

Community economies: economic politics outside the binary frame

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Paper presented at the Rethinking Economy Conference, ANU, August 1999

At a video conference Jenny Cameron and I organized late last year as a kind of anti-Hanson intervention, we brought groups of people in four locations—two in Victoria and one each in New South Wales and Queensland—video-face to video-face to share 'stories of success' from rural and regional Australia. These stories included many examples of people coming together to experiment with new economic relations and partnerships. They included

- a community newspaper run by a cooperative in a small town in Gippsland where the commercial paper had folded;
- a project between BHP Newcastle and its retrenched steelworkers to aid in workers' retraining and orientation to different employment;
- a community garden in a country town in which the disabled, the young and those on 'community service orders' work together producing flowers, vegetables and fruit;
- a partnership between educational institutions and national and multinational food manufacturing companies operating in the Goulburn Valley to assist local young people to train in food-related careers and stay in the area;
- a local business that developed in opposition and response to the felling of old growth native forests in Gippsland by developing an innovative radial saw that allows plantation eucalypts to be used in construction at a very early age—these portable saws are now being exported around the world.
- The Rumbalara Football Netball club—a reconciliation and Healthy Lifestyles project that brings together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal players in the Goulburn Valley and builds networks between the koori community and the local business community.

The afternoon of story sharing across space was inspiring in many ways—just to see the ingenuity and enthusiasm people have for their projects and to create an opportunity for show casing this was useful. As I will show later, this event has led to the construction of a website that allows these stories to have a more permanent form and continue to play a communicative and educative role.

But what I would like to interrogate for a moment was the faintly unpleasant sense of *deja vu* that I (and at least one other, I know) experienced while listening to many of the stories in which the term 'community' was mentioned over and again.

My unease was associated with that voice in my head saying “this is so 70s” and those flash backs to community development projects (remember the Australian Assistance Plan of the Whitlam government?) from adventure playgrounds and food co-ops, to women’s and workers health centres, small local business promotion, townscape revitalization and of course the community arts movement—of which Gay Hawkins has written a wonderful genealogy.

Why the sinking feeling, I have since found myself wondering? When all these remembered projects could, from my current theoretical position be seen as examples of non-capitalist economic practice? Was it the ‘localness’ of the stories that the video-conference showcased that made me shirk? Or their small scale-ness in the face of things (read globalization)? Or their association with a cosy but cloying sense of ‘community’ where recognition is based upon sameness? And where the fear of non-recognition, if not exclusion, lurks around any disclosure of difference or disagreement? Or was it the unexamined power of the term ‘community’ which disturbed me? A term which is, after all, used across the political spectrum as though it were an unqualified social ‘good’?

Or was it that ‘remembering the 70s’ for me brought up not only memories of involvement in inner-city community activism and embarking on postgrad studies in community development at Macquarie University, but also a, from today’s perspective, somewhat embarrassing rejection of these ties of community when I abandoned Australia, entered graduate school in the US, became enchanted with the rigors of Marxian political economy, and began studying multinational firms and the emergence of what we came to call ‘global capitalism’? And just to add to the autobiographical note here, it was in this move that I met Julie Graham who, in her beat up old yellow VW with its “Eat the Rich” bumper sticker, was making her own escape from community activism—in her case a local women’s movement taken over by lesbian separatists,

At graduate school in Worcester, the armpit of the North East as many referred to it, away from community as it was being enacted, if not enforced in Australia and the Connecticut Valley, we became firmly trapped in the vision of global power and local vulnerability (despite the contradictions staring us in the face—namely the considerable powers that were being marshalled and used to produce significant social and economic change in the movements we had to some extent left—here I’m thinking of the transformation in work, lifestyles and relationships wrought by the feminist movement and the smaller, but still lasting legacy, of the green bans movement in Sydney).

So the video-conference raised for me a set of feelings and memories that are uncomfortable—and this presentation is one attempt to analyze the unease that is generated for me when the terms ‘community’ and ‘economy’ are said together in one breath—as they are in the very name of our collaborative ‘Community Economies Project’.

