

2<sup>nd</sup> EMES-Polanyi International Seminar  
**Societies in transition: Social and solidarity economy,  
the commons, public action and livelihood**

CNAM, Paris (France) · 19 - 20 May 2016

Title: Polanyi through the lens of Epistemologies of the South and Postcolonial Feminist Economics: different glances at the concept of disembeddedness<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

This paper debates the concept of disembeddedness in the context of the feminisms of the South. Departing from a feminist rereading of Polanyi's work, proposed by Waller and Jennings (1991), I intend to discuss the Polanyian concept of disembeddedness within market societies, by interacting with the points of disagreement they presented regarding the limits of Polanyi's criticism on formalist economics. Given Polanyi was described as being epistemologically complacent with the formalist model to describe capitalist economies and that they argued the formalist perspective has deepened the abyss between family and economy domains, I discuss to what extent modern gender meanings related to this split still remain in case of non-western perspectives of gender. Waller and Jennings have argued that the formalist analysis reinforces the invisibility of non market social arrangements, equally indispensable to provide an accurate picture of the provisioning dynamics which characterizes, first and foremost, the actual economies. Despite all the promising convergence between Polanyi's theoretical perspective and a feminist reinterpretation of Economics, Polanyi is assumed as having emphasised the inadequacy of formalist analysis for understanding non market societies and doing so underestimated the relevance of non market social arrangements within market societies.

At the heart of the matter are two key issues. The first one is related to the usual readings of the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared in the context of the international research project "Alice, strange mirrors, unsuspected lessons", coordinated by Boaventura de Sousa Santos at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra (Portugal) and funded by the European Research Council, 7th Framework Program of the European Union (FP/2007-2013) / ERC Grant Agreement n. [269807]. I gratefully acknowledge the ERC support as well as the postdoctoral grant given by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) through the Operational Programme Human Potential of the European Social Forum (POPH/FSE).

concept of (dis)embeddedness and the belief that all economies may be primarily embedded - an idea supported by some New Economic Sociology scholars such as Swedberg (1997), Granovetter (1985) and Barber (1995). To a certain extent, this interpretation is assumed by Waller and Jennings when debating these social arrangements from a feminist perspective. Otherwise, as Polanyi's concept of disembeddedness refers to macroeconomic level, we may question this latter statement. So I argue that, despite the relevance of their analysis, some Waller and Jennings's critiques to Polanyi should be better framed.

The second idea refers to the issue of gender. I question if the split between domestic domain and economy - assumed for the anglo-american context in the 19th century, according to Nicholson (1986) and Waller and Jennings (1991) - may be applied as well to gender issues everywhere. Relative to this, Oyěwùmí's contributions (2003: 1) are welcomed to broaden the scope when she "interrogates gender and allied concepts based on African cultural experiences and epistemologies". Somewhat similarly, Lugones (2008), proposing the concept of coloniality of gender and thinking of subaltern women in Latin America, argues that "modern colonial gender system" has its own characteristics and may not be applied to some indigenous women. So patriarchy should not be raised as an universal category to explain gender roles and gender social meanings worldwide. It does not mean that the split between domestic and economic domains in modern societies should be considered completely inappropriate to describe the invisibility of subaltern women in capitalist production system. Given the porosity of modern capitalism even over non-market societies such as indigenous communities and peripheral economies worldwide, this invisibility of women on modern economic issues has also affected non-western women's reality.

My question is however epistemological: is it proper to say that Polanyi could have deepened his critique to the formalist model by pointing out its inadequacy for market societies and in doing so by identifying the inextricability between family and market domains in the modern society? Would this analysis be extended to non-western contexts nowadays affected by market economy? Departing from the concept of Epistemologies of the South, proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), and from the works of Lugones (2008) and Oyěwùmí (1997), I question if Waller and Jennings' critique to some Polanyi's ideas makes sense when applied to non-european or anglo-american contexts, in which gender concepts and roles may assume different trajectories.

I structured my argument in three parts. The first one presents Waller and Jennings' main arguments grounded on a feminist institutionalist perspective. The second part discusses Polanyi's concept of disembeddedness, questioning if it is proper to think that all economies are indeed embedded. The third and last section specifically discusses to what extent Waller and Jennings' critiques may be universalised. In this latter section, I draw upon the concept of Epistemologies of the South not solely to problematise the apparent split between economic and familial domain but also to discuss the need for amplifying gender concept through Global South's experiences.

