

An Ethics of the Local

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Preamble

Imagine that something is happening in the world that's not about an actual, measurable phenomenon called "globalization." I am thinking here of the ascendancy of what might be called the "global imaginary" and its implications for how we feel, act and identify. Perhaps a global regime is consolidating itself not so much through institutional initiatives but through subjects who experience themselves as increasingly subsumed to a global order—enter here the world economic system, known also as the market, or neoliberalism, or capitalism. Becoming part of the imagined global community involves our subjection to this order, our (re)constitution not primarily as national citizens but as economic subjects—productive or less so, competitive or not, winning or losing on the economic terrain.

It's not an emotionally neutral process. As the nation loses its simple and secular primacy, our familiar social container erodes—its walls become permeable, its stitching unravels. Inevitably, we are exposed. The government that once protected us from the world economy now hurls us up against it. Its rhetoric of competitiveness draws on the self-centeredness of community while abjuring its progressive and ethical force.

But there is more than one aspect to this experience. When we are we laid open to global forces, we confront ourselves differently. As the nation loosens its hold on us, we encounter new possibilities of community. In this moment it is possible to ask what is possible—besides economic victimhood and social incivility. Can we find other ways to be? Can we be other than what globalization makes of us? These questions are challenging ones that ask for daily practices of learning to live differently. I hear them as a call for an "ethics

Global/local

Globalization discourse situates the local (and thus all of us) in a place of subordination, as “the other within” of the global order. At worst, it makes victims of localities and robs them of economic agency and self-determination. Yet in doing so globalization suggests its own antidote, particularly with respect to the economy: imagine what it would mean, and how unsettling it would be to all that is now in place, if the locality were to become the active subject of its economic experience.

In the discursive context of globalization, attempts to restore identity and capacity to localities assume moral force and political priority. But such attempts cannot succeed if the local is *necessarily* confined and constrained by the global. A less obvious, less predictable, less binary relation must obtain if we are to know the local as a space of freedom and capacity. *The impossibility of a global order* must be affirmed as a truth and reaffirmed as a truism. If we can accept that it is impossible to subsume every individual being, place and practice to a universal law, whether it be the law of the father, or the market, or a geopolitical formation, then it will follow that the local cannot be fully interior to the global, nor can its inventive potential be captured by any singular imagining.

Impossible though a global order may be, there are afoot in the world today concerted efforts to produce global integration—the World Trade Organization, the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, IMF structural adjustment plans tethering individual societies to a global capitalist economy (and constructing the latter in the process). Critics have pointed to the violence inherent in such projects and the manifold erasures and suppressions that are enacted in their pursuit. In Seattle, demonstrators against the WTO became advocates for the peoples and practices that are violated when a global (economic) regime is imposed. They

might also be seen as practitioners of an ethics of the local. Such an ethics is grounded in the necessary failure of a global order, which is the negative condition of an affirmation of locality.

A local ethic proffers respect, not just for difference and autonomy but for self understood as capability. Yet this is only a part of the story. In Volume 2 of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault distinguishes the two elements of every morality. The first element is the code, or the principles. But the second and often more important element is the cultivation of the ethical person. According to Foucault, the “relationship with the self...is not simply ‘self-awareness’ but self-formation as an ‘ethical subject’...” (1985, 28) and there is “no forming of the ethical subject without ‘modes of subjectivation’ and...‘practices of the self’ that support them” (28). In the story that follows I adopt Foucault’s conception of morality as a template and a guide. I begin with simple principles, familiar to all, and then trace a complex, idiosyncratic, and highly social process of (re)subjectivation—involving practices of forming the ethical local subject that I have used in my research. The first moment yields clean and underspecified abstractions, without which we could not begin to orient ourselves, while the second embroils us in the dirt and danger of location, interpersonal engagement, and the labors of becoming.

First, principles

The task of convening principles for a local ethics is to some extent a negative one. It involves countering not globalization itself (involving interchange between spatially separated processes or entities) but the meanings of globalization that come to bear on social

possibility.¹ For the global is not merely a geographical scale that subsumes and subordinates the local; it has become a sign as well for universality and sameness/unity.² In this light, the preoccupations of recent social theory, where any number of thinkers enjoin us to *recognize particularity and contingency, honor difference and otherness, and cultivate local capacity*, can be read as appropriate guidelines for an ethics of locality. These three familiar injunctions (constituting almost a postmodern social mantra) gain force from what they are posed against. Each affirms a subordinate term, each values what globalization discourse (in some of its forms) threatens to endanger, each redresses an imbalance of emphasis in triumphalist accounts of globalization. As principled abstractions, they have not only the deconstructive energy to unsettle global certainties but the instrumental potential to transform local subjects through inculcatory practices. And despite their familiarity, they have not usually been treated as codified norms for a practical ethics.³ In this sense, they have not yet reached their potential for performative efficacy.

¹ See Dirlik (2000a) for a similar distinction between globalization as an historical process, which has been ongoing “since the origins of humanity,” and globalization as a discourse or paradigm, “a self-consciously new

² This despite the protestations of many theorists that globalization is both productive of, and accommodating to, heterogeneity and difference.

³ Here it is interesting to consider the argument of Hardt and Negri (2000) that these principles were once potent counters to modernity (and in particular modern sovereignty) but with the passing of modern forms of rule they have been robbed of moral relevance and political effectiveness. Indeed, for Hardt and Negri, theorists like Homi Bhabha who are still critiquing modernity and affirming these principles as the basis of a new postmodern politics of community are not only beating a dead horse but are unwittingly complicit in constructing the order of postmodern sovereignty, designated simply and terrifyingly as “Empire.”

