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CALL FOR PAPERS

SOCIAL ECONOMY AS AN EMERGING PARADIGM: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND PREFIGURATIVE DYNAMICS

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing political and institutional interest in the social economy (hereinafter: SE). As is well known, the concept of SE refers to a field with fluid boundaries, encompassing a diverse range of organisational forms, working practices, and modes of production and provision of goods and services — social enterprises, cooperatives, mutual aid societies, non-profit associations and foundations — united by distinctive features such as the non-distribution of profits and the pursuit of collective interests through democratic and participatory governance mechanisms.

Both at EU level, with the launch of the Action Plan on the Social Economy, and in the Italian context, with the new Third Sector Code and the introduction of co-design and co-planning tools, the SE is increasingly recognised as a strategic pillar of public policies aimed at promoting social cohesion, inclusive employment and sustainable development.

Alongside this process of institutionalisation, we have also witnessed the spread of a wide range of local and regional experiments, which have helped to redefine the role of the social economy in welfare systems, territorial development policies and social innovation processes.

In this Special Issue, we aim to investigate both the social, political and institutional factors that shape the forms and approaches to the SE, and the linkages and interactions (both top-down and bottom-up) between public policies and the initiatives of civil society and social movements.

State of the art

The identification of the social economy as an emerging paradigm has raised a number of questions within the academic debate regarding its sociological definition and its policy implications. Whilst, indeed, throughout its long historical trajectory the field defined by SE organisations has traditionally been conceptualised in economic sociology as a ‘third space’ standing in opposition to — and as a potential alternative to — the state and the market (Laville, 2022; Paci, 2013), in recent years a series of studies has highlighted how, alongside its regulatory formalisation, the social economy sector has been characterised by ambivalence and contradictions.

Its quantitative expansion, in terms of the number of organisations and the workforce employed, which coincided with the reduction and fragmentation of public provision of social services, has led to the identification of SE organisations and the Third Sector as service providers tasked with filling the gaps in public welfare, thereby eroding its capacity for experimentation and systemic innovation (Borzaga,

Gori and Pains, 2023). Furthermore, there has been a growing hybridisation with the typical logic of the private market (Henriksen, Smith and Zimmer, 2015; Reggiardo, 2022), which has led the more structured part of social economy organisations to internalise managerial cultures and productivist organisational styles (Aiken, 2006). Particularly in a sector notoriously characterised by high labour intensity and low productivity, these transformations have led to increasing precariousness and underpayment (Busso and Lanunziata, 2016; Dorigatti *et al.*, 2024), resulting in several cases in a crisis of motivation among the workforce (Fazzi, 2024).

At the same time, the field of social enterprise studies has also focused on the role played by its organisations in responding to emergencies and crisis situations (Chaves-Ávila and Soler Guillén, 2023) and on the role they might play in addressing the challenges posed by the dual ecological and digital transition (Ciarini, 2025). In particular, emphasis is placed on how the spread of mutualistic principles and collaborative practices — such as co-production, co-design and co-planning — can trigger dynamics of democratisation in public action and work, producing effects beyond the narrow confines of organisations within the social economy sector.

It is in this sense that a number of scholars have highlighted the transformative power of the SE, emancipating it from its sectoral definition and presenting it as a vehicle for the reconfiguration of economic and institutional systems. Contributions that emphasise the multi-scalar projection of the SE's organisational and mutualistic forms (Vercellone *et al.*, 2017; Milburn and Russell, 2018; van Dyk and Kip, 2024), on the possibility of rethinking the democratisation of the economy's fundamental infrastructures (Barbera *et al.*, 2016; Dagnes and Salento, 2022), grounded in a politics of socio-ecological care (de Leonardis, 2025; Borghi and Leonardi, 2024) and a general recodification of work (Tcherneva, 2022; Laruffa, 2020; Ciarini, 2025).

The picture outlined so far highlights how the development of the ES as an emerging paradigm stands at a crossroads between conflicting trends. On the one hand, it can be seen as a mechanism for adapting to the transformations of welfare and contemporary capitalism; on the other, it can represent a space for institutional experimentation, the re-politicisation of needs, economic democratisation and the construction of alternative forms of organising work, care and production.

