Community Economies Collective*

Imagining and Enacting Noncapitalist Futures

> Feminists...want to leave their husbands, abandon their children, become lesbians, practice witchcraft, and overthrow capitalism.
>
> — *Pat Buchanan*[1]

Inspiring, isn't it? Imagine if rather than having to "overthrow" capitalism (now a virtually unimaginable project) leftists could pursue the other revolutionary options available to Buchanan's feminists — what if we could *leave* capitalism, *abandon* capitalism, *become* socialists, *practice* socialism? What follows is the unfinished story of such an imagining. It's the story of a search — for a new way of thinking socialism and a new way of performing it. It's also the story of a group of

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people who began a research project together and became a desiring collectivity.

We started out, embarrassingly, with no real desire for "socialism." Yet maybe that's not so surprising. Over the last hundred years, the word has been drained of utopian content and no longer serves, as it once did, to convene and catalyze the left. This makes it difficult even to speak of "the left" or to use the pronoun "we" with any confidence or commitment. As self-identified leftists at the end of the twentieth century, we found ourselves tongue-tied, not knowing who or what we might speak for.

But what if the current dispersed and disidentified state of the left could be seen as an opportune reversal, and the absence of a mobilizing vision could be read as a new kind of presence? If formerly there was certainty (if not unanimity) among leftists about the lineaments of a desirable society, now there is silence, tentativeness, and openness to possibility. The project of creating alternatives has become a voyage to unknown destinations, accompanied by unfamiliar or unexpected companions.

In this vacant/pregnant environment our group came to life in 1997 — a collection of students, postdocs, and faculty members who hoped to become desiring economic subjects of a "socialist" sort (even if that initially meant little to us). Without a destination we set forth, tired of waiting for a revolution we didn't want and tired of waiting generally. From the perspective of a more literate moment (after many courses and reading groups), it seems clear to us now that we were embarking on what William Connolly has called a "politics of becoming"[2] — a process through which we would not only begin to envision other worlds, but also cultivate ourselves and others as possible inhabitants.

Legacy

> It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the Earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations.[3]

Seeking a politics of desire and invention, we found the prevailing (left) economic imagination to be a colonized territory, offering us very little in the way of models or alternatives. Think about "socialism," for example, which bears the unbearable burden of providing a complete and total alternative to capitalism, itself envisioned as total and complete. If

capitalism is characterized by private ownership and market relations, socialism must entail state ownership and non-market allocation. Yet socialism cannot simply present itself as capitalism's opposite. It must also be its equivalent — expansive yet sustainable, efficient but not exploitative, it must have capitalism's strengths without its weaknesses.

To its great disadvantage, socialism has been largely defined by capitalism, as its opposing counterpart and suitable replacement. And the project of building socialism has been similarly constrained. To the extent that capitalism is understood as a systemic form of economy, the enactment of socialism is a task of systemic transformation. Before socialism can be constructed, a capitalist totality must "break down" or be "overthrown."

We wanted to step outside the confines of economic monism, where capitalism is everywhere and its opposite (a now discredited socialism) is the only alternative.[4] This would require reading the economic landscape through a lens of difference rather than sameness, enabling ourselves to see capitalist and noncapitalist (even socialist) activities coexisting there. If we could locate noncapitalist activities here and now, if we could see them as prevalent and sustaining, perhaps we could find more possibilities of participating in their creation. Perhaps too the imagined scale and temporality of socialist politics could undergo a shift, becoming more partial and proximate.

Rereading the Economy

In *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)* J.K. Gibson-Graham argues that representations of capitalism constrain our political imaginations and economic possibilities.[5] If we understand capitalism as *necessarily* expansive and *naturally* dominant, we eliminate the imaginative space for alternatives and the rationale for their enactment. It seems that we need to conceptualize the economy differently in order to enact a different economy. More specifically, we need to de-naturalize capitalist dominance and to represent *noncapitalist* forms of economy (including ones we might value and desire) as existing and emerging, and as possible to create.

Rereading the economy does not mean simply investigating the interstices and bringing minority practices to light; it involves opening up the entire economic space to resignification.[6] Fortunately there are many others to guide us in such a radical undertaking. Most recently, feminist

theorists have produced a powerful critique of conventional economic representation and an accompanying re-visioning of "the economy." On the basis of accountings of unpaid labor performed in households and neighborhoods (including childcare and housework), feminists argue that as much as 50 percent of all economic activity in both rich and poor countries is excluded from labor force statistics and national income and product accounts.[7] Calling upon a time-honored definition of economic activity, their intervention helps us to see the discursivity and contingency (not to mention interestedness) of concepts of economy. It reminds us that to call a society or economy "capitalist" is an act of categorical violence, one that obliterates from view the economic activity that engages more people for more hours of the day over more years of their lives than any other.

Figure 1 conveys the point visually:[8]

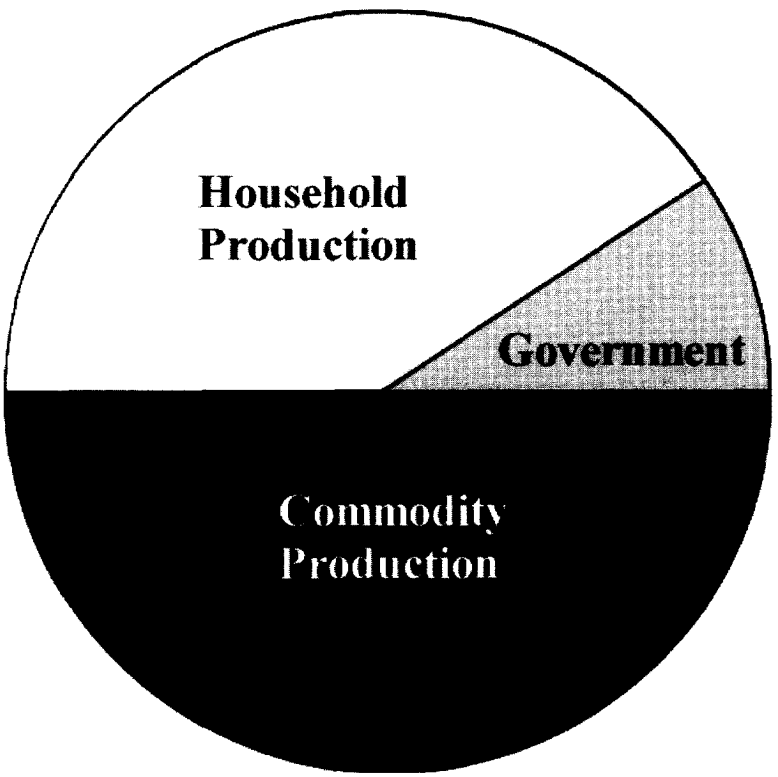


Figure 1: The U.S. economy, hours worked, 1990.