What if these theorists are so intent on combating the remains of a past form of domination that they fail to recognize the new form that is looming over them in the present?...Power has evacuated the bastion they are attacking and has circled around to their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference....Long live difference! Down with essentialist binaries!” (137-8)

Despite the best intentions, then, the postmodernist politics of difference not only is ineffective against but can even coincide with and support the functions and practices of imperial rule. (142-3)

(1) *Recognize particularity and contingency.* This principle establishes parity between global and local, existence and possibility. It bids us acknowledge that the global universal is a projection, on a world scale, of a local particularity. Thus “development” is the historical experience of capitalist industrialization in a few regions that has become a description of a universal trajectory and a prescription for economic and social intervention in all of the world’s nations. Similarly, “neoliberalism” is an approach to economic regulation that emerges from a single economic tradition, presenting a *particular* understanding of the economy, presuming a *particular* economic subject, and focusing on enhancing *particular* types of economic practices—capitalist market practices to be precise. As a hegemonic particularity, it has set the global regulatory agenda for the past decade or more, obscuring and often destroying local economic practices devalued as traditional or parochial, or invisible as nonmarket and noncapitalist. “Human rights”—again, emerging from a locality, that home of a small portion of humankind called the West. Now threatening to install itself as a universal discourse of liberation, obliterating other notions of justice and violating other visions of society and humanity.⁴ The list goes on, or could.

Rather than being a threat to existing forms of power, Bhabha and others are “symptoms of the epochal shift we are undergoing, that is, the passage to Empire” (145). Their outmoded antimodernist critiques of binary hierarchies have been incorporated and subsumed by the postmodern imperial formation, which has devised new forms of hierarchy and domination.

While the sweeping scope of their pronouncements and the energetic affirmation of totality make me feel somewhat weary, I am also invigorated by Hardt and Negri. I can recognize my self-positioning and recommit to my various projects in the light of their very different one. As for the principles so easily dismissed by them, I am both less optimistic than they are (not believing that respect for difference and otherness have been embraced or enforced globally) and less pessimistic (not believing that they have done their work and are now disarmed and irrelevant). On the contrary, it seems to me that these principles have seldom been put into practice, and that the ethical process of cultivating subjects for whom these principles resonate has barely begun.

Stephen Healy takes a similar position, on the grounds that Empire—as Hardt and Negri define it—has not fully coalesced: “Insofar as this new discursive order has not yet solidified it becomes crucial for those of us who want to see a different world to be able to imagine other ways of representing difference” (2001, 103).

⁴ A municipal leader in Oaxaca, Mexico: “I can no longer do what is fair. Every time I try to bring justice to our community, applying our traditional practices to amend wrongdoings, a human rights activist comes to stop me” (Esteva and Prakash 1998, 110). Esteva and Prakash do not object to human rights per se, but to the ways in which they are currently being globalized.

But recognizing particularity (in all the “universals” that have migrated imperially from local to global scale) entails another cognizant move—the recognition of contingency. The universal/global is not only particular/local in its origins but is subject to the movements of history. It has been installed (perhaps by force) and can therefore be removed. “Things could be otherwise” is the positive implication of contingency and the sign of political possibility. What might a politics of the “otherwise” be? How might a “local” politics participate in constructing different universals and new communities?⁵ Here we could examine the contingent economy for unexpected political subjects and opportunities.

Under the mantle of contingency, the economy loses its status as logical essence and foundational instance of globalization (Madra and Amariglio 2000). Stripped of inevitability, it becomes a domain of potentiality and a space for the unfolding of creative engagements. We find an enlarged political field where economic necessity once reigned and a range of options where narrow economic dictates once held sway.

(2) *Respect difference and otherness*, between localities but also within them. This principle affirms that locality need not be a parochial enclave but can be instead a place where we exercise our responsibility to the Other, understood as unassimilable, as absolute alterity:

To maintain an ethical bond with the Other...is to see the self in relation to something ‘it cannot absorb’...the Other must remain a stranger ‘who disturbs the being at home with oneself.’ (Shapiro 1999, 63-65, quoting Levinas)

⁵ Ernesto Laclau contends that the sustained critique of essentialist universals has created the space for the emergence of contingent universals—the latter do not conceal the political moment of their universalization. In Laclau’s formulation, the universal is the politically mediated hegemony of a particularity (2000, 51). In a democratic context, universal values must come to the fore, but they are “not the values of a ‘universal’ group [such as the working class JKGG], as was the case with the universalism of the past but, rather, of a universality that is the very result of particularism” (1994, 5).

Locality is the place where engagement with the stranger is enacted. In the words of Jean-Luc Nancy (1991), it is the place of exposure, of one to another singularity. It is also the crossroads where those who have nothing in common (all of us) meet to construct community (Lingis 1994).

Resonating with the principle of respect is Esteva and Prakash's call for a radical pluralism, in which the discourse of "human rights" is brought down from its pedestal and placed "amidst other significant cultural concepts that define 'the good life' in a pluriverse" (1998, 119). Human rights advocates are not being asked to withdraw from discussions of local justice, but instead to participate dialogically and generously, with "the openness to be hospitable to the otherness of the other" (128).

The discourse of globalization, with its overt or implicit celebration of capitalist dominance, prompts the question of what *respect for difference and otherness* might mean for the economy. What if we were to call for recognition of economic diversity? What if we were to offer full and free acknowledgment to economic subjects and practices that are not, or cannot be, subsumed to capital? What would a language of economic difference be, and what kind of practices would it usher into visibility?⁶

In *The End of Capitalism*, J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996) observes that, although difference has become an important and even central value in many dimensions of social existence, in the economic dimension we are still prisoners of the "same." Capitalism is the name of the economy of sameness, and if noncapitalist forms of economy are seen to exist at all, they are understood as subordinated to or contained by capitalism.

⁶ See Gibson-Graham et al. (2000, 2001) for two edited collections that explore economic difference in the dimension of class.

But another story could be told, concocted from the writings of feminist economic theorists, or from economic anthropology, or from theories and chronicles of the informal economy. This rich narrative of a highly differentiated economy could undermine the capitalocentric imaginary; and it could also function as part of the imaginative infrastructure for cultivating alternative economic subjects and practices (Gibson-Graham et al. 2000, 2001). This brings us to the final principle, which reminds us that as local subjects we need to

(3) *cultivate capacity*. Here I am thinking very generally of the capacity to modify ourselves, to become different, and more specifically of the capacity to enact a new relation to the economy. In the discourse of globalization, the economy is something that does things to us and dictates our contours of possibility. It is not the product of our performance and creativity. Globalization discourse represents localities as economically dependent, not so much actors as acted upon, receiving the effects of economic forces as though they were inevitable. In the face of this representation, the urgent ethical and political project involves radically repositioning the local subject with respect to the economy.