## **2. Unraveling the argument: a feminist rereading of Polanyi's idea of disembeddedness**

Waller and Jennings depart from the argument that economic theory should be acutely questioned by a feminist perspective rather than simply applied to women's situation as usual. In terms of suitability, Polanyi's work is believed to have a series of convergences with feminist scholarship, particularly on methodological issues. Notwithstanding its convergences, some of his theories have been considered by them still flimsy to address some burning issues, being however depicted as "promising and hospitable to feminist reformulation" (Waller and Jennings 1991: 485).

The two issues which have been of most concern to feminist scholars regarding economic domain are the high incidence of unpaid female work (in agricultural family labour, domestic work and family businesses, for instance) and the caregiving issues. These questions remain underestimated in the organisation of material life and are completely out of sight of the formalist approach of Economics. They are persistently treated as being noneconomic issues despite the undeniable fact that the market itself is unable to push through all the provisioning requirements (Jennings 1993; Thomson 2009). Feminist Economics has thereby set to work on unraveling three commonly neglected ideas: 1. Economy as something other than market and rational choice (Gibson-Graham 2002; Jennings 1993; Thomson 2009); 2. Economics as a field of knowledge which is created and designed according to the perspective of those ones who constituted the field (Ferber and Nelson 2003); 3. Economics as a field which needs to break away from the precedence given to attributes culturally associated with 'maleness' (Ferber and Nelson 2003; Thomson 2009). Julie Nelson (1992: 104) has thus affirmed the need for confronting the hegemonic definition of Economics since it "is based in dualistic gender metaphors". In a similar vein, Lourdes Benería (2003: 122) has stressed the role market has played in gender inequalities: "The fact that markets have been socially constructed has important gender-related implications, for links to the market have been historically different for men and women, with consequences for their choices and behaviour".

With this in mind, I shall now explain Waller and Jennings' argument concerning Polanyi's ideas. Although his institutionalism may be considered a powerful ally, Polanyi's work, specially his concept of disembeddedness, from a feminist perspective, is believed not to problematise enough the effects of formalist model in market societies. He is also said not to have deepened the analysis about the forged split between economic and familial domains within market societies and its consequences, having had this discourse of split drastic effects on women's invisibility regarding economic processes. Waller and Jennings are not alone in addressing a critique or proposing an extension of Polanyian perspective. More recently and having a different focus, Nancy Fraser (2011)<sup>2</sup> has argued that a revision of "the social-institutional basis of Polanyi's framework" is needed and that the dualistic view of economy and society should be replaced by what she has called a triple movement, in which social emancipation is added. According to Fraser's argument, "the triple movement transforms the triad of society, economy, state into a quartet, which also includes the public sphere of civil society". If Nancy Fraser (2011) claims, on one hand, as I will stress in the next section, that the polanyian concept of disembeddedness should be understood in a more complex way - and not as a fait accompli -, on the other, she also questions, as Waller and Jennings (1991), if society may be really completely stormed by the market (Fraser 2012). She still reminds us that embeddedness or re-embeddedness might be similarly problematised since they are not shielded from being oppressive, as some social protection schemes have proved to be according to feminist voices.

Departing from what Linda Nicholson (1986) alleged as being the double public/private distinctions, the first one related to the split between state and family (scope of private domain) and the second, between economy (now considered as being public) and domestic domain<sup>3</sup>, Waller and Jennings (1991) have adopted a perspective somewhat different - called 'double dualism

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<sup>2</sup> And Fraser (2012: 5) adds: "Polanyi's perspective holds considerable promise for theorizing today. Yet we should not rush to embrace it uncritically. Even as it overcomes economism and ecologism, the Great Transformation turns out, on closer inspection, to be deeply flawed. Focused single-mindedly on the destructive effects of 'self-regulating markets', the book overlooks harms originating elsewhere, in the surrounding 'society'. Preoccupied exclusively with the corrosive effects of commodification upon communities, it neglects injustices within communities, including those, such as slavery feudalism, and patriarchy, that depend on social constructions of labor, land, and money precisely as non-commodities. Demonizing marketization, the book tends to idealize social protection, as it fails to note that protections have often served to entrench hierarchies and exclusions".