To the extent that we think of capitalism as coextensive with commodity production, capitalism occupies no more than half the economic space.[9] But, as Bowles and Edwards point out, not all commodity production can be considered capitalist (that is, if we understand capitalism as involving commodity production by free wage labor under exploitative conditions in which the surplus is appropriated by nonproducers).[10] Commodities are just goods and services produced for a market — they can be produced under a variety of different production relations. Slaves (unfree and unpaid) produced cotton for a market in the antebellum U.S. South. Worker collectives (who appropriate their own surplus), self-employed people (also self-appropriating and thus not exploited), and slaves (without freedom of contract) in the prison industry today produce goods and services for a market, but not under capitalist relations of production. In this reading, perhaps 40 percent of the total product of the U.S. economy is produced under capitalism. That allows a lot of room for other kinds of things in the social space of economy.

The project of rereading the economy depends on the familiar (to Marxists at least) proposition that knowledge is neither neutral nor singular; instead multiple, politically inflected knowledges coexist in unstable relations of dominance and subordination.[11] Rereading the economy entails excavating *subjugated* knowledges, both academic and popular, and drawing upon them as resources — to bring what is unsayable into language and what is hidden into visibility.

Rereading is necessary to empower novel social and political possibilities but it will never be sufficient, as those who are impatient with language activism frequently remind us. Moreover, it exposes us to the dangers of intellectual arrogance and social isolation. Nevertheless we pursue it because we feel deeply that representation is powerful and that visibility as a project has transformative force (this is something the queer contingent in our group will not allow us to forget or underestimate). Part of fostering a different economy involves cultivating *a language of economic difference*, within which alternative economic projects can be conceived, and through which alternative economic subjects can be validated and come to self-recognition.

Conversational Beginnings

Wary of producing a private language (which seemed a project of childhood or even of madness), we felt from the outset the need to enter into conversations with people who were willing to talk to us or to entertain the idea of a different economy. In these interactions we hoped to *speak* and *hear* richer, more vibrant economic dialects, to explore and develop our rudimentary language of economic difference, to construct alternative economic representations, and ultimately perhaps to build a (linguistic) community around new economic projects and possibilities.

We began our conversations in the region where most of us live — the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts (though we could have pursued them almost anywhere). The Pioneer Valley is made up of three counties along the Connecticut River (see Figure 2) and two sub-regions marked by different discourses of economy: "the Happy Valley" to the north (comprising Franklin and Hampshire counties), which is usually represented as a thriving semi-rural area centered on higher education institutions, the arts, and a large alternative sector; and the cities of Springfield and Holyoke in Hampden county to the south, which are portrayed as deindustrialized and depressed, though enlivened by a culturally diverse small business sector and a large informal economy.

Our conversational engagement started with informal personal interactions, often one-on-one, with people in the alternative sector whom we have known and worked with, and expanded to include formal interviews with key economic actors in the region as well as larger focus group discussions and community conferences. It also involved recruiting community members — especially from groups that are usually seen as marginal to the economy or as non-productive — to join us as co-researchers, investigating and bringing to light noncapitalist or nontraditional activities already existing in their communities. With funding obtained from a grant,[12] we were able to hire a local artisan, six high school students, a number of intermittently or self-employed individuals, two retired people, a high school dropout, a maintenance worker, two social service providers, including one who works with drug users and one who assists recent immigrants, and people involved in volunteering. The community researchers were young and old, pale and colorful, gay and straight, Latino and Anglo, male and female, speakers of EFL and ESL,

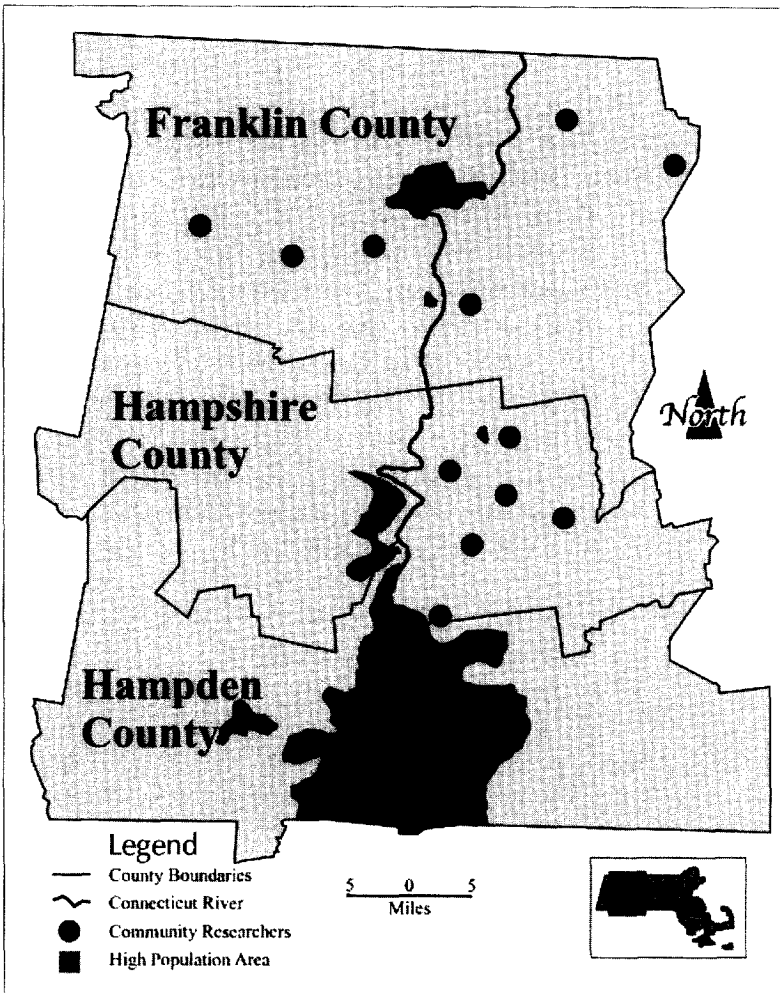


Figure 2: Community researchers in the Pioneer Valley.