Globalization discourse constructs its subjects as “citizens” of capitalism: they are entrepreneurs, or employees, or would-be employees; they are investors in capitalist firms; they are consumers of (capitalist) commodities. Given the impoverished field of economic possibility, the ethical practice of subject formation requires cultivating our capacities to imagine, desire, and practice noncapitalist ways to be. An ethics of the local would undermine ideas of individual self-sufficiency, fostering the affective acknowledgment of interdependence as a basis for some sort of “communism.” It would produce citizens of the diverse economy.

Cultivating the ethical subject: the politics of research

I want to turn now to thinking about how we as local subjects might cultivate ourselves in accordance with the principles of a local ethics, and to describe as a vehicle for that cultivation process a multi-continental program of research that is attempting to create social and discursive spaces in which ethical practices of self-formation can occur. In introducing that research program, I invoke the term “politics”—because I see these practices of resubjectivation or making ourselves anew as ultimately (if not simply) political (Connolly 1999).⁷

The research projects I will describe are focused on transforming ourselves as local economic *subjects*, who are acted upon and subsumed by the global economy, into subjects with economic *capacities*, who enact and create a diverse economy through daily practices both habitual (and thus unconscious) and consciously intentional. But these practices of self-transformation rely on an initial and somewhat difficult move. If we are to cultivate a new range of *capacities* in the domain of economy, we need first to be able to see noncapitalist activities and subjects (including ones we admire) as visible and viable in the economic terrain. This involves supplanting representations of economic sameness and replication with images of economic difference and diversification.

Feminist economic theorists have bolstered our confidence that such a representation is both possible and productive. Based on a variety of empirical undertakings, they argue that the noncommodity sector (in which unpaid labor produces goods and services for nonmarket circulation) accounts for 30-50 percent of total output in both rich and poor

⁷ This research program has strong affinities with the work of Arturo Escobar (2001) and Arif Dirlik (2000b) on the politics of place.

countries (Ironmonger 1996). According to the familiar definition of capitalism as a type of commodity production, this means that a large portion of social wealth is noncapitalist in origin. And even the commodity sector is not necessarily capitalist—commodities are just goods and services produced for a market. Slaves in the antebellum U.S. south produced cotton and other commodities, and in the contemporary U.S. worker-owned collectives, self-employed people, and slaves in the prison industry all produce goods and services for the market, but not under capitalist relations of production.⁸ Arguably, then, less than half of the total product of the U.S. economy is produced under capitalism. From this perspective, referring to the U.S. or any economy as capitalist is a violent act of naming that erases from view the heterogeneous complexity of the economy.

Working against this process of erasure, our research is trying to produce a discourse of economic difference as a contribution to the ethical and political practice of cultivating a diverse economy. In projects underway in Australia, Asia, the Pacific, and the United States, we are attempting to generate and circulate an alternative language of economy, one in which capitalism is not the master signifier, the dominant or only identity in economic space. This eclectic language, emerging from conversations both academic and popular, provides the conceptual infrastructure for re-presenting economic subjects and multiplying economic identities (Gibson-Graham 2001).

Two of our projects have moved beyond the planning and early implementation phase and are beginning to reveal their specificity as ethical practices and political experiments.⁹ One is based in the Latrobe Valley in southeastern Australia (Cameron and Gibson 2001).

⁸ There is a tendency to conflate all market-oriented (i.e., commodity) production with capitalism. We need to resist that tendency if we are to theorize economic difference in the market sphere, and to acknowledge the many types of economic organization that are compatible with commodity production.

The other is underway in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts, the region that stretches north-south along the Connecticut River in the northeastern U.S. (Community Economies Collective 2001). While the Latrobe Valley is a single industry region (based on mining and power generation) with a recent history of downsizing and privatization, the Pioneer Valley mixes agriculture, higher education, and recognized economic alternatives, supplementing this unusual mixture with a small manufacturing sector that is suffering the lingering effects of deindustrialization. In both of these regions globalization sets the economic agenda—we are all being asked to become better subjects of capitalist development (though the path to such a becoming does not readily present itself) and to subsume ourselves more thoroughly to the global economy.

The two research projects provide a social context for Foucault's second moment of morality—cultivating the ethical subject—which involves working on our local/regional selves to become something other than what the global economy wants us to be. But what actual processes or techniques of self (and other) invention do we have at our disposal? Foucault is not forthcoming here, at the microlevel of actual practices. And when we embarked on these projects we did not imagine how difficult the process of resubjection would be. In both the U.S. and Australia, for example, we have come up against the patent lack of desire for economic difference in the regions where we are working. We have encountered instead the fixation of desires upon capitalism—individuals want employment as wage workers, policymakers want conventional economic development. It was only after months of resistance, setbacks, and surprising successes that we could see the deeply etched contours of existing subjectivities and the complexity of the task of “re-subjecting” we were

⁹ Here it has become necessary to shift to the first person plural since the projects we are discussing are collective efforts involving large numbers of people (see acknowledgments below).

attempting to engage in. Invaluable in helping us to conceptualize and negotiate this complexity was the work of William Connolly. Whereas we had stumbled through the process of cultivating alternative economic subjects, Connolly's work on self-artistry and micropolitics allowed us retrospectively to see steps and stages, techniques and strategies.

Connolly is concerned with the subject as a being that is already shaped and as one that is always (and sometimes deliberately) becoming. In his view active self-transformation—working on oneself in the way that Foucault has described—functions as a micropolitical process that makes macropolitical settlements possible. If we are to succeed in promoting a diverse economy and producing new subjects and practices of economic development, there must be selves who are receptive to such an economy and to transforming themselves within it. How do we nurture the micropolitical receptivity of subjects to new becomings, both of themselves and of their economies?

Micropolitics can be understood as an “assemblage of techniques and disciplines that impinge on the lower registers of sensibility and judgment without necessarily or immediately engaging the conscious intellect” (Connolly 2001, 33). One object of such a politics is what Connolly calls the “visceral” domain where “thought-imbued intensities below the reach of feeling” (1999, 148) dispose the individual in particular ways, with a seldom acknowledged impact on macropolitical interactions. In a discussion of the public sphere, where he argues that the visceral register cannot be excluded from public discourse and the process of coming to public consensus, Connolly (1999, 35-36) puts forward a set of norms for discourse across differences. Instead of attempting to tame or exclude the body, reducing public discourse to rational argument, he advocates developing an appreciation of “*positive possibilities in the visceral register of thinking and discourse*” as a way of

beginning to creatively produce and respond to the emergence of new identities. This appreciation of positive possibilities in the body, he suggests, might be supplemented by an “*ethic of cultivation*” that works against the bodily feelings of panic experienced when naturalized identities are called into question. And rather than expecting people to transcend their differences in order to be or behave like a community, he suggests the possibility of a “*generous ethos of engagement*” between constituencies in which differences are honored and bonds are forged around and upon them. All these attitudes and practices could make possible *ethically sensitive, negotiated settlements* between potentially antagonistic groups and individuals in the construction of communities.