The notion of 'community economies' conjures up images of small scale and locally identified economic activities, of indigenous economic practices based on local knowledges, of household transactions and labour processes, perhaps of alternative economic enterprises like cooperatives, collectives, voluntary labour exchanges, local trading networks, as well as images of those associational relationships that constitute 'social capital'--the new catch phrase of policy makers across the political spectrum.

In that these images highlight the local, the small scale, the social and cultural, the alternative, they are necessarily positioned as 'other' to the so-called 'real economy' of international markets, competitive dynamics and agglomerative tendencies which operate at the global scale. They are represented in a capitalocentric discourse as either the pre-modern remnants that have survived despite the global reach of the capitalist market, the romantic experiments that operate in the interstices of the capitalist world economy, the supportive cultural or domestic context upon which capitalist development is built, or incubator sites from which new capitalist development will grow.

The community economic development literature is divided into advocates on one side of a kind of small business community entrepreneurialism that borders on local chauvinism and looks to economic growth as the way to ultimately transcend the fetters of localism. And on the other, proponents of self-reliance and sustainability who believe in a kind of 'natural community' predicated upon social, ecological and local holism that hankers after the construction of autonomous utopias.

It seems that when 'community' and 'economy' are put together the power, expansiveness, and universality of the latter term is rendered confined and constrained. When the terms 'community' and 'economy' are linked, what Iris Marion Young (1990) calls the 'ideal of community' appears to overcome the Masculinity of economy (its singularity, its centeredness, its universalism and above all its essential identity—as capitalist) and renders it different to itself, multiple, decentralized, decentered, face-to-face and human, small scale and above all local.

While I have no qualms about feminizing the Economy in any sort of way (indeed in our project we are interested in any strategies that help us to see the economy as heterogeneous and that help us to see the economic landscape as one of diversity), I am interested in exploring some of the effects of representing the economy in its 'community' guise.

My concerns come down to two main issues

- one is to do with the association of community with a presumed identity that is unified, known and shared, that is, the way that the ideal of community undermines expressions of difference.

- and the other is to do with the mapping of community onto the local and the small scale, and the way these scales are then configured as less powerful, less able to spread and infect other economic sites or scales, less determining of development pathways.

Both issues are of concern as I engage in a community-based action research project that is aimed at highlighting economic diversity and engaging in a conversation about rethinking economy. In this paper I will only discuss the first in detail. Let me deal first with my concerns around popular visions of community.

1. Community

For Iris Marian Young the ‘ideal of community’

presumes [that] subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves....it privileges unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of the limits of one’s understanding of others from their point of view...(1990: 302, 300)

As it has become known in western thought, the term community, Young argues, expresses the desire to overcome individualism and difference, to produce social wholeness and mutual identification (1990: 302).

One of the interesting aspects of the term ‘community’ is the good work it seems to be able to do across the political and social spectrum. No matter in what context it is used—whether that of the global financial community, the gay community, the gambling community—it has some purchase.

Georges van den Abeele (discussing the work of Jean-Luc Nancy) traces the “ecumenical appeal of community” to the two slightly different etymologies of the word—on one hand *com + unus* meaning “what is together as one”, and on the other hand *com + munis* meaning “with the sense of being bound, obligated, or indebted together”(1991:xi).

“As if by coincidence” he writes, “the rival etymologies point to the two classic ways the West has tried to theorize community, between the organicist notion of the “body politic” (a community that is absorption into oneness), and the idea of social contract (a community that is mutual indebtedness).” These differing interpretations of community have fed into divergent political philosophies and practices.

On one side is authoritarianism and totalitarianism where the social/political body is ruled by the head (the state or dictator) which stands in for the multitude making up the whole and in so doing speaks for and as the whole, eliminating difference through exclusion, deportation or extermination. On the other, are the ‘freely’

aggregated self-determining subjects of possessive individualism whose differences in terms of access and ownership are erased as they enter the political or economic market place of contracts, deals and debts. So, it seems that in the discourse of Western metaphysics the language of community and collectivity is paired in opposition to that of individualism and particularity, and the dominant political philosophies have worked hard to suppress the dangerous individual differences that threaten social order by folding them into a notion of community in which oneness/sameness rules and difference is 'overcome'.

