do people insist?”)

In my [first Column](#) I stated that an organization can be said to be part of *la otra economía* when they

- 1) Orient their practice towards critical and collective decision-making processes.
- 2) Seek to translate these processes into emancipatory social, political and economic relations (both within their organizations and in society at large).
- 3) Are concerned with taking care, and fairly sharing and distributing, natural resources.

I argued that an anthropological perspective is currently helping understand such processes, since these ways differ from *capitalocentric* thinking (see [community economies](#)), and it becomes important to comprehend their specific nature. I ended by laying out questions, one of which read: “Why do people insist on creating these types of organizations, where justice, solidarity, cooperation and freedom to critically explore every day practices prevail, even if they may seem *counter hegemonic and counter intuitive*?”

Anthropological research identifies at least four reasons

- Fulfilling needs (e.g., the need to have a job may push workers to organize and recover their workplace when the owners declare insolvency, see for example [Hudson 2011](#); [Sin Patrón 2007](#)).
- Enacting a political and ideological conviction (i.e., collectively organized work or groups, where decisions are taken by all participants, are seen more equitable and thus worth pursuing, see for example [Fontenla 2008](#), specifically page 44 for how this perspective is assumed by people from several different Latin American countries).
- Embodying cultural patterns (e.g., collective approaches are learned in a community or family and they are regarded as the natural way to do things, less frequently reported in the literature, yet found in our ethnographic interviews in the Research Project called “[Aprendizaje y Creación en Proyectos de Autonomía](#)”).
- Enjoying the creative act that is set forward when one is creating a collective process with others (Yapa for example discusses “[shared expertise and shared agency](#)”, page 137, and Gibson Graham talk about the [conditions of possibility](#), page 11).

Sometimes these four reasons coincide and all of them are found in one single experience. Whether or not these coincide, a desire for social innovation, as we may call it, is at play. And certainly, it relates to learning.

Doing things otherwise: creation, learning and time

The *decision* to start something anew could take just a few days, or a month or two at the most, according to the documentation available. Yet, in contrast, the learning process that entails supporting

the creation of a new organizational system, and specifically one that goes against the tide, may take (and least) years (see [Flury 2011](#) on how the notion of *learning as lived experience* is linked to *space and time* in self-managed groups).

Moreover, and along the same line of *time*, philosopher Castoriadis has identified that the very notion of *project* is indeed what is characteristic of autonomous, self-managed organizations. The fact that the process of creating new institutions sets forth, precisely, something that cannot be totally anticipated (a *pro-ject*) makes it distinctive. A *pro-ject*, by definition, is to throw [something] forth, as its etymology indicates ([Latin *proiectum*](#), “something thrown forth”). It is important to note that the concept of *project* has kept this meaning strongly in Spanish. I am aware that it presents differences from the way English speakers use this term).

When pro-jects continue to exist, participants might have learned something

In Argentina, and taking for example the angle of workplaces recovered by their workers, around 90% of them continue to exist (inferring from measures have been taken after 6 and 10 years). Source: Research Report by “[Facultad Abierta](#)” (Open School/University) team, Anthropology School, University of Buenos Aires).

Additionally, cases where the *reasons why* we identified in the precedent section above are coincidental predominate.

And when these coincidences are expanded to include other *pro-jects*, they create new structures altogether.

[Fontenla \(2008 b\)](#) documented at least six different networks of cooperative and self-managed groups in several different areas (e.g., meet, garment and shoes, graphic design, printing).

For Brazil, Andrada studied [Justa Trama](#), “a self-managed network that brings together six hundred workers of seven different enterprises from all regions of the country. It encompasses most of the links in the textile production chain, from agro-ecological cotton plantation to the final making [of clothes and other pieces of garment].” ([Andrada, 2013, page 10](#))

In *la otra economía, otra sociedad* what is at hand is an open invitation to exercise an innovative perspective.

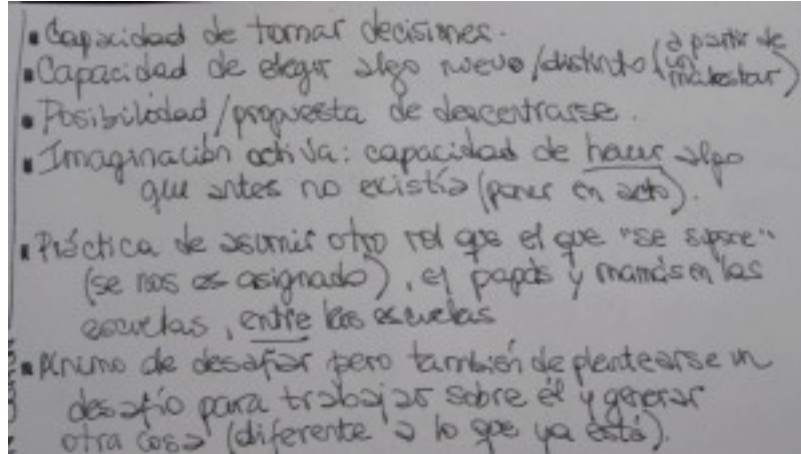
Learning to do so presents also challenges, and the most commonly identified are a need to be educated (or socialized) in

- (1) Dialogue and open debate (some literature identifies this as a *parrhesiastic* orientation).
- (2) Direct and yet collaborative decision-making (the fact that each member has voice over the whole organization’s process means that participants need to learn to integrate their views, and listening to others becomes key).
- (3) Interacting in small groups and become ultimate responsible for the task at hand (yet take into account that each group needs to relate to other small groups in order to get the organization’s task accomplished).
- (4) Enact the power to transform the organization (all members have a right to suggest and debate changes) and thus embody the freedom to question the underlying logic of the organizational process
- (5) Trust in that what may come out may be better for all (which implies a different time frame, one oriented by the goal of collectively processing the information).

I end by noting that anthropology has had the need to work with other disciplines when focusing on these very specific learning processes. In forthcoming columns I will expand on the relationships

between anthropology and other disciplines (e.g., *sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, social psychology, psychoanalysis, institutional psychology, philosophy and cognitive psychology*) when focusing on the issues I will continue to discuss on *otra economía, otra sociedad*.

Appendix. Photographs.



Notes on an assembly meeting 2010.

Issues identified by participants as distinctive. Image courtesy Ana Inés Heras



Creating new organizations. Photo courtesy Ana Inés Heras



Day Care Center. Photo courtesy Ana Inés Heras



Work sites (construction). Photo courtesy Ana Inés Heras



Workshop (textile). Photo courtesy Ana Inés Heras



Heras at an assembly at the Centro de Integración. Monteagudo. Photo courtesy Cecilia Almeida

Ana Inés Heras earned her MA and PhD in Education (1995) with a Fulbright Scholarship at UCSB. She also studied History and Physical Education at the undergraduate level in Argentina. She currently studies participants' collective learning processes at autonomous, self-managed organizations in contemporary Argentina, focusing on how diversity is understood in such processes.