

Minga and volunteering: Alternative economy and precarious work in pro-sustainability settlements in Chile

Minga y voluntariado: Economía alternativa y trabajo precario en los asentamientos pro sustentabilidad en Chile

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Background

Faced with the apparent omnipotence of neoliberalism, a series of socio-territorial projects have emerged around the world that, along with protecting and regenerating ecosystems, claim to promote forms of resource provision based on collaboration and reciprocity between the different actors. Among other projects that share these characteristics are dozens of ecovillages and ecological communities in Chile, grouped here under the notion of Pro-Sustainability Settlements.

Aims

In this sense, this article proposes to describe and reflect on the tensions and hybridizations that occur in the search to specify forms of alternative economies in a context of neoliberal capitalism.

Method & procedures

For this, an ethnography was carried out in three Pro-Sustainability Settlements of different demographic and bioclimatic characteristics, with an average stay of 30 days in each of them. Data collection and production techniques were used such as participant observation, field notes and semi-structured interviews applied to 16 of its inhabitants, of which nine were men and seven women, with an average age of 37 years.

Results & discussion

From the participant observation, a great heterogeneity of collective economic practices was identified, among which the minga and volunteering stand out.

The minga, consists of the provision of support in some work or task and the non-monetary remuneration of this, in such a way that the part that receives the support in carrying out a task returns it during the same day, with food or teaching of some technique and / or, later, collaborating with the person who provided it. The minga implies reciprocal relationships that regulate daily life among the inhabitants, strengthens the social fabric and the feeling of community, produces knowledge exchanges and grants free or low-cost access to resources that would otherwise be onerous or directly inaccessible.

For its part, volunteering, in one of its most important modalities, is a practice by means of which people without a prior link are summoned to work in the settlements, most of the time without any remuneration, this call and its subsequent agreement, are mediated by specific deals on the roles and benefits that will correspond to each party. In this case, the deals may contain certain abuses and generally do not meet the basic standards of formal employability set by contemporary capitalism.

Conclusion

In this way, reciprocal relationships coexist and intermingle with those more typical of precarious work, although they are not subsumed in it. Both poles foreshadow future worlds and show that those seemingly alternate places, along with their desired aspects, also carry unwanted effects.

By virtue of the above, characterizing these places by mutual support does not give a complete idea of what happens, because, although this form of collaboration is present, so are less altruistic forms of provision of resources or more instrumental.

Thus, the construction of the desired world is interspersed with the world in which it is inserted. As a consequence, hybrid forms appear, containing something of each, without any prevailing by itself.

Keywords: alternative economy, ecovillage, ethnography, neoliberalism

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