The SE thus presents itself as a privileged field of observation for studying the transformations of welfare regimes, the processes of reorganisation of the welfare state, the construction of service markets, the redefinition of public functions and emerging forms of territorial regulation. At the same time, the SE can be seen as a space for bottom-up institutional production, democratic experimentation, the building of mutual aid networks, and the development of practices capable of challenging the subordination of the economy to the logic of profit.

This call therefore aims to promote a discussion that brings together both dimensions: on the one hand, a critical analysis of the ambivalences of the institutionalisation of the SE; on the other, an exploration of its transformative, prefigurative and constitutive potential.

The main objective is to address the implications of the ambivalent dynamics summarised above, linking critical approaches to the phenomenon with those more oriented towards a prefigurative approach. In this sense, the aim of this call is to investigate both the social, political and institutional factors that shape the form and approaches to the SE, and the possible emerging models.

Aims of the call and thematic areas

This call seeks original contributions that explore the role of the social economy in the contemporary transformations of economic and welfare systems. We welcome articles offering both theoretical reflection and empirical analysis (qualitative and quantitative), drawing on both national and European contexts. Comparative or historical-comparative contributions will be particularly welcome, as will

works based on case studies capable of shedding light on the concrete configurations and emerging dynamics of the social economy within different institutional and territorial contexts.

By way of illustration, but not limited to, contributions may fall within one or more of the following themes:

1. Comparative and historical-comparative approaches

Contributions that reconstruct genealogies, historical trajectories and national or territorial variations of the social economy, highlighting continuities and discontinuities between historical forms of mutualism, cooperation, associationism and contemporary configurations of the social economy.

2. Political economy of the social economy

Analysis of the relationships between the social economy, growth models, contemporary capitalism, public policies, institutional regulation and transformations of the welfare state. Contributions addressing the social economy within the framework of transformations in the welfare mix, quasi-markets, outsourcing and new forms of governance are welcome.

3. Work, employment and organisational models

Contributions focusing on labour market dynamics in the social economy, the quality of work, organisational models, social professions, employment conditions, motivations and the tensions between solidarity-based objectives and the constraints of economic sustainability.

4. Social economy, welfare and social innovation

Articles analysing the relationship between the social economy and transformations in local welfare, with particular attention to co-planning, co-design, co-production, shared administration, social innovation, territorial welfare and participatory practices.

5. Territorial development and spatial disparities

Contributions highlighting the role of the social economy in local development processes, territorial regeneration, and the construction of collaborative ecosystems, as well as in the differences between urban, peripheral, rural and inland areas and in North-South disparities.

6. Commons, political ecology, feminism, decoloniality

We encourage papers that link the SE to reflections on the commons, social reproduction, care, socio-ecological sustainability, feminist thought and decolonial perspectives, examining the transformative potential of the SE in relation to crises in employment, welfare and the environment.

7. Social economy and social movements

Contributions exploring the relationship between the social economy and social movements, mutualism, practices of solidarity, self-organisation, social conflict and the creation of new democratic institutions.

8. The social economy as an emerging paradigm

Theoretical and empirical reflections examining the social economy as a possible emerging paradigm, highlighting its limitations, ambivalences, contradictions and prefigurative possibilities.

Deadlines and further information

Articles, in Italian or English, may be submitted until the deadline of **15 September 2026**.

To submit an article proposal, authors must follow the online procedure by FrancoAngeli's *Open Journal Systems* (OJS) platform at the following link:

<https://journals.francoangeli.it/index.php/sl/about/submissions>.

Technical information useful for authors for submitting their proposal through the platform is summarized in a *Technical Guide* available at the following link:

https://journals.francoangeli.it/public/guide/Authors_guide_FrancoAngeli.pdf.

The article may have a maximum length of **8,000 words** and must comply with the journal's **editorial guidelines**, summarized in the document available at the following link:

https://www.francoangeli.it/riviste/NR/Sl-norme_EN.pdf.

Articles that have not been edited in accordance with the editorial guidelines, or that exceed the length indicated in the *Call for papers*, will not be accepted. Articles formatted in compliance with the editorial guidelines and correctly submitted through the OJS platform will be subject to a *double-blind peer review process*.

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