<sup>3</sup> Based on Polanyian framework, Nicholson (1986) has argued that we are before a double public/private distinction. Her analysis refers, however, to the anglo-american context. According to her, the first split ('political split') occurred in the 17th century and the second, in the 19th century. Waller and Jennings proposed a reading of Nicholson's argument which is somewhat different since Nicholson seems to be more concerned with the evolution of individualism in social life. Waller and Jennings, conversely, intend to stress the fact that much of provisioning has been produced as non-economic ever since.

approach' - and pointed out three main critiques to Polanyi's work. The first one is that Polanyi had neglected to a certain extent the relationship between market and familial domain. Consequently, the effects of the formalist approach on the modern social construction of gender were considered as having been slackly addressed, since a significant part of women's labour became invisible into a market economy framework. As Waller and Jennings have said, "we see this as a flaw because the importance of modern gender meanings associated with economy/family distinctions are obscured by this neglect". In this context, non-market institutions would have lost their ability to influence and determine economic issues.

A second critique stems from the previous one. Polanyi, according to Waller and Jennings, would have lost the opportunity to deepen his critique to the formalist approach in methodological terms by choosing to stress its mismatching concerning non-market societies. The third critique is, in turn, directly related to the concept of disembeddedness. It stems from the fact that the formalist model was not considered as problematic by Polanyi to explain market societies. In reality, as remarked by Waller and Jennings (1991: 490), he "suggests that formalist economics is a relatively reasonable description of substantive economic relationships in a market economy". Although Polanyi's work is recognised as helpful for a feminist reading of Economics, the authors have insisted on demonstrating the influence that the perspective of disembeddedness may have had on reifying gender asymmetries. So Waller and Jennings affirm the following:

"Polanyi's substantive approach allows for and facilitates the inclusion of gender in economic analysis once gender and the family are considered. But while Polanyi pointed out the problem of economism by objecting to the application of formalist analyses of the economy to nonmarket societies, he did not object sufficiently to the inadequacy of formalist accounts when applied to market societies, thereby failing to note the very problem of reification and economism most closely associated with gender inequality (...) Our analysis suggests (...) that the formalist view of economic relationship omits from its analysis, and defines as noneconomic, both the economic activities of women in the home and women themselves as a group"

Considering these critiques they present and the relevance of a feminist rereading of Polanyi's work, I propose to bring the question a step closer. So I question: is it proper to say that Polanyi should have objected to formalist model to describe market societies? Should the concept of disembeddedness have been drawn up on a different basis? These are matters addressed in the next section.

### **3. Unveiling the concept of disembeddedness: is it proper to think that all economies are after all embedded?**

One of the pivotal concepts at the heart of these questions is that of disembeddedness. Since this concept was addressed in *The Great Transformation* (TGT) - as well as in other works such as 'Our

Obsolete Market Economy', 'Aristotle Discovers the Economy' and 'The Economy as Instituted Process' - embeddedness has been assumed as a central and polemical issue (Dale 2010; Machado 2010). As a matter of fact, it has hitherto generated a heated debate with new approaches being outlined and having gained prominence especially in the field of New Economic Sociology (NSE). Waller and Jennings are supposed to have followed these new perspectives even though they do not explicitly discuss the concept of disembeddedness in their paper.

And what are the departure points we should primarily take into consideration before evaluating how far Polanyi really went or could have gone? I suggest we should have in mind two first ideas. The first one draws upon the fact that some concepts have slightly changed according to the Polanyian phase - with regard to this issue, Dale (2010) and Block (2003) pointed out that a marxian phase had influenced some former writings whereas that Polanyi who wrote TGT could be described as someone who was to abandon at that time this marxian perspective<sup>4</sup>. The second idea is related to the way Polanyi's legacy has been appropriated and disseminated so far.<sup>5</sup> These new approaches - addressed by scholars such as Granovetter (1985), Swedberg (1997) and Barber (1995) - constitute, conversely, quite different rereadings of Polanyi's concept of dis/embeddedness. It especially refers to the perspective adopted by Granovetter, who not solely affirmed not to refer to Polanyi when mentioning embeddedness for the very first time (Machado 2010) but also intended to say the quite opposite of Polanyi's statement: focusing on the social networks, Granovetter has advocated the complete embeddedness of markets<sup>6</sup>. That is why Beckert (apud Machado 2010: 71) says that the concept itself of embeddedness has gone through "a great transformation", the main of which is to be coupled with micro and meso economic levels. This was not the perspective adopted by Polanyi in TGT or even in previous writings.