well educated and less so, drawn from all over the Pioneer Valley (see Figure 2).

We invited them to interview their friends and acquaintances — to find out what they did in a week or a day — as part of the process of unearthing hidden and alternative economic activities.[13] As you might imagine, the stories that came back were unexpected, distressing, beautiful, strange, inspiring, and ordinary.

In addition to innumerable small or informal conversations, we have so far engaged in two large-scale, relatively formal conversations in the

Valley: one with mainstream practitioners of economic development (Number 1 below); and the other with our community researchers about their interviews and interviewees (Number 2). We have also involved ourselves in an ongoing conversation (Number 3) with academic colleagues and students interested in a new Marxian politics of class; and we've engaged in a traveling conversation (Number 4) with local activists exploring the world of cooperative enterprises. In what follows we try to convey the ways in which these conversations yield different understandings of economy, a nascent community (and maybe more than one), and emergent economic subjects and desires. The final conversation (Number 5) taps into our ongoing dialogue with other leftists, as we attempt to communicate the changing story of our journey and to understand their responses, with both sides lacking clarity, prone to misrecognition, fearing failure, emotionally disposed (or indisposed) toward political adventure, ambivalent about untrodden paths and unspecified destinations.

CONVERSATION NUMBER 1:
Opening up the space of economy

Our first formal conversation was with economic development practitioners, those people who speak the received "truth" of the economy in the Pioneer Valley. We chose this starting point for several reasons: to familiarize ourselves further with the disciplinary rigidities governing the practice of economic development (the most visible form of economic activism in the region); to enter an ongoing local conversation about the economy; and to begin the search for openings and fissures in the imposing edifice of "development," both as theory and as social practice. In retrospect, it seems we were looking for two sorts of openings — the discursive "nonclosures" signaled by contradictory ways of thinking and speaking, and the opening of persons to one another that is conversation.

In the fall of 1999 we hosted two focus groups in the video studio at the University of Massachusetts. The participants included government officials, labor and community leaders, business executives, and planning professionals, all of whom were involved in the local economic development conversation. At the beginning of the focus group, each participant responded to two questions that elicited their well-considered and well-rehearsed conceptions of the region's economy:

- What is the economic identity of the Pioneer Valley? What are its strengths and opportunities, weaknesses or challenges?
- How do you see your or your organization's activities relative to that identity? Are you trying to contribute to a regional strength, address a regional weakness, or create a new regional economic identity?

In addition to these two questions, participants were asked to consider a statement from a recent study on the arts sector in the Pioneer Valley that describes its importance to the regional economy and the difficulties associated with quantifying the impact of this largely informal economic activity. This prompted a more general discussion of the role of informal, invisible, illegal, and "alternative" economic activity in the Valley. On this relatively unfamiliar terrain, participants' comments were more halting and less well formulated.

This "genealogical" phase of our project was designed to help us gain an understanding of how the dominant discourse of economy circulates as truth in the economic development community. But while we were inspired by Foucault's focus on the connection between knowledge and the exercise of institutional power,[14] we found him silent on the question of how to interact productively with a dominant discourse in producing a counter-discourse. If the focus groups could enable us to see how the truth of economy is manifest in local economic development practice, how could they be useful in the larger political project of learning to speak a different language of economy and inviting others to join us?

With this question we brought ourselves to the door of the psyche. And there Gabriela, a Lacanian analyst in her native Bolivia, became our guide and interpreter. Like Foucault, Lacan insists that discourse speaks the subject, but the subject of discourse is never closed or completed in the process. Anxieties and desires disturb the symbolic order even as that order works to constitute subjectivity. In the same moment that economic development discourse produces subjects, institutions, and disciplined practices, it mobilizes currents of affect that undermine its coherency and reveal the potential for different subjects and divergent actions to emerge.

From our conversation with the focus groups, we could see how what is conceivable determines (or at least delimits) what is practicable.

But we saw considerably more than that. For in economic as in other discourses, truth is connected to hope and desire, and also to fear and anxiety. All of our focus group participants saw the ultimate goal of economic development as social well-being. Their mandate is the creation and preservation of a good quality of life for those who dwell in the Pioneer Valley. Their practice, however, is circumscribed by the perceived truth of the economy that reduces development planning to a single imperative: attracting and retaining large capitalist firms engaged in export-oriented production. This is seen to be the only way to provide people in the region with the well-paying jobs that can secure a high standard of living. If the presence of large capitalist firms is the sign of success, sacrifices made to attract and retain these firms — including longer hours of work, labor concessions, and large municipal expenditures — become a perverse requirement of development. Impossibly yet predictably, quality of life must be sacrificed, in some measure at least, to obtain quality of life.