We can see a parallel in the enlightenment discourse of economy in which the universal need for survival stands in stark opposition to individual differences in access to the means of survival, and dominant theories of Economy have similarly worked hard to suppress the dangerous inequalities that threaten the social order by cloaking them in an equalizing doctrine of individual needs and rights that harnesses difference into the very maintenance and self-regulation of economic and social well-being (though concepts such as the division of labour, or the wage contract).

Both meanings of community resonate with dominant representations of economy. On one hand we have the unified organismic image of the capitalist economy (ruled by the sphere of production and its dynamics of profitability) that builds upon the notion of a community absorbed into oneness—a community sustained by the health of the body economic. A body whose makeup then stands in as the model for all Economies. And on the other we have the atomized image of multiple rational economic actors (both enterprises and individual consumers) who constitute that economic whole called 'market capitalism', an image that builds upon the notion of a community of mutually obligated and indebted individuals. Here community is sustained by adherence to the rights of contract and the rules of supply and demand.

That both representations of Economy (as quintessentially capitalist) successfully erase the recognition and possibility of economic difference is one of the arguments developed in our book *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*.

But what I want to focus in on here is not the issue of economic difference, it is on how the notion of community is embedded in economic thought. Because it is this notion of oneness and indebtedness, and its implicit reference to sustenance and care of the other, that is fundamentally problematic as well as potentially liberating. Both the visions of community as 'being together as one' or as 'being obligated or indebted together' are infected by an ethic of care. And in that Economy is associated with material survival, as well as social order, it too can be seen as haunted by relations of care of the other.

Where notions of community founder is when greater emphasis is placed upon the definition of the 'one', the designation of the 'who', of who is together, that is, on defining the **commonality** of being, rather than on what Jean-Luc Nancy refers to

as the **being in** common. For Nancy this latter is a mode of being that presupposes that there is “no common being, no substance, no essence, no common identity, **but that there is being in common.**” (1991:1)

It is these issues of care and being-in-common that have emerged as potent forces in discussions with people in the La Trobe Valley (LTV)—the major ‘local’ site of our conversations around economy at present. People in the LTV have lived for a long time with a sense that their community and their economy have existed in harmony. The state developmentalist agenda that built up the Valley as the major source of electrical power for Victoria was predicated upon the vision of a healthy state-owned power generation industry and a vibrant regional community of miners, power workers, their families and service providers. The fictive oneness of the LaTrobe community was of course always built upon the exclusion of certain groups from active involvement in the formal economy, particularly koori people and women. The central contract that produced community was one between male workers, local capitalists and the State.

The rationalization and then privatization of the State Electricity Commission (SEC) power stations and mines, has had a dramatic impact. The whole definition of the region’s identity, the subjectivity of its inhabitants, the understandings of Economy and ‘community’ are all under examination. Notions of unity have been exploded....yet feelings of care remain.

Listen to the words of this power industry worker who participated in a focus group discussion we held with members of the Latrobe Valley community in 1997:

When Jeff Kennett came along and said, right we are eventually going to sell them, he had to get the power stations at an economical level so that they could look and say “Yes, that’s a good business, I’ll buy that.”

He went about it by isolating each power station and saying “If you don’t perform you’ll go to the wall, but if you do perform, you might survive.”

Just before we were being sold, we always demanded the figures of how efficient the plant was and how much profit was being made. It was a doomed station. It was supposed to be shut down in 2001. And we were down to running four of the eight units. Three were moth balled and one had had so much damage done to it, it was uneconomically viable to bring it back. And so we were given this information for the first time. And that information was the truth.

When we were shown the truth we all got together and we started doing things that we would never do before. When it comes to having done things right. That’s what I am coming at. We have done things right to our own detriment. We’ve done the right thing and that’s what people in the Valley have got to be proud of.