We are drawn to Connolly’s italicized arsenal of stances and strategies because they take into account the stubborn, unspoken bodily resistances that stand in the way of individual becoming and social possibility; and at the same time they acknowledge the visceral register of discourse as a positive resource for social creativity. For us, retrospectively, they offer a “cultivator’s manual” for the ethical practice of cultivating different local economic subjects—subjects of capacity rather than debility, subjects whose range of economic identifications exceeds the capitalist order. Though Connolly did not intend them this way, for us they have become a way of organizing our narrative of local resubjection in the Latrobe and Pioneer Valleys.

Finding positive possibilities in the visceral register: openings to the diverse economy

The Economy haunts and constrains us as social beings—we find our life pathways and visions of social possibility hemmed and hampered by its singular capitalist identity. Intellectually, and in our bodily dispositions, we encounter daily a higher economic power, now burgeoning laterally as the “global economy.” For local subjects, and for all of us as

subjects of economic discourse with its relentless realism and drum-beat repetitiveness, it is not easy to access the possibilities that lie outside dominant narratives and images of Economy.

In beginning to construct the diverse economy as a set of possibilities for economic subjects, in both the Latrobe and Pioneer Valleys we started with the familiar capitalist economy that was seen to hold hostage the economic and social fate of each region. Early on, we held focus groups that attempted to access the local countenance of Economy and begin to shift it from center stage or at the very least to create an opening for such a shift. The first focus groups were held in 1997 with business and community leaders in the Latrobe Valley (Gibson et al., 1999). When we asked them to talk about the social and economic changes that had occurred in the Valley over the last decade, the participants produced relatively uniform and well-rehearsed stories centered upon dynamics in the formal economy, especially the privatization of the State Electricity Commission (SEC) in the face of state debt and the pressures of globalization. Words such as “victimization,” “disappointment,” “pawns,” and “powerless” anchored these narratives in a sea of negativity and the moods of the speakers ranged from energetic anger to depressed resignation.

But when they were later asked to consider the strengths of the region and the capacities of the community to cope with change, an unmatched set of stories emerged, conveyed in that halting manner of speech that accompanies cognitive activity. Participants spoke of artistic ingenuity and enterprise, of contributions made by migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds and intellectually challenged residents, of the potential to revalue unemployed people as a regional asset.¹⁰ The knowledgeable and authoritative

¹⁰ One participant gave the example of Whyalla, South Australia, where many people had been retrenched by the steel industry. Local planners came to see the unemployed as their major regional asset (rather than seeing

“voice” associated with discussions of downsizing and restructuring gave way to a more speculative and tentative tone. Moods began to lighten, and expressions of surprise and curiosity displaced dour agreement.

Though the stories were initially slow in coming, one example sparked another and soon they were tumbling out over and around each other. For us, these stories began to map the contours of a relatively invisible diverse economy. No longer simply abandoned by capital, the region became populated by numerous examples of community-based economic alternatives that held the potential for a very different vision of regional development.

At the end of the session one participant noted the shift that had occurred in his own understanding and sense of possibility—a shift that had resulted from being placed in a different relation to the formal economic “identity” and familiar downbeat narrative of the Valley:

The interesting thing and rather ironic is that a bureaucratic organization like the Council or like the State Government or a welfare organization might organise a panel to sit around and discuss the sorts of things that we have discussed, and...they probably wouldn't have achieved as much as we have achieved today. Because the information that I've gained just from hearing everybody talk...it's been absolutely precious. And it hasn't come about as a consequence of some bureaucracy wanting to solve problems but rather as we are pawns in another exercise [i.e., our research project]. I'm actually going away from here with more than I came with. (Local government official)

Over the course of a two hour conversation, the participants had moved from an emotionally draining but unsurprising narrative of regional destruction at the hands of the SEC, to outbreaks of raw emotion occasioned by retelling this painful story in the sympathetic and energizing presence of witnesses/listeners, to open, even exuberant responses to our questions about counter-stories and alternative activities. What we perceived

them as a drain on the community) since unemployment benefits tended to be spent locally rather than on holiday travel out of state or on trips to the hairdresser in Adelaide.

as a “positive possibility in the visceral register” was the intersubjectively energized disposition to be moved, the willingness not to be attached to a single and centered narrative or set of emotions.¹¹

In a similar focus group in the Pioneer Valley in 1999, planners and business and community leaders were initially asked about the strengths and weaknesses, problems and successes of the regional economy. Again, familiar stories emerged, couched within the anxiety-ridden discourse of development in which every region is found wanting (and thus in need of economic intervention). The prescription was familiar: attracting “good” jobs by recruiting major capitalist employers—via subsidies and other inducements—to locate in the region.

But the discussion took an unsettling turn, as the participants reiterated several times that a requisite of economic development was a suitably educated and acculturated labor force. (That this was something entirely outside the control of these economic development specialists may partially explain why it repeatedly bubbled up out of the ambient sea of low-level anxiety.) Several people lamented the fact that the two-earner family, whether wealthy or impoverished, left no one at home to raise the children. Where was the appropriate labor force to come from if no one was fully engaged in producing it? At one moment the labor leader in the group recounted with muted horror the story of Conyers, Georgia, an affluent suburb of Atlanta where the largest outbreak of syphilis in the US in decades had occurred among junior high school students, some of whom had as many as 50 partners. In Conyers, it

¹¹ Perhaps this willingness was an acknowledgment of what can never be entirely erased from consciousness—“the simple fact of one’s own existence as possibility or potentiality” (Butler 1997, 130, quoting Agamben 1994, 43).

seemed, economic development had betrayed its promise of social wellbeing, and indeed was undermining itself as a process (Healy 2000).