The fear that successful economic development brings with it the possibility (or even likelihood) of social failure began to surface in a discussion of education and childrearing at the end of one of the focus groups:

> I think one of the dilemmas is, looking at the interface between family structure and the structure of the economy, that increasingly in order to make it according to the standard of living we have adopted in this country, the significant adults in the family have to be working....You know, women are working now in order for the economy to work with the low unemployment and children are not attended to and we are not committing to after-school programs.... (Community Reinvestment Act officer from Fleet Bank)

Lamenting the general lack of social commitment to children, panelists affirmed the central importance of childrearing and education to economic development, which in their view could not go forward in the absence of educated workers and entrepreneurs. Yet not only was this central factor outside the purview of economic development practice (not to mention totally outside the control of the practitioners), it was actually threatened by successful development. As one participant pointed out, full employment makes caring for children next to impossible, even in wealthy communities. He spoke with horror of a story recently aired on PBS about Conyers, Georgia, an affluent Atlanta suburb

that had experienced an epidemic of syphilis among the town's teenagers. The epidemiologist tracking the disease found thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds with as many as fifty partners — this in a new town full of ostentatious trophy homes. Most of the kids in the story come from households where both parents work long hours.[15] There was definitely economic development, but was there social well-being in Conyers, Georgia?

While mainstream economic discourse maintains that "the economy...works on its own" (in the words of one focus group participant), the panelists' fears tell another story: *the economy is a set of social practices constituted by other social sites and activities, including schools, family, and community life.* Rather than being an autonomous cause of social well-being, successful development is an "effect" of other social processes, and those are outside the control of economic development practitioners. No wonder they are prone to fears and anxieties.

For us what happened in the focus group went further than a tacit emotional recognition of capitalism's contingency — its dependence on what has been called "reproduction" or "social capital" or "the social economy." From the perspective of the project of rethinking the economy, the conversation acknowledged that nonmonetized household *economic* activity, including the rearing of children, is essential to the functioning of the money economy. It was thus an opening through which a hidden (noncapitalist) economy was revealed, and recognized as consequential for capitalist development. It provided an affirmative, if unspoken, answer to the participants' principal question: "Okay, granted there is a lot of noncapitalist economic activity going on, but does any of it make any difference? Does it contribute in any significant way to economic development and social well-being?"

From the focus group conversation, we grasped (or regrasped) the power of rethinking the economy. And that gave AnnaMarie's project, which had up to now been relatively peripheral to our discussions, a new centrality in our economic imaginings.

* * *

AnnaMarie is a graduate student in regional planning at UMass and a member of our research group. In part because of her experiences during her child-rearing years, AnnaMarie is passionately and actively committed to affordable housing for women. Her master's thesis research is

focused on the deindustrialized part of the Valley that is seen to be most in need of conventional economic development, and specifically on South Holyoke, which is home to a large population of low-income women. At the time of her research, she was also working in the Holyoke planning office, where she was privy to Holyoke's plans for economic development and to the conversations of planners. Anna-Marie speaks about her project:

> I am interested in imagining alternative approaches to economic development in South Holyoke and in inner-city neighborhoods generally. Such neighborhoods usually have a high percentage of low-income, female-headed, single-parent households. Mainstream representations situate these households within a racialized discourse of cultural pathology. Planners portray them as economically deficient, or even as economically depleting if the women are receiving government assistance.
>
> In the minds of professional planners, what inner cities need are tax breaks and other financial incentives for businesses to relocate or expand in the area. The idea is to create more jobs, and to build an economy where none currently functions, or where there is an illegal economy based on drugs, sex, and criminal activity.
>
> To a feminist and a planner with a commitment to affordable housing, the mainstream economic development project seems dangerous. What often happens with economic development is gentrification and displacement of low-income residents from housing that is affordable. I wonder what will happen to the neighborhood economy that sustains this low-income community. But I am the only one in the planning office who sees this economy, where women and men are taking care of their homes, raising their kids, and helping each other get by. The kind of help they provide might include caring for a neighbor's children, cooking for a neighbor who is ill, allowing a neighbor use of the phone, driving a neighbor to a doctor's appointment, and so forth. All these activities and many more make up what I have come to think of as the "household-based neighborhood economy." This is not the economy that gets valued, supported, or "developed" by prevailing economic development practices.
>
> The underlying mainstream assumption about low-income communities is that they are somehow outside "the economy," or are lacking an economy, and so an economy needs to be developed there. In our Rethinking Economy project, we assume that there is already an economy in low-income communities. In fact, we assume multiple and diverse

forms of economic activity taking place — both legal and illegal, for pay and not for pay, capitalist and noncapitalist, involving barter, gift, theft, and market transactions. Furthermore, we assume that the households in these communities constitute important sites of (largely unpaid) economic activity. Where the mainstream sees absence or emptiness, we see presence and fullness.

In the focus group I conducted with neighborhood women, I did not encounter empty, deficient, or depleted subjects. The women were intellectually lively and full of playfulness. By most mainstream standards, these women would be considered poor. But as they talked about their lives they said they "didn't feel that poor."

The focus group provided rich insights about household work, and suggests that the conversation about the place of households in the economy needs to be enlivened. Economic development is supposed to increase people's well-being by providing them with paid jobs. But paid work alone does not lead to well-being. Work in households and neighborhoods is an indispensable ingredient in social well-being, yet so ordinary as to be invisible.

AnnaMarie's project involves rereading the economic landscape to reveal a hidden productive sector. From the perspective of this rereading, "economic development" (in which industrial growth is privileged over housing and community) often involves replacing one productive sector with another, or strengthening one while weakening the other. AnnaMarie wants to rethink development and rework its practice on the basis of a redefinition of "economy." She poses a straightforward question: if the household-based neighborhood economy produces goods and services that directly contribute to social well-being, shouldn't the people involved in household economic activity, networks of mutual care, and volunteer labor be involved in conversations about development?

I imagine a conversation among members of a community that elicits their skills and capacities, assets that might be useful in achieving goals they agree upon. Perhaps they will want to develop more effective systems of neighborhood care and support, building on what already exists — aftercare for school children, care for elders, food production by those who stay home for those who must go out to work. Perhaps they will want to create urban community gardens or rehabilitate rundown buildings as affordable housing, as many communities have done. If

there is money for economic development, it might go toward enhancing the neighborhood support systems that already sustain the community (rather than to businesses to create jobs that will not benefit neighborhood residents and may contribute to their displacement).