Although being interested in demonstrating that self-regulated markets constitute a particularity of capitalist society, incompatible with non-market ones, Polanyi has had, as we could see, lightly

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<sup>4</sup> According to this, Dale (2010: 199) adds: "One lens in TGT, a survival from Polanyi's Marxian period, frames its subject as the logic of market forces that dissembled economy from society. Coupled with this is another, much more original, lens through which Polanyi begins to glimpse something startlingly new (...) he begins to see that there can be no such thing as a disembodied economy: a pure market economy is an illusion that may be pursued but never attained (...) From these observations Block infers that the non-Marxian Polanyi should be hailed as the originator of the notion of the 'always embedded economy'".

<sup>5</sup> There is still a third idea I suggest being considered: that of the need for differentiating Granovetter's position from Barber's perspective. According to this latter, all economies are underpinned by broadened social and cultural systems.

<sup>6</sup> Machado (2010) pointed out a relevant Barber's critique concerning Granovetter's bet on social networks. According to Barber, Granovetter has not recognised the relevance of broadened social systems such as gender, social structures of parenthood, social stratification and so on. With respect to this see Barber (2005) and Machado (2010).

different positions over the years, contributing in so doing to amplify the misunderstanding. If market disembeddedness was thus assumed as a feature in The Great Transformation, it was conversely taken for a mere theoretical perspective in 'The Economy as Instituted Process', as Machado has demonstrated in his analysis (2010).

Notwithstanding the eventual ambiguity of his positions found in different moments, the critiques that Waller and Jennings have addressed to Polanyi stemmed from the fact that he was expected to also emphasise the inadequacy of formalist model to explain market societies. Indirectly held responsible for not making visible the influence of non-economic institutions on capitalist economic processes, Polanyi's perspective is likely to be taken as flimsy. However, as it could be seen, neither Polanyi denied the existence and relevance of social influence on daily economy at a micro level, considering this necessary broader scope of economic domain as provisioning, nor he intended to claim something but the specificity of a self-regulated market relative to a capitalist framework. He was particularly interested in analysing the economic macro level (Machado 2010), in which market rules seem to define the horizons and perspectives and directly affect the destination of life in society. Thus, blaming Polanyi for not assuming embeddedness as a universal rule implies, I argue, an epistemological imprecision. It does not mean that we should not bring Polanyi's concept of dis/embeddeness to a step further. As Fraser has proposed (2011, 2012), it is advisable to question this dualism and to add new categories to Polanyi's work, such as the subaltern arenas<sup>7</sup> (understood here as social emancipation) which have played a different role when compared to society itself. But it does not imply at all to scrap the critique to the disembeddedness of the capitalist economic model brought by Polanyi. Capitalism is certainly not the unique form of economy we have, but the mindset behind the system of production and consumption still defines the way Economics has been thought and built. The underlying hegemonic narrative of development, influencing State and funding policies, offers an evidence of social issues being subsumed into economic domain. If embeddedness of economies has been a key terrain of struggle, power asymmetries may not be ignored. In this sense, Fraser (2011: 141) has contributed to update Polanyi's concept of disembeddedness: "For Polanyi, markets can never in fact be fully disembodied from the larger society (...) In the end (...) Polanyi's distinction is better grasped as a difference in degree than as a difference in kind. While markets can never be fully disembedded, they can be more or less embedded".

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<sup>7</sup> Ver Fraser, 1991.

The analysis I propose here should not be understood as an attempt to reduce the importance of a feminist critique to Polanyi's concept of disembeddedness. On the contrary. In the end, Fraser has done it. Nevertheless, it means that Polanyi's concept of disembeddedness needs to be more problematised and adequately framed considering its dynamics over time. Still relative to Waller and Jennings's critique, an additional question demands to be considered concerning their departure point from Nicholson's double dualism (1986): is it possible to generalise the split between economic and domestic domains and, besides, to address it to discuss women invisibility outside of a modern concept of gender? Is this concept of gender enough to represent non-western women whose lives have been anyway affected by capitalist economic system? I will address this question in the next and last section.

#### **4. May the dissociation between economic and domestic be considered as an universal phenomenon? Contributions from Epistemologies of the South and Postcolonial Feminisms**

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2016) has recently emphasised the need for fighting not solely against capitalism but also against colonialism and patriarchal relations. This perspective highlights three other issues relevant for a change of scenery: (1) that social emancipation, concerning economic rights, not only depends on facing class asymmetries but also implies to tackle the naturalisation of different kinds of social hierarchies (Santos 2006); (2) that asymmetries may not be surpassed unless an intersectional perspective is assumed, since hierarchies of gender, race and class persistently feed each other; (3) that abyssal lines (Santos 2007) brought by colonialism have not disappeared at all. Fighting against these abyssal lines means facing the remaining forms of coloniality - and coloniality of gender is one of them.