The tone of confidence that prevailed in discussions of “what the regional economy needs” had faded, and the productive anxiety of competent practitioners had given way to a confused and even despairing fearfulness. This was an instant in which we glimpsed the “role that the visceral register of intersubjectivity plays in moral and political life” (Connolly 1999, 27). While the participants, drawing on a longstanding intellectual tradition and buttressed by their social roles, authoritatively asserted the sufficiency of capitalist growth to the goal of producing economic and social development, on the visceral level they experienced untamed fears of society out of control, and a tacit shared recognition of the insufficiency of the capitalist economy (no matter how developed) to the task of sustaining a community—raising its children, reproducing its sociality. Perhaps this was not so much a “positive possibilit(y) in the visceral register of thinking and discourse” as an eruption, through the smooth surface of rational interchange, of vulnerability and the hope of solace. Each of these feelings involved a disposition to openness—in the place of the explicit closures and certainties of development, we encountered an unspoken, prerepresentational acknowledgement that capitalist economic development is a dependent rather than a self-sufficient process, and that social wellbeing has multiple wellsprings and determinants.

The Pioneer Valley discussion highlighted (though not explicitly) the interdependency that exists between formal capitalist economic practices and the workings of a neighborhood and household-based economy (Russo 2000). The Latrobe Valley discussion pointed to the various contributions that people seen as “marginal” to the mainstream economy and alternative community enterprises usually seen as “non-economic” make to the

functioning and wellbeing of a region. And despite the very mainstream notion of economy prevailing in both groups, the expressions of emotional openness to different understandings gave us confidence that the participants would be able to award saliency (at least in the visceral register) to a resignification of their region in economic terms. Their openness gave fuel to our desire to flesh out, through a community inventory, a diverse economy in which capitalist enterprises, formal paid wage labor and market transactions occupy only the visible tip of the economic iceberg. By giving a place in the diverse economy to activities that are often ignored (collective enterprises, household and voluntary labor, transactions involving barter, sharing and gift-giving, etc.), we hoped to refigure the identity and capacities of the regional economy. And by recognizing the particularity of peoples' economic involvements, including their multiple economic identities (in addition to being unemployed with respect to capitalist employment, for example, a person can be employed in household, neighborhood and other noncapitalist activities), we were attempting to reframe the capacities of individuals. All these strategies of re-presentation would draw upon "positive possibilities in the visceral register" and potentially also give rise to affirmative affective and political stances, if the "negative possibilities" that also reside in the viscera could be diffused or transformed along the way.

Exploring an ethic of cultivation: opening to other and alternative subjectivities

Connolly finds in the body and more specifically the brain some of the factors that dispose us negatively (if unconsciously) to new situations and possibilities. He talks about "thought-imbued intensities that do not in themselves take the form of either conscious feelings or representations" (1999, 28) and finds one of their bodily locations in the

amygdala, a small brain at the base of the cortex. Triggered by “signs that resemble a past trauma, panic, or disturbance,” the amygdala transmits fear along the pathways of the brain with considerable energy and intensity. Recognizing the barrier that such a bodily function poses to new becomings, Connolly proposes cultivating or educating the amygdala, resistant though it may be to cognitive manipulation. Since amygdalic panic arises not just out of corporeal predispositions but out of experience (of pain or disturbance), he suggests that counter-experiences issuing from experimental self-artistry and intersubjective arts might play a part in attenuating that panic. They might even create a space for the creativity that the amygdala unleashes (in Connolly’s speculative imagination) through its frictional interaction with the relatively staid and reflective brains, the cortex and hippocampus (29).

When we began our work in the Latrobe Valley with those who had been marginalized by economic restructuring, we often encountered hostility and anger, anchored in a deep sense of powerlessness. Introducing our project of economic resignification seemed to reactivate the trauma of retrenchment (especially for men in their 40s and 50s who have found it impossible to secure alternative employment) and to reinforce the bleak future envisioned by young unemployed people for whom the expectation of jobs in the power industry and related service sectors has been dashed. Eve, one of the community researchers hired by the project, became quite skilled at dealing with the aversive reactions that emerged when the project was introduced, and with people’s initial resistance when they were asked to portray themselves in terms of “assets and capacities” rather than needs and deficiencies:¹²

One particular [older] gentleman in a literacy class was quite obviously very frustrated and pessimistic. He was quite vocal and kept presenting me with

¹² In the Latrobe Valley project, we were involved in adapting Kretzmann and McKnight’s (1993) techniques of asset-based community development to a deindustrialized region, rather than the type of inner city neighborhood for which the techniques were originally devised (see Cameron and Gibson 2001 for a resource kit that documents this process).

stumbling blocks. “Look what they have done. What are they going to do about it? What’s the use? No one is going to be bothered. People will want to be paid.” I tried to address his issues without being confrontational. I tried to be sympathetic and understanding. We talked a bit about the problems in our community. I agreed with what he had to say...It was evident that we had to almost exhaust that line of thinking before moving on.

Eve found that she had to allow anger to be spoken before any movement could take place. This was a painful process, since much of the animosity was directed towards the researchers themselves as individuals associated with powerful institutions like the university, or even worse the municipal government that co-funded the project. As Lenni, another researcher, remarked,

In the end Eve would say, “Don’t present yourself that you come from Monash [University].” She would present herself as a single parent, and I would present myself as an unemployed person, and automatically you would have that rapport with someone, cause you’re on the level that they’re on. It would be until you’d say that the project is sponsored by Monash Uni and the Latrobe Shire—that’s when you’d get the political stuff.

Eve’s strategy was to avoid engaging with the angry energy that arose from the narrative of “our” victimization at the hands of “them.”¹³ She suspected that further exploration would lead back to the evils of the SEC, the conservative state government and ultimately the Economy. And despite the promise of transformative enunciation that is said to arise from denunciation,¹⁴ we all sensed that this exercise in debunking would be unlikely to inspire creative thoughts and desires for alternative economies. Our tactics, then, involved moving away from the narratives that triggered the amygdalic reaction and trapped local

¹³ Antagonism and resentment are the common emotions of modernist politics—the fuel of revolutionary consciousness and action. But the political effectiveness of such emotions is questioned by many today. Wendy Brown, for example, in *States of Injury*, notes that the subject of this kind of affect becomes “deeply invested in its own impotence” and is more likely to “punish and reproach” than “find venues of self-affirming action” (1995, 71).