With AnnaMarie, we enter a different economic landscape. Not only are the social practices of householding and childrearing integral to economic development and to the functioning of the economy (this recognition came from our mainstream focus group) but they can also be seen as *part of a hidden noncapitalist economy.* If we fail to recognize that economy, we risk foreclosing the possibility that economic life might offer something other than capitalist subjection.[16]

When AnnaMarie's focus group participants say they "don't feel that poor," they are not denying their economic experience, which includes working at low-paying jobs, or receiving inadequate government assistance, or living in the dangerous environment of an illegal economy. Rather they are simply unable to recognize themselves within the dominant discourse of development. Unwilling to measure themselves solely by its standards, or to view themselves primarily from its perspective, they are refusing to be positioned as *objects* of development. It is this that prompts AnnaMarie to envision them as possible *subjects* of development, playfully engaged in conversations about improving their lives and communities, speaking from their positions as active participants in the household-based neighborhood economy.

Transactions	*Labor*	*Organizational Form*
MARKET	**WAGE**	**CAPITALIST**
ALTERNATIVE MARKET ***Local trading systems*** ***Alternative currencies*** ***Black market***	***ALTERNATIVE PAID*** ***Cooperative*** ***Self-employed*** ***Indentured***	***ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST*** ***Environmental ethic*** ***Social ethic***
NON-MARKET ***Barter*** ***Household flows*** ***Gifts***	***UNPAID*** ***Volunteer*** ***Housework*** ***Family care***	***NON-CAPITALIST*** ***Communal*** ***Self-employed*** ***Feudal*** ***Slave***

Figure 3: A Diverse Economy

What we glimpsed in AnnaMarie's project was the possibility of not being fully captured by dominant forms of economic subjection. In this partially disinterpellated and disidentified state, the subject is visible as a space of cultivation, open to alternative economic identifications and identities. AnnaMarie's co-conversants, who are usually represented as objects of development or victims of economy, emerged instead as complex economic subjects, capable of diverse desires and novel economic positionings.

Through the lens of their experience, we could begin to envision a different world, one in which the economy is something we do, not just something that does things to us. *We had gained a new positioning in the grammar of economy.*

CONVERSATION NUMBER 2:
The diverse economy

Our next conversation was catalyzed by community-based research on the hidden and alternative economies. This conversation could be seen as extending AnnaMarie's project to a larger economic territory (the shaded area in Figure 3). Like AnnaMarie, we would take something relatively invisible or negatively valenced and attempt to read it as a positive presence — not as generalized "poverty" or "noneconomic" activity but as particular forms of wealth creation and modes of livelihood.

The community researchers we had hired met with us for a weekend of "training" conversation, then spent several weeks in "interview" conversations with their friends and neighbors about nontraditional economic activity, and returned for a weekend "debriefing" conversation in which we constructed together a vision of the hidden and alternative economies in the Valley.

As an aid to their interviews, we provided a visual rendition of the economy as an iceberg (see Figure 4 below) with capitalist firms, wage labor, and market-oriented production at the tip. Below the surface of the water were all the sites and activities that were outside the mainstream conception of the economy. During the training we talked not about displacing or replacing capitalism (that being a failed or at least hope-deprived project) but about the prevalence and vibrancy of noncapitalist economic activity in enterprises, households, communities,

and other social locations. Why not make this activity, or at least the positive forms of it, the object of political struggles and economic imaginings?

In our conversation with our co-researchers, as in all of our conversations, we faced the challenge of desire and identification. When one is not simply positioned in opposition to an all-powerful capitalism, but becomes an economic subject in a diverse, complex, and open economy, what kind of emotions and desires will emerge? We anticipated that we would encounter desires for various cooperative and collective enterprises, crowned by the "worker collective" in which workers

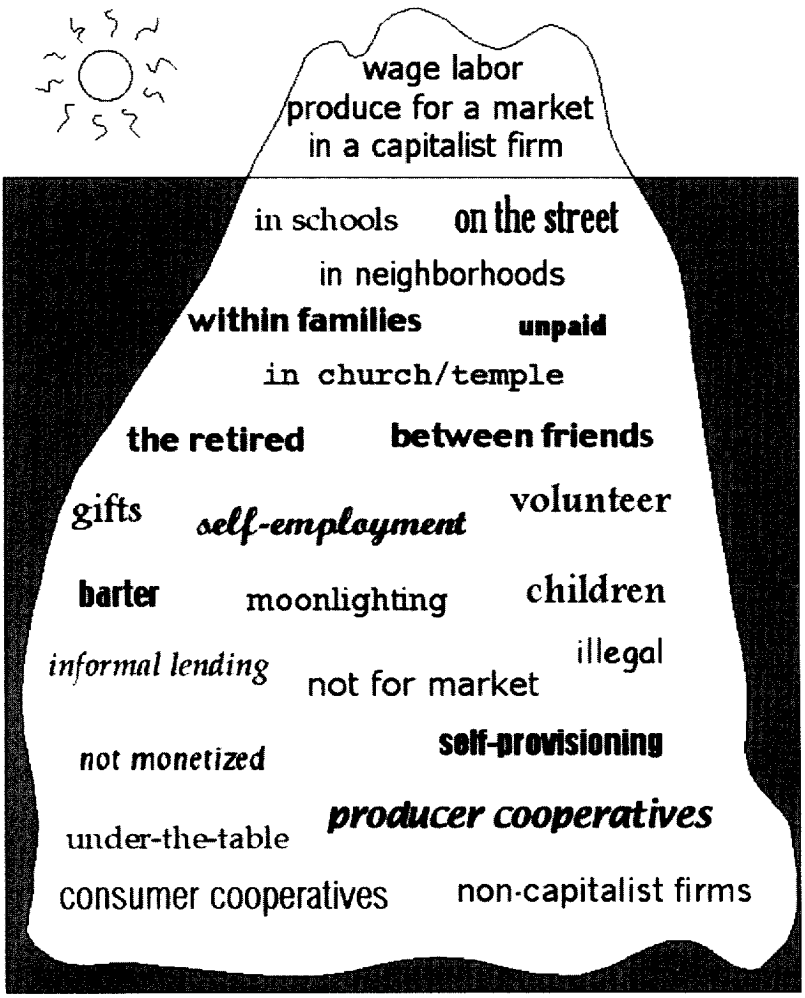
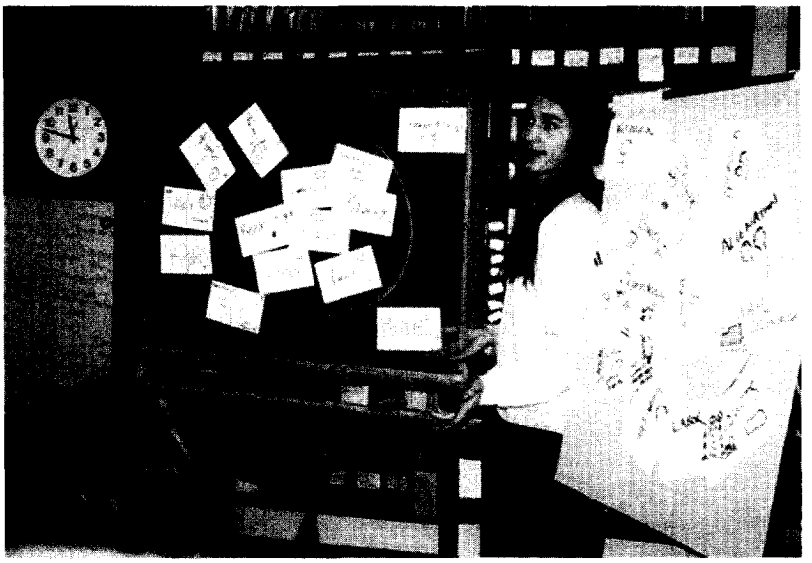