Talk about the rest of it, I've done things right and I've still got a job. My mate hasn't got a job, and some care should be taken of him. That's how I feel about the place. I was fundamental in the process of actually taking their jobs off them. It was nothing for them to be picked up later and I feel really sorry for them. I've had a lot to do with those guys losing their jobs. But I knew it was the only way that the station I was in was going to survive in the long term.

Of the many issues raised by this statement I want to pull out two. One is the incredible shock of recognition that the 'health' of the body economic does not equate with the health of the social body, the community. The paring down of the labour force, the closing of inefficient plant, the facing up to the 'economic truth', the selling off of assets on the 'free market' have all ensured survival, but not care. In fact the well-being of the body economic is now predicated upon the exclusion of those once central to its functioning. The other is the intense expression of concern and care for the other (his mates) voiced by this man.

I would like to read this call for care as the call for a certain kind of community. Linda Singer writes in her essay "Recalling a community at loose ends"

...community is not a referential sign but a call or appeal. What is called for is not some objective reference. The call of community initiates conversation, prompts exchanges in writing, disseminates, desires the proliferation of discourse. When one reads the appeal to community in this way, as the call of something other than presence, the problematic posed by the prospect of community shifts to the economy of discourse and articulation. (1991:125)

In a sense Singer is referring to community as a call to becoming of something yet to be defined. I find this an exciting and potentially transforming idea.

What is interesting (and possibly enabling) at the present moment in the Valley is that the traditional paternalistic call of community associated with the state and the SEC has been silenced, and no one clearly discernible call has taken its place. What is more, the traditional 'alternative' or dissident calls of community, (that are nevertheless still built on the idea of an overcoming or transcendence of difference) for instance, that of the Marxist vision of communism or that of the Christian doctrine of communion, no longer hold the appeal they once had.¹ (Though with the rise of attendance at non-denominational churches in the Valley, perhaps that of the Christian community is on the increase).

¹ All 'alternatives', for Nancy, are brought down by their inability to think beyond the self-generating subject—the subject as already known, as being or as coming into being at some future moment. In that the states of redemption, revolution and the compromise of consensus are all forms of 'emancipation' based upon a known subject, the call of community is not a call into being of something new, but the enstatement of a presence that is pre-constituted.

There is, however, a strong sense of the becoming of a being-in-community that is voiced in the Valley. Listen to this statement from a young woman who grew up in the region and is now a successful business woman. She talks about the commitment to staying in the Valley:

We've taken it all on board, we've taken all the ugliness and everything with it and said we are going to see this through. There is even individuals here today who have actually said that it's been painful, it's been hard, let's help someone else. Let's make the blow a little less painful for them. This is a strong community, it comes forward today, everyone's here prepared to work together but we need to sell that to the wider group. We need to be more astute, there will be more threats. This is not the last and it wasn't the first.

This statement gives some expression to what Nancy has called 'being-in-common'. Without predicating what or who constitutes the 'we' she refers to, this woman talks of the being-together of the people in the Valley, of the care people are offering one another and of the creative energies that might be unleashed together. The authority to constitute the 'we' of community need not be seen as resting on sameness but on the very different experiences of being-in-common in this place.

As I see it, the challenge for our project in the conversations we are engaging in around rethinking economy is to allow this sense of community (as about care, creativity and difference) to inform our work.

Jean-Luc Nancy has argued that the "failure of communal models is...linked to their embrace of human immanence, that is, of totality, self-consciousness, self-presence" (1991:xiv). He wants to revive the notion of community as "neither a community of subjects, nor a promise of immanence, nor a communion of individuals in some higher or greater totality (a State, a nation, a People)" and we might add a Region (van den Abeele, 1991:xiv). He is keen to avoid the sense of community that is built upon already constituted subjects who are brought together in a constructed oneness.

I think Nancy and Young have identified the source of the unease I began with. The association of community with **a being** that is already known precludes the **becoming** of new and as yet unthought of ways of being. To liberate economic difference, I need also to liberate community from its traditional 'recourse to the subject'. In terms of economic activism this means resisting equating community economic development with Either growing the local economy through promotion of small business Or attempts to develop utopian self-sufficiency. Both strategies deny difference and express [a] "desire to bring multiplicity and heterogeneity into unity"—on one hand the unity of incubator capitalism or on the other that of a kind of 'natural community' based upon social and ecological holism.