Lugones (2008) has addressed this issue, stressing that we are before what she has called the 'modern/colonial system of gender', which introduced new power practices properly related to modern societies. With regard to this, she will remind us of some matriarchal indigenous communities in the United States, demonstrating that patriarchy as a system may be a modern and western concept. Lugones is not alone. She and Oyeronke Oyěwùmí (1997, 2003) have challenged patriarchy as an universal category. They do not intend to put in doubt the issue of asymmetries of gender and power relations all over the world but they are aware that some previous questions are needed in order to proceed a proper epistemological analysis when referring to women in Global South. Regarding the eurocentric basis of some feminist concepts

and stressing the racialisation of knowledge, in which “Europe is represented as the source of knowledge and European as knowers”, Oyěwùmí (2003: 1) says:

“My objective is to interrogate gender and allied concepts based on African cultural experiences and epistemologies. The focus here is on the nuclear family system, which is a specifically European form and yet is the original source of many of the concepts that are used universally in gender research (...) It is clear that Euro/American women’s experiences and the desire for transformation have provided the basis for the questions, concepts, theories, and concerns that have produced gender research”.

In this sense, I argue that Waller and Jennings’ critique does not properly include non-western subaltern women - indigenous and peasant women, peripheral women from non-western countries (colonised in the past), women from quilombos and coastal populations, babassu coconut breakers, to name but a few. Hence, I argue that Waller and Jennings could benefit from the perspective of Epistemologies of the South in their analysis, by bringing these doubly invisible bodies into the picture. Epistemologies of the South may be understood, in this context, as “a set of inquiries into the construction and validation of knowledge born in struggle, of ways of knowing developed by social groups as part of their resistance against the systematic injustices and oppressions caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy (Santos 2014: preface, x)”. As a counter hegemonic perspective, epistemologies of the South have called for other economic imageries, demonstrating that different logics of production and consumption not solely exist but also question the alleged inevitability of modern economic rationality. Despite being identified as inexistent or irrelevant by a modern hegemonic discourse (Santos 2006), community economic experiences and perspectives, in which women play a crucial role, have proved that other ways of producing, paying for work and distributing surpluses (Gibson-Graham 2002) are completely feasible.

For these different women of the South, there has no split between economic and domestic domains. In the specific case of indigenous women, for instance, economy is totally twisted with domestic spaces, being women responsible for guaranteeing (1) the conditions of the spiritual rites’ reproduction, (2) the food supply deeply connected with the sacred dimension and (3) the maintenance of the diets related to the rites. Everything is connected, production being totally embedded into social reproduction. Conversely - and despite not being considered by Waller and Jennings in their paper -, these women from Global South are not immune to the capitalist economy, suffering the effects of disembeddedness. Nevertheless, indigenous women have proved to be one of the major collective subjects to occupy streets in order to resize the fight against asymmetries brought by capitalism and its formalist way of ignoring the heterogeneity of

subjects. They are a key element in the fight for re-embedding economy into everyday living. Drawing the attention to the domestic domain in which they are, these women and other ones in the peripheries of the Global South have formed alliances to face the hegemonic and formalist discourse of Economics.

So, regarding Waller and Jennings' critique, I argue that it is crucial to take into account the way in which economy is built by different women and not solely by the western ones. Rescuing the idea of a situated analysis, proposed by Brah and Phoenix (2004), and the heterogeneity of subaltern subjects, proposed by Spivak (1988), I would like to remember that domination may be intensified by economic coloniality, being this latter a beating idea which feeds on coloniality of gender. Coloniality of gender, in turn, affects the way in which gender and development are put together to be discussed. It is thus necessary to go beyond the modern concept of gender if we want to know what is underlying the women's invisibility in different contexts.

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Guided by postcolonial discourses of representation, identity, and agency, the study analyzes literature in the field to identify problematic issues and discusses their implications. iii. Para Pepe.Á Ultimately, asking questions and analyzing LIS discourse through the lens of postcolonial theory informs the questions themselves that need to be asked for research and practice in LIS, reveals the level and kinds of engagement in the field, and the intersection of LIS with the postcolonial context discussed earlier.