Figure 4

Dinner after the Training

communally appropriate the surplus they produce. This expectation came out of our backgrounds as leftists interested in alternative production and class relations. But when the community researchers came back to help us construct a concrete vision of the bottom of the iceberg, they (like others, we suspect) were interested primarily in alternatives to the market: gifts, barter, and what they saw as unusual market relations.

We met with them for a weekend of eating and talking after they had completed their interviews. And over the course of the weekend what emerged was a vision of an *economy of generosity*, overflowing with goods, money, and labor. Not only were their interviewees providing care for family, friends, and neighbors — this we expected, though we were overwhelmed by the number of hours and amount of emotional energy committed — but in unimaginably various ways (outside the institutionalized volunteer sector) we found people donating time, materials, and affection: there was the woman who tithes (meaning giving away fully one-tenth of her income) but not to the church — to friends and neighbors who need it; the depressed single mother who volunteers 24-hour counseling and support services to drug addicts; the retired insurance adjuster who does dowsing as a gift, a way of opening people to their powers of intuition and connecting them to the environment (he is also a spiritual counselor and gives away counseling and writings on grieving); the woman who raises "found" children (in other words, not



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her own), usually high school age boys; the 52-year-old grandmother of fourteen who provides free advocacy services in her community and is writing a picture book about her many-colored grandchildren to show how much she appreciates them; the man who does professional-quality videotapes of local concerts and gives the tapes to the performers; the lesbian couple who offer a place in their hardware store for people to sit by the fire and talk (not to mention opening it for community sings, with as many as two hundred people); the 16-year-old aspiring artist who used to be on the streets and now takes care of her family, cooking and cleaning for her mother and father (they live separately) and mentoring her 14-year-old sister; the 85-year-old woman who hosts weaving workshops to bring weavers together and keep them inspired (she also built a labyrinth on her property and invites anyone to visit); the mother who raises money locally for her son who does microenterprise lending in Southeast Asia; the middle-aged woman who makes lap blankets for nursing home residents as a way of thanking hospice for their care of her husband before he died.

Most of these examples involve women, invoking the stereotype of the female volunteer and caregiver. This may give the impression that "discovering" the gift economy means simply putting a positive face on gender oppression and women's infamous "second shift." But there

were as many men interviewed whose lives revolve around giving. Paul, for example, loves to feed people. He buys food and cooks a sitdown dinner for his fellow janitors and his supervisor — quite a large number of people — every Friday night at work. He also bakes birthday cakes for co-workers (during the week of his interview there were two birthdays). Here's a snapshot of Paul's work week: M-F, evening shift, maintenance worker; Saturday, 9-6, factory worker; some weekdays, house--cleaner (different hours every week). In his spare time Paul offers labor as a gift: every weekday he drives a man without a license to work in the morning and picks him up in the afternoon; Wednesday mornings, he takes care of an infant so the mother can meet her midwifery clients; two afternoons a week, he spends time with a dying person, pursuing what he sees as his life's calling.[17] Earlier in his life, Paul owned a furniture store:

Paul: I was making $150,000 take-home a year, for fifteen years, so I was living like a *maniac.* Y'know, it was just go go go, work work work work work. I mean I worked seven days a week, and...I have so much more enjoyment now, I mean, the first year I went from $150,000 to $7,000, y'know, and it was like [*sound of a sharp inhalation*]...it's *totally changed.* Once the money changed, my feelings about things changed,...and all to the positive....I would never go back to the other way of life. *Never,* in a million years.

Marta: Do you have sort of an ideal job, y'know...if you had a perfect job, what would it be?

Paul: I found over the years that it takes a different breed to be able to work with people dying all the time...and I happen to be that breed. It's something I'm not afraid of...it sounds horrible, but I enjoy working with people that close to death, they have a totally different perspective on life, which really brings you to a different place yourself.

Marta: That's so valuable.

Paul: It is. And you don't... it's a non-paid job but there's no price on how good you can feel at the end of the day when you're done with it. It's like...with the furniture business...I tried to make this money to get this kind of happiness, y'know, to have that kind of feeling. Whereas coming out of two or three hours spending at somebody's house once or twice a week, I was getting a hell of a lot more from them than any money was going to give me.

