

1. Post-growth economics

1.3. Work and employment beyond growth

Mutations of freight transport and logistics in green economy

Since the turn of the century, sustainable development implies a mutation in professional practices and its transmission throughout the industries. Does working in the Social Economy necessarily imply a specific construction of this new work organisation and its transmission? This presentation aims to contrast two types of work organisation, from the observations of the logistics and freight transport industry. The first one could be called “sustainable management” and is developed in the big businesses of the industry – freight, agribusiness or logistics groups. The second one, typical to Social Economy, could be called “networked organisation” and was encountered within experiments in bike, trike or rickshaw delivery; in the creation of a short commercial circuits logistics platform or in the activity of a sustainable freight forwarder.

“Sustainable management” seeks to integrate every aspects of “sustainable logistics”: eco-conception, waste sorting, freight optimisation, “green warehouses”, “sustainable purchases” and so on. This new management is achieved through specific indicators measuring the “sustainable development” performance of the business. “Sustainable management” relies on a highly hierarchical and centralised approach to work organisation and the evolution of professional activities. The manager alone receives performance bonuses, whereas coercion is stronger for workers with the lowest qualifications (warehousemen, forklift operators, drivers, etc.). Job evolutions are imposed by the managers through on site trainings, solely based on the business' requirements. The less qualified workers are not solicited to share up their initiatives with waste disposal or the optimisation of truck loading, for example. Instead, courses on the theoretical aspects and notions of sustainable development are delivered by contracted training agencies to all the employees. But the workers with lowest qualification are often quite reluctant to those training sessions. Although they are not hostile to the idea of a concern with environmental issues, they see those training as an intrusion of their employer in their private life and value system. This “sustainable management” has in fact various objectives: it is a communication asset for the final client – through the indicators, a performance can be put forward – and it serves to motivate the workforce around uniting values.

The comparison with Social Economy is exiting as the mutation of work organisation and its transmission are strikingly different. The experiments relying on the theoretical references, as well as the networks, of Social Economy are much more diverse and heterogeneous. Contrary to “sustainable management” those associations or cooperatives are not going through processes calibrated in advance. They progress by trial and error, through interpersonal encounters and keep on testing new organisational methods. The knowledge building goes through a sometimes chaotic accumulation, in a very horizontal perspective, with a co-construction between the workers in the field and research organisations. As an example, the development of a short commercial circuits logistics platform must necessarily rely on experimentation as this initiative is completely new. Here, after they collected documentation through state institutes and more alternative sources, the project bearers will invent a specific form of implication for agriculture and distribution professionals, consumers and local authorities in their logistics platform project, by integrating them to their administrative board. Central in this approach is the relation to the territory as a micro-local space of exchanges: the network of persons one knows are at the root of those projects, who

advance with bonds progressively woven with friends and fellows.

Thus there exists indeed two distinct modes through which work organisation changes. The first one, affiliated to the global capitalist economy, operates through “sustainable development”: hierarchical, centralised and coercive for the less qualified. The second one, within the Social Economy, is networked, micro-local, territorialised and favors a co-construction of knowledge and practices.

As of today, one type of management offers clearly better employment conditions. One should thus not be overly naive: working in Social Economy, although it means developing participative and reticular experiments on work organisation is not without contradictions. The economic profitability of an ecological logistics business that would be coherent with Social Economy is not a given. Indeed, many of the interviewed workers are nearly volunteering, or accept salaries far below their qualification level (e.g. a minimal wage for someone with a MBA).

Freight transport and logistics or not, contrary to what is often noted, overlooked in the environment and energy enhancement initiatives. They imply innovations in terms of new work organisation practices. But those initiatives are implemented in harsh conditions for the work force: coercion for the low qualification workers in big businesses, small to no revenue for the Social Economy workers. Key to these difficulties, in contrast to the building industry for example, might be the low interest from public policy-makers, consumers or Social Economy militants for an ecological approach to transport, and freight transport specifically.

As a conclusion, an analysis of the managerial and organisational mutations shows that “green washing” is not the only driving force for the integration of the principles of sustainable development in big businesses. Nevertheless, it also serves to put into perspective the specificities of Social Economy. Away from a management imposed from the top to the less qualified, imposing a value system friendly to the industry competitiveness, Social Economy relies on territorialised, micro-local networks and claims a coherence between social commitment and professional values. Nevertheless, the working conditions in Social Economy are even harder in the logistics and freight transport industry. Those initiatives (at least in France) stem from particularly volunteer and militant endeavours and are hard pressed to find support, political or financial, even within the Social Economy community.