¹⁴ In, for example, Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed” (1972).

community members in fear and fury, making it nearly impossible to think about things differently.

By speaking from their own experiences as individuals in difficulty, the community researchers were able to establish a rapport with other community members built upon shared identities, and at the same time they were able to shift the discussion away from these limiting identifications. In conversation, they attempted to elicit the multiple identities of each person. Their questions about personal gifts and capacities introduced a new fullness into the agenda. No longer was a subject defined by deficiency or restricted to the subject position of economic victim. To return to Eve's difficult conversation with the older gentleman:

[I found out that] he is very good with his hands and knows a bit about cars. I asked, hypothetically, if there were a group of single parents interested in learning about car maintenance, and if I could arrange a venue and possible tools, would he be interested in sharing his skills and knowledge? "Yeah. I'd do that, no worries," he said. I asked him would he expect to be paid for his time. "No. I wouldn't do it for money," he replied. I asked, "So do you think you'd get anything out of it yourself?" "Yeah. I suppose I'd get some satisfaction out of it 'cause I like to help people like yourself." So I really tried to turn it around and have him answer or resolve his own questions and issues.

Where the man had felt pain and anger associated with past experiences of Economy, under Eve's patient cultivation he has moved toward pleasure and happiness associated with a different economic way to be. Through her questioning his attention has shifted away from a powerful narrative of impotence and victimization into a hopeful scenario that positions him as skillful and giving, and endowed with an economic identity within a community economy. The threat represented by our project, by Eve herself, and by the formal Economy—all recalling the historic trauma of retrenchment that prompts the angry closing off to emotional and social novelty—has been neutralized through Eve's affective tutelage.

And in the place of anger at remembered pain there is a hint of joy in abilities seen in a new light, and a generosity of spirit that surprises with its unfamiliarity. These feelings that attend creative moments of becoming challenge and ultimately displace the more securely narrativized emotions of reproach, defensiveness, blame and resentment associated with established economic identities.

Such a movement might appear to represent a very minor shift in the macropolitical scheme of things. But it is a requisite part of the larger political process of enacting a diverse regional economy, where individuals from very different backgrounds and life circumstances must move beyond fear and hatred to interact in inventive and productive ways. Here the story of Kara, one of the community researchers in the Pioneer Valley project, is exemplary. Kara initially was highly resistant to the project's goal of bringing mainstream and marginalized economic actors into conversation and collaboration, which she viewed as just a way of subsuming the latter (and the project) to the agenda of the powerful. She saw the mainstream people, whom she encountered through a video of our focus groups, as emissaries of the State, Capitalism, and Power, from which unholy trinity she was hoping, and indeed planning, to entirely remove herself. Throughout the weekend training for community researchers she nursed and vociferously communicated her antipathy. But at the last moment, during the evaluation of the training, she had a moment of self-evaluation and opened to the possibility of productive engagement with those she saw as (threateningly) different from her: "I don't want to be so us-them," she said, "or to live in a world that is set up that way, emotionally and politically." Suddenly the mainstream types were rehumanized, and the possibility of working with them became a micropolitical opportunity. It was as though in that very moment Kara was working on herself "to attenuate the amygdalic panic

that often arises when you encounter...identities” (Connolly 1999, 36) that call the naturalness or sufficiency of one’s own identity into question. By engaging in a “selective desanctification of elements in [her] identity” (146)—in this case, a highly charged oppositional stance with respect to power understood as domination—Kara was able to open herself generously: to the humanity of others, to the possibility of being other than she was, to participating with those most different from herself (in her own antagonistic worldview) in constructing a diverse economy.¹⁵

Fostering an ethos of engagement: multiple opportunities

As a way of building upon the inventory of skills, capacities and dreams that emerged from the initial conversations in the Latrobe Valley, we organized a range of events that drew people together in an action situation where crazy ideas and schemes could be freely thrown around without the pressure of a formal meeting regime and the expectation of concrete outcomes. Food-based events at which people made pizza or baked scones were particularly successful in getting people to meet, overcome the stultifications of shyness, begin to listen to one another, and build and transmit excitement. The focus upon food production as an end in itself produced its own outcomes—a meal that was consumed by its producers and unwitting involvement in the practice of collectivity. Without any expectation that a group with a common goal should form, these events provided a space for a range of people from many different backgrounds to experience what Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) might call “being-in-

¹⁵ Our examples here appear to confirm Foucault’s observation that contemporary ethical practices of self-formation are addressed primarily to feelings. Feelings are the “substance” of modern ethics; they are what we endeavor to form and transform. For the Greeks, by contrast, acts linked to pleasure were the substance of ethics; for the Christians the substance was desire (Foucault 1997, 263-69).

common.” Or what Alphonso Lingis (1994) describes as the “community of those who have nothing in common” except that they die (and eat).

One of the community researchers, Lenni, described a moment of understanding prompted by these gatherings:

I guess the crunch came when Eve was doing her food events and things like that. And just the mingling and talking to people, to me that was like the breakthrough of...this is what it's about, it's working with other people and listening to other people and getting that opportunity to listen to their dreams and things like that.

She went on to reflect upon how she had changed over the course of the project:

If I give myself the time, I can listen to anyone. I had only ever dealt with people over the counter [before involvement in the project]—with commercial transactions. I'm not as critical as I was. Working with people from various backgrounds and abilities—I'm more tolerant. I've learnt to see the good in people. I had always been taught to be cautious and careful of people. My dad always used to say, “the only friend you've got is yourself.” But the project is a place where you can relax and take people as they come. It offers the security to trust people.

Lenni is speaking here about the time afforded by the project for the transformative practice of listening. Without rushing, by affording space and time, a generous spirit was coaxed out of researchers and community members alike.

In addition to food-based and cooking events, field trips to alternative enterprises allowed people to spend time together, fostering mutual respect and engagement (Cameron 2000a). Two interested groups went on bus trips from the Valley into inner city Melbourne to visit CERES, the community garden at Brunswick. While the garden itself made a strong impression upon the Valley visitors, it was almost as if the experience of the bus trip—of being cooped up together in a moving steel canister for hours at a time—produced an atmosphere of enchantment that became the life force of the garden project.¹⁶ Said Jean:

¹⁶ For an exploration of enchantment that has enchanted and inspired us, see Bennett (2001).