What is so heartening is to find examples of communities at loose ends operating along side and within economic diversity in the Valley. One of our video conference stories illustrates this nicely. And I want to end with some of the glimpses of how Work Focus Inc is 'becoming' community and economy in the La Trobe Valley.

Work Focus Inc is a loose assemblage of projects that helps people with employment and self-employment—it grew out of a Federally funded Skill Share Project, continuing on when the funding was cut off. Some of its projects include Woodworx, (a mobile sawmilling operation), Gateway programs that help bridge the school to work transition and the unemployment to employment transition with skills courses, The Roundhouse Arts Incubator (a cluster of artisans working in a transformed steam train turning house in Traralgon), and Pam the Pearl Lugger—the restoration of a original Japanese pearl lugger using mainly voluntary labour.

Work Focus is fostering interesting connections

- Woodworx builds upon transactions between large multinational companies in the area (AMCOR a paper mill and one of the power stations) and the unemployed workers who 'man' the portable sawmills that cut down old timber on the dairy properties the companies acquire for plantation or coal mining purposes—access to the timber is granted free of charge. In addition, the employed AMCOR workers help the sawmillers out with informal training and by felling the larger trees on company time—in return for a few cartons of beer. Family farmers in the region who want their old cyprus pine windbreaks removed also allow Woodworx access to their timber gratis. Out of these exchanges: beer for felled timber; cleared land for wood; a community enterprise, a multinational corporation and self employed farmers build connections based upon their 'being together'. An ethic of conservation of timber resources is being developed as is a revalueing of so-called waste product. A loose affiliation across difference is potentially being forged.
- One of the Gateway programs involves older retrenched and retired workers working with school drop outs and homeless kids on woodworking skills. The workshop located at the showground in the shed that displays prize chickens during show week—for the other weeks of the year WorkFocus can use it as a woodwork shop. Kids gather here to make furniture for themselves using donated timber under the instruction of volunteer teachers. The shop is also used by the Woodworx team to build outdoor furniture made with recycled timber. The 'being together' in this workshop creates one sort of community of difference in which care is expressed in the kind of training and material support offered.
- The Gateway project also offers computer training, especially to women who have had time out of the formal labour force. At a recent meeting between our project and people gathered at Work Focus to talk about community assets and alternative economic activities, a young unemployed man became very

agitated about why our project couldn't just give him the few thousand dollars he needed to start a lawn mowing business. His frustration and anger was dramatic and somewhat disruptive. After the meeting one of the older women who had been undertaking computer training and had heard the outburst offered her services to this young bloke to drive him around to jobs so that he could start the business he planned. She had a young son who she could see would potentially be in this man's position in a few years' time and wanted to explore how she could provide an opportunity for another. Across the differences of age and demeanor the glimmer of a community economy was seen.

In all these examples surplus labour or so-called waste product is being distributed to others without direct regard for a dollar outcome measured in established economic terms. These distributions are the economic flows that become new communities—communities at loose ends, communities of difference, communities of being together, but not being one. That sinking feeling is starting to abate. It is perhaps possible to envision community economies outside or beyond the binary frame.

But what about my other concern with that about power and the local and small scale. Let me briefly end with some reflections on this issue.

2. The local and small scale

Since the local is the space of politics for most economic activists, I want to question its positioning as interior to the global and as a 'second best' political terrain. Not that this repositioning of the local hasn't been done already by quite a number of people--but in the so-called era of globalization it is continually being undone and needs to be done again.

In terms of interventions around economic politics, the community economy response is usually seen as pitted against globalization like a mouse trying to move a mountain. As an incredulous colleague derided me last year when I spoke of some of the projects ENGENDER is involved in:

“Do you really think that by earning \$1,000 a year from craft goods production, rural Indonesian households will be able to prevent their daughters from being exploited in the nearby Nike factory?”