After several months as a hospice intern, Paul sent Julie a note about working with the terminally ill: "I have found my people."

Unlike Paul, whose tape is overflowing with laughter and volubility, Sam is gruff and businesslike, and he seems at first not particularly forthcoming. Sam owns a truck and auto repair shop, has a construction business, and does snowplowing. His work as a mechanic and entrepreneur seems to take most of his time, but when the interviewer gets around to his unpaid work another world becomes visible. Weekends, for example, the churches drop kids by his shop, mainly African-American boys that need someone to talk to: "We'll sit outside and talk." With five daughters, he "helps out" at the Girls Club, and hopes to be elected to the board this year. He's a member of an association of contractors who help each other with problems. He organizes political events in the city, especially during campaigns for municipal office. He works with the local merchants' association to assist businesspeople in the African-American community, offering counseling, technical assistance, financing, help in dealing with the city, or in fixing up their property.

In his neighborhood he works to get old houses rehabilitated, helps friends with auto repair, checks in on older neighbors who are disabled and housebound, offers interest-free loans on cars he buys and reconditions ("maybe a car is an essential thing in their life to...get the kids to school and also get themselves to work"), fixes his brother's racing bike, helps his high-school age daughter and her friends with school projects ("that stuff you can never put a price on...make a child more knowledgeable about what is going on"), plows an elderly neighbor's driveway and the driveway at the church, takes neighborhood kids to auto races in the region, helps the church and church members with vehicles that break down on church business ("you tow a vehicle down to them and then tow their vehicle back and get everybody home safe and just a lot of times enjoy helping them").

Kara: Do other people help you?

Sam: I basically do what I do for charity by myself....A lot of people don't like to do certain things. This way here, I'm capable of doing it myself and the enjoyment is all mine.

Kara: So many people are grateful....

Sayla

Gifts of labor and goods are often intertwined with the market economy. There's the woman with the agricultural bookstore who sells everything from pastoral poetry to textbooks on farm accounting and gets most of her books as donations from individuals and other used-book sellers in the Valley. There's the woman who makes quilts, selling them from her clothesline (visible from the road); the quilts are made from donated old clothes and scraps of fabric that people bring to her house — she never has to go looking.[18] There's the retired CEO, the ex-postal worker, and the World War II veteran, all in their seventies and close friends for years, who donate their Mondays to beer bottling at the Berkshire Brewing Company, because they enjoy spending time with each other and with the multiply pierced young people who join them on the bottling line. Everybody gets lunch and a case of beer but it's basically volunteer labor, intertwined not only with a market-oriented but also a capitalist enterprise.

Often it is difficult to see where the market economy ends and the economy of generosity begins. Philip is a part-time minister in the hilltowns who summarizes himself alliteratively as the "pastoral triple threat": "poet, preacher, and raiser of purebred sheep." After mornings at his office hours, where he receives visitors for counseling, he spends several afternoons a week working as a cashier in the local grocery store: "...the absolute nerve center of the hilltowns....It's a place where people can gather, they can talk, we are an unofficial bank, post office, library. All sorts of information gets held and transferred there. People meet there...people get therapy and spiritual counseling there....And it's not all dispensed across the counter. And across the counter, goes both ways." Cashiers at the grocery store perform "a little bit of Robin Hood" for people who don't know they are getting discounts.

In the store Philip keeps in touch with his congregation and his community, so that when he sits down on Friday morning to write a sermon, he actually knows who he's talking to and what he should talk about. "I can't imagine...preaching without working at the store." And of course he sells his books of poetry next to the cash register.

When Philip wrote to his congregation recently about the way his ministry was evolving, he listed some of the many things he had done in the last two weeks — shoveling snow for the church and elderly parishioners, blessing a brick oven, removing flying squirrels from a parishioner's closet, performing an un-wedding (a service of divorce), preaching to the UCC ministers' association, supervising divinity school graduate students, organizing and publicizing a domestic violence workshop, delivering groceries to people without transportation, conducting a service to help a family let go of feuding.

> I have visited in hospitals and homes of all sorts, and helped people move out when marriages have failed. I have conferred with you at office hours, at home, after church and after hours, in parking lots and woodlots, on the phone while I was shaving, in the hospital when you were out of it, and when I was theoretically working at the grocery story. I have run a chain saw in the service of the Lord.
>
> If I were paid for every hour, I'd be rich. But if I were to pay you for all I've learned and how I've grown, I'd be bankrupt. The net result: I'm rich.

What he doesn't include in this letter shows up in his interview. Every day he helps his wife in her pottery, loading and unloading boxes of clay; he pugs the clay, getting it ready for her to throw; he carries the many buckets of water she'll need; he packs the stuff in boxes to send to stores around the country. Every Friday he goes to the school to read to the second grade class; this is why the literary allusions in his sermons are all from *Winnie the Pooh* and *Charlotte's Web.*

> **Philip:** I think that this is a community that works on gifts exchanged rather than money exchanged. And there are a lot of us who are just doing enough paid work to satisfy the electric company or the government and buy the food that we don't raise. But what we're here for is, and how we interact best with others, is this exchange of gifts.
>
> The function of poetry in a community like this is a highly distilled ver-

> sion of how this whole community functions. And poetry is a gift....If a poem is written and sits on a desk, is it a poem? I don't think it's a poem until it's given and received. And until the audience has given its gift of passionate attention and affirmation and has received the poem. It's not until the circles complete that the gift exists. And, ideally, community works that way as well.

What people saw in the gift economy was not simply nonmarket *transactions* but the *production* of something they universally called "community." Jaime is an urban agriculturalist who coordinates the network of community gardens farmed by eighty-five families in the city of Holyoke. He not only donates extra hours on the job (a common experience among interviewees, and seen by them as volunteering rather than overtime) but also gives away much of what he produces on his own garden plot:

> **Jaime:** Well, look, with the products that I harvest....It's like I told you earlier, I don't sell it....
>
> **Greg:** Why?
>
> **Jaime:** I don't sell the product for the simple reason that I know that, that — the land is giving it to me. And God is giving it to me, and there are people who need it, and I...if I have, I can supply it for them.
>
> **Greg:** And who do you give it to?
>
> **Jaime:** I give it to friends, to co-workers, to neighbors....

