Luminita-Anda Mandache, “God created the world, we created Conjunto Palmeiras”: the meanings and practices of an “alternative” economy at the periphery of Fortaleza

Abstract: There has been a lot of research on “alternative” economies and a lot of hope is put on their potential. Development practitioners and international organizations see in them a new means to practice development. Activists and academics perceive them as potential sources for an anti-capitalist economy. Definitions of “alternative” vary and are always embedded with the ideology of their promoter. Under the name of social or solidarity economy, they include a mix of practices as diverse as barter, local/community/alternative currencies, micro-finance, cooperatives, and workers’ unions. My question is: how can these “alternative” economic practices, gathered under the umbrella of solidarity economy, be understood in a context of extreme poverty? What actually does “alternative” economy mean from the perspective of those who implement these practices in a context of poverty? In responding this question I focus on the institutionalized activity of one particular organization, The Palmas Bank. The Palmas Bank, functioning since 1998, is considered by some activists the largest and most popular organization implementing local currencies in Latin America and is also the self-proclaimed leader of the solidarity economy in northeast Brazil. The Palmas Bank is situated at the margins of Fortaleza, Brazil’s most violent city, and the world’s 5th most unequal, and Conjunto Palmeiras, the neighborhood that hosts the Palmas Bank is the city’s poorest area.