Perhaps if he were here he might come back at me today with a similar comment to the effect that

“Do you really think that a few blokes pulling a mobile saw around Gippsland cutting down some windbreaks is going to solve the devastation of 8,000 jobs lost in the Latrobe Valley?”

We are all familiar with the denigration of the local as small and relatively powerless, defined and confined by the global. The global is a force, the local is its field of play. The global is penetrating, the local is penetrated and transformed. Of course, localities are not passive as we've seen in a number of presentations today. They interact in the process of transformation, creating in the process a heterogeneous landscape of globalization—but the relation of penetration isn't usually represented as going both ways. Somehow the global is untransformed in the process of interaction.

In its guise as a force called 'globalization,' the global appears as a telos on the move, one world in the relentless process of becoming. Globalization obtains some of its energy from its discursive association with capitalism, conceived as an irresistibly expansive form of economy. This compounds the subordination of the local. Not only is it subsumed as the interior 'other' to the global, but noncapitalist economic activities, community economies, involving households, collectives, independent producers, barter networks, etc.—all ostensibly local—are seen as contained and ultimately dominated by a global capitalist economy.

Critics have attempted to destabilize the global/local binary that constructs the former as sufficient, whole and powerful while the latter is deficient, fragmented and relatively weak. They point out that the global doesn't exist, or at least not in any stable and generic relation to other scales; scratch anything global and you find locality. Thus the contemporary formation of regional trading blocs is a process of regionalization and regulation, rather than one of unfettered globalization; and multinational firms are actually multilocal rather than global, though the statistics on their profits and internal and external transactions are used as indicators of globalization.

What becomes apparent when we look at globalization discourse and its critics is that globalization is the product of theorists, theorists reading the economic and social landscape for unification and integration, whereas it could just as easily be read for temporary interactions and partial interconnections.

Others point out that there's a tendency to objectify both local and global, to perceive 'localness' or 'globalness' as inherent qualities of an object rather than understanding them as scales of analysis or interpretive frames. So a MNC is global, a community is local. We need to resist this objectivist tendency if we are to free the local (and the community) from its position of subordination.

When a women's collective in SE Asia sells a commodity to a TNC, is that transaction local or global? And when Andy Knorr's radial saws which were invented to solve a local environmental problem in Gippsland are marketed around the world especially to those developing nations who have planted large eucalyptus plantations to combat deforestation—is this small business local or global?

Finally, there are the criticisms of the widespread tendency to confuse size or extensiveness with power. Here people cite the limits of large entities: the failures of MNCs to enact their will, if they can even figure out what it is; the failures of large and presumably powerful nation states—the U.S. in Vietnam, the Soviet Union in 1989; chaos theory's affirmation of the ancient saying that a butterfly beating its wings can affect the weather half a world away. All of these critical moves are basically deconstructive: they break down the binary structure of difference, allowing us to see that the global is not global, the local is not local, the local is not powerless or even less powerful.

We cannot assume that because something is local and unique it is not globally consequential. Indeed, it may be extremely powerful, given the impossibility of restricting its meaning or emotional resonance to any particular location. Hope coalesces around the smallest objects, translating their impact to the global dimension. Julie has already mentioned the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation. It has been a catalyst of optimism and action around the world. It's a local experiment operating on a global imaginative and emotional scale. Most recently, for example, Race Matthews' new book *Jobs of Our Own* revisits the lessons to be learnt from Mondragon and in Melbourne a new group, Mutuality Australia, have formed to talk about the possibilities for similar enterprises in Australia.

Our Community Economies Project is concerned to show that discourse and language are not constrained by size and scale. Why can't we see globalization or 'global transformation' as occurring through repetition, reiteration and replication at a local level, not simply through penetration, domination, and colonization of so-called global forces and agents.

The Community Economies Website is an attempt to use the international spread of the internet to interact with the global conversation about Rethinking Economy. Why can't something as local and small scale as the Fig Tree Community Garden inspire the becoming of communities of difference and non-capitalist economic practices around the world?

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