I sat up the back of the bus, knitting very quietly, trying to mind my own business, but Mario kept yacking in my ear all day. [Laughter]...They're just a mixed group that if they're trying to do so much work, trying to do something, you've got to find where you fit, what they're trying to do, if it's such a good cause. To me it's like a giant big social club.

For Jean the bus trip and the CERES visit allowed her to see herself a part of the community garden project in the Latrobe Valley, although gardening is not her thing:

Forget the gardening!...I'm taking a concrete square [where trailers used to be parked]. They all look at me as if I'm mad. "What am I going to do with a concrete square?"...I would like to bring my fairy garden¹⁷ from out of my back yard that I won't open to the public, and give it to the public, or leave it behind when I go.

There is a feeling of hopeful surprise among people involved in the management committee and wider membership (retrenched workers, retirees, housewives, people of non-English speaking backgrounds and unemployed youth) of the now incorporated not-for-profit Latrobe Valley Community and Environmental Garden (LTVCEG). They are surprised to find themselves in an organization, and astonished that they have begun an enterprise with each other. A space has opened up for relations with others who are largely "other" to them—people with whom they have nothing in common—and a community economy is in the process of creation (Cameron 2000a). Listening to Jean again:

It wouldn't matter if you were ten in here, or a hundred and ten, everybody's equal. They're sharing their morning teas, their coffee, have a laugh, have fun, get ideas, the youngies can come up with things too, you all learn from each other, you're coping with all types of people, from your hot-tempered stand over bully, to your type that if you say something to them they scream straight back at you. You've got to learn to deal with every type. It's good learning, it's...I don't know, there's just something right about this whole thing.

Framing this process in Connolly's terms, we can see the project as fostering what he calls a "generous ethos of engagement between a plurality of constituencies inhabiting the

¹⁷ Jean's fairy garden is inhabited by garden sculptures (gnomes, flamingos, etc.) set up in scenes and distributed about the lawn.

same territory” (1999, 36) and, we should add, not in the habit of speaking to one another. Rather than asking people to mute their differences or rise above them, or to leave substantial parts of themselves at home when entering the public arena, the generous ethos is accepting of a range of beings and behaviors, including the socially unacceptable. And the ethical practice of cultivation involves giving people multiple opportunities to encounter each other in pleasurable ways—creating spaces of engagement, offering activities and events that promote receptivity. As Jaime, a community gardener in the Pioneer Valley, would say, the garden is the community.¹⁸

An ethos of engagement is an aspect of a politics of becoming, where subjects are made anew through engaging with others. This transformative process involves cultivating generosity in the place of hostility and suspicion. But such affective predispositions are not displaced easily, which means that the process involves waiting as well as cultivating. One of the Pioneer Valley researchers reflected on the patience that must accompany actively fostering a different economy, and she came back to the relation of language and affect that we began with earlier. Not only does one need a language of the diverse economy but one also needs trust among the potential subjects who may inhabit that economy and take on the task of building it together. And trust can only be engendered through multiple opportunities for engagement (the terms she uses are “conversations” and “relationships”):

I think it comes back to the point that Sr. Annette [of the Pioneer Valley Project, a coalition of labor and churches] made, which is the knitting together is not just a language. It’s creating contexts for that language to circulate...and so it’s relationships and being patient enough to have conversations and talk to people...and even if only five people come out, you value their time and make something out of it...and that’s where the knitting

¹⁸ Jaime reflects eloquently on his practices of cultivation: “It is necessary to strengthen new leaders, for them to do what I’m doing, so they continue forward, making a call to this community, so that...this, instead of being a community garden, that the whole city be a garden, and that the flowers be the people” (Community Economies Collective 2001, 26).

happens. Y'know, how difficult it is to create a context of trust where things can actually be built...and you've just got to be patient...and it's just a lot of talk...and the people that are doers, that are too impatient, you just hold a place at the table for them.

Back to the beginning: principles as practices¹⁹

Cultivating local capacity, respecting difference and otherness, recognizing particularity and contingency. These three principles are tangled together now, after all we have been through, and difficult to distinguish. We have affirmed them in relation to the discourse of globalization, with its emphatic insistence that the world we share is a (capitalist market) economy. This unrelenting emphasis presses upon us, and the counterpressure we are impelled to exert traces the principled contours of a local ethics: working to undermine universals in the guise of economic commonalities; refusing unity brought about by economic inevitability; refiguring victim-ized subjects whose economic futures are bound into and bounded by capitalist development.

Starting with a practice of *respecting difference and otherness*, our two projects storied and inventoried the diversity of the local noncapitalist economy. Coming to a new language and vision of economy turned out to be an affirmation not only of difference but of economic capacity. The people engaged in our research conversations had a chance to encounter themselves differently—not as waiting for capitalism to give them their places in the economy but as actively constructing their economic lives, on a daily basis, in a range of noncapitalist practices and institutions. In this way they glimpsed themselves as subjects

¹⁹ Those readers who are following our intersecting lists of principles and practices will notice that we have omitted the final element in Connolly's list: "*ethically sensitive, negotiated settlements* between chastened partisans who proceed from contending and overlapping presumptions while *jointly* coming to appreciate the unlikelihood of reaching rational agreement on several basic issues" (1999, 35). This is not because such

rather than objects of economic development, and development became transformed as a goal by giving it a different starting place, in an already viable diverse economy.

But there was more to the ethics of difference and otherness than enlivening economic diversity. Converting this principle into a practice of the self has involved us in nurturing local capacities for community. We are not speaking here of the community of commonality that “presumes subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves” (Young 1990, 302). Rather than convening people on the basis of presumed or constructed similarities, our projects seemed to foster communities of “compearance”²⁰ in which being together, or being-in-common, was both the ground and fullness of community. The awakening of a communal subjectivity did not emerge from common histories or qualities but from practices and feelings—of appreciation, generosity, desire to *do* and *be* with others, connecting with strangers (no matter who), encountering and transforming oneself through that experience:

To be completely sincere...the greatest pride that I have working as a community leader is my being able to share and develop myself *within* the community. To meet the person I don't know. And for the people who never met me, didn't have the chance to meet me, that they meet me. (Jaime, Pioneer Valley)²¹

Linda Singer suggests that we understand community “as the call of something other than presence” (1991, 125), the call to becoming, one might say. And the capacity for becoming is the talent we have perhaps been most actively fostering—through individuals

settlements are excluded from the purview of our projects but because the projects are not far enough along for such settlements to have taken place.

²⁰ This is Jean-Luc Nancy’s word for a mode of being together that recognizes “no common being, no substance, no essence, no common identity” (1991, 1). It suggests that we are already *in* community, if we can only orient ourselves, affectively and cognitively, to the recognition and enjoyment of that experience.

²¹ As we consider the nascent communities in the two valleys, we are drawn to Linda Singer’s essay on “a community at loose ends” and her suggestion that “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..., disseminates, desires the proliferation of discourse. (1991,125)

opening to one another, and to the inescapable fact of their “own existence as possibility or potentiality” (Agamben 1993, 43). Indeed, this is how we might summarize our practices of *cultivating local capacity*. Almost every meeting and engagement associated with the project stimulated desires for alternative ways to be, and each of these desires operated as a contagion or revealed itself as a multiplicity.

What emerged, for example, from the awakening of a communal subjectivity was a faint but discernible yearning for a communal (noncapitalist) economy. This was not an easy yearning to stimulate or cultivate. The ability to desire what we do not know, to desire a different relation to economy, requires the willingness to endanger what now exists and what we know ourselves to be.²² Because they require a death of sorts, an offering up of the self to the unfamiliar, desires for existence outside the capitalist “order” are difficult to engender. When restructuring devastates a regional economy, unemployed workers may have little interest in economic alternatives. Instead they desire to be employed, to continue their social existence as workers. (As do we.) In the face of this fixation upon capitalism, we came to see that one of our tasks as researchers was to help set desire in motion again (not unlike the task of the Lacanian psychoanalyst). If we could release into fluidity desire that was stuck, perhaps some of it would manifest in perverse (noncapitalist) dreams and fantasies.

From the outset we saw our projects as “bringing desire into language,” in part by constituting a new language of economy. But as we came late to understand, with the help of Foucault and Connolly, the subject is not constituted through language alone. It is formed

²² Judith Butler asks what such a dangerous undertaking might involve:

What would it mean for the subject to desire something other than its continued “social existence”? If such an existence cannot be undone without falling into some kind of death, can existence nevertheless be risked, death courted or pursued, in order to expose and open to transformation the hold of social power on the conditions of life’s persistence? (Butler 1997, 28-9)

through real practices that act upon the body (Foucault 1997, 277) or through “tactics or disciplines not entirely reducible” to the play of symbols (Connolly 1999, 193). These disciplines “fix dispositional patterns of desire” (Connolly 1995, 57) that become part of what we experience as subjection—to capitalism or commun(al)ism, or whatever the alternatives might be.

Perhaps it was our growing sense that language is not enough that inclined us toward bodily practices and sensations and away from the delights of wordiness. In any case we’ve tried to make our conversations and gatherings entirely pleasurable (food has been one of their main ingredients) and also loose and light—not goal-oriented or tied to definitions and prescriptions of what “a left alternative” should be. Over the course of the projects, without prompting, the community researchers and their interviewees began to express practical curiosity (as opposed to moral certainty) about alternatives to capitalism. The Pioneer Valley researchers took a week long trip to Cape Breton to attend a conference on worker cooperatives and spent three days listening to stories of workers who appropriated the surplus they produced and distributed it to sustain a community economy. Amid the hilarity in the dormitory and the van, during the sunlit walks, in restaurants and cafes, on the 11 hour ferry ride, we explored and debated (desultorily) the virtues of worker cooperatives. Fears were spoken and then let go. By the end of the trip, we had produced several fantasies of communal enterprises and the social life they might enable, as a way of performing and acknowledging our temporary, satisfying collectivity. How are we to understand this unexpectedly pleasurable trip but as an experience of ethical self-formation, of working on the self, as Foucault would say (though without being aware of working)? Through the conversations in the van, the discourse of economic interdependence and community we had

ingested for three days became transmuted into bodily desires and flows of energy directed toward a communal economy.

This brings us to the ethical practice of *recognizing particularity and contingency*. Our projects were attempts to build on the distinctiveness of a local economy rather than replacing a unique constellation of activities with a generic model of development. The infusion of particularity into development discourse was deeply destabilizing to economic certainty. It became possible to think the economy as a contingent space of recognition and negotiation rather than an asocial body in lawful motion. But beyond thinking differently about the economy, what is the ethical practice of economic contingency? Ernesto Laclau helps us here, describing the political space opened up by current antinecessitarian thinking:

...increasing the freeing of human beings through a more assertive image of their capacities, increasing social responsibility through the consciousness of the historicity of Being—is the most important possibility, a radically political possibility, that contemporary thought is opening up to us. (Laclau 1991, 97-8)

If the economy is a domain of historicity and contingency, other economies can be produced, and producing them is a project of politics. This suggests that we could move beyond capitalism and the economic politics of opposition “within” it. The ethics of contingency, Laclau implies, involves the cultivation of ourselves as subjects of freedom—self-believers in our economic capacities, responsible to our political abilities, conscious (we would add) of our potential to become something other than what we have heretofore chosen to be.

If recognizing contingency offers an enlarged domain of choice and responsibility, then the ethical practice of contingency is the cultivation of ourselves as choosers, especially in areas where choice has been understood as precluded to us. Implicated as we are in our identifications (because they are to some degree optional), we choose to be subjects of a

capitalist economy, or we choose to work on ourselves—ethically, micropolitically, viscerally, intellectually—to forge some other way to be (Madra 2001).

Unavoidably we have had to think about the politics and ethics of our academic “locality.” And here choice looms as a daily challenge: choice of the theorist, not to try to “get it right” but to pursue inventiveness;²³ not to think critically in a debunking mode (describing what something is and should not be) but instead ebulliently (Massumi 2001).

Finally, there is the process of writing. In Foucault’s lexicon, writing is an ethical practice, a way that the self relates to itself. It is an intellectual discipline that allows us to consider “the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think... seeking to give new impetus, as far and as wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom” (1997, xxxv). For us writing is a practice of forming the hopeful subject—a left subject on the horizon of social possibility.

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²³ See Gibson-Graham (1996, Ch. 9) and Cameron (2000b) for a similar and more extended argument.

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