Jaime locates his personal generosity within a larger vision of gardening as a practice of community:

> **Jaime:** Well, look...the tradition of sharing is inside gardening itself, because...for example, in the garden La Finquita, we have thirty-two families. Of the thirty-two families, let's say that in one day twenty people get together. Of those twenty people that are in the garden, we are sharing ideas, chatting, we are sharing vegetables, right there we prepare, let's cook this, so one person buys a piece of meat, another buys some bread, and I give the vegetables, and another puts in the labor of cooking, et cetera. It's like everything is together in the same activity, in the sharing.

Asked what about his work he takes most pride in, Jaime has difficulty separating pride from gratitude, individuality from communality.

The community has offered him the opportunity to give and thus to develop as an individual (for which he is grateful, and of which he is proud). The community is the condition of his individual existence, yet it is the encounter between individuals that gives birth to the community. Jaime's description of that process of mutual constitution is saturated in the language of the gift economy (words like "share," "grateful," "receive" recur throughout his interview):

> **Greg:** Of what are you most proud, of the work you have done here?
>
> **Jaime:** To be completely sincere, in a very candid way, 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. For the people who never met me, didn't have the chance to meet me, that they meet me. And to express my feelings toward them, and from them, or allowing them to feel free to express their feelings toward us or toward me so we can relate to each other, we can get closer, and we can build a friendship. To build this link of *compañerismo* [camaraderie, fellowship]...that's the biggest feeling of pride that I have when I'm working in Nuestras Raíces, because this is a very wonderful experience that I have received....
>
> **Greg:** Is there anything you would like to add, anything else you would like to say?
>
> **Jaime:** Well, I'll tell you that, as I said earlier, I am extremely proud and grateful for the labor I have done together with my partners. I tell you sincerely that this is my house. If I could work here Saturday and Sunday I would do it...because I feel happy. And also to continue forward and forming our leaders, because 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.

In the language of Jane Bennett, we might say that Paul, Sam, Philip, and Jaime — men in midlife from very different backgrounds, ethnicities, social environments, and life pathways — are enchanted with the world and their ways of being in it.[19] Rather than endlessly pursuing an elusive wholeness and filling themselves with cash and consumables, they find satisfaction in letting go of what they have, be it money, time, or goods. Through giving they distribute their presence in the world, portioning out the self, leaving traces of themselves in the dispersed

minds and hearts of recipients.[20] And in spreading themselves so generously, they lose the sense (and possibility) of solitary boundedness. They become conduits, means of connection, enlarging themselves not through accumulating wealth and successes but through expansion into the infinite continuum of connectedness. In this way, they have come to inhabit a realm of abundance.

Oddly enough, we recognized that realm, having seen it in Anasuya's master's thesis on giving in Burma. In the village where Anasuya did her field work, the teachings of Buddhism promoted generosity as a way of being in the world. Thus it was not surprising that she found giving (known as *dana*) to be a lively and extensive flow of cash, goods, and labor thriving alongside and in concert with a market economy. At the recent *Marxism 2000* conference, Anasuya gave a talk about her research:

> According to Buddhist teachings not only do external events and our environment form who we are but our inner attitudes and our actions also, through repetition, form what we become. Through consciously choosing to cultivate an attitude of generosity and letting go, and by following through with that attitude in our engagement with the world, we become a manifestation of expansive mind and a dweller in a world of plenty.
>
> Approximately 25 percent of disposable income in Burma is spent on dana (this is not counting donations of labor or goods). This flow of wealth sustains a range of social institutions and activities. As a recipient of dana, the abbot of one of the Buddhist monasteries in the village I visited used it not only to support the monks of his monastery but also gave it back to the villagers by building, equipping, and running a local hospital, employing villagers both as builders and hospital staff. He installed a water purification system for the village, started a scholarship program for elementary school children and resurfaced the road, all with donated funds.
>
> A teacher I interviewed in a nearby teaching college annually donates funds equaling three months' salary to provide curry for one day for three hundred boarding students. At age 27 she made a once-in-a-lifetime cash donation, out of devotion to her spiritual teacher, to cover the cost of building a small pagoda. She also donates her labor to teach English at the hospital, so the staff can speak to foreigners who visit. She meditates to purify her mind, as an offering to others whose lives touch hers.
>
> I interviewed a painter who paints walls, frescoes, and religious paintings in public and residential buildings. When he works for a monastery

he undercharges them as a form of dana. He recently donated a very large sum to the abbot of the local monastery, for the monks and for the staff of the hospital.

A carpenter and his extended family who are engaged in many small businesses report that they make just enough to support themselves. They see themselves as poor, yet they regularly donate cooked food and bags of rice to the local monks and in the past gave an entire building to a monastery. They also make donations during New Year celebrations. It becomes apparent that they have no money in the bank because they give it all away.

While there seem to be similar practices of giving in the Pioneer Valley and the hills of Burma, in the Valley these practices are relatively hidden while in Burma they are socially recognized and actively promoted through teachings, public discussion, and conscious engagement. The Valley is like the negative of the colorful photo that is the Burmese gift economy — the same picture in different modes, one latent, the other developed, differently available to visibility.

Giving in the Pioneer Valley became the principal focus of the debriefing discussion and the center of a flow of passionate energy. When Lucy outlined her six interviews with retired people, highlighting their extraordinary gifts of time and labor, Coral with her full-time job and three children wept to think that it would be thirty years before she could devote herself fully to volunteering. And when Gabriela conducted an evaluation of this phase of the project, the researchers described the research process itself as a vehicle for generosity. They understood their interviews as gifts of time and positive valuation, and they chose interviewees who were in need of such gifts and would benefit. (Many interviewees mentioned appreciatively that no one had ever asked them about their daily lives before.)

Palpable in our conversation was the transformative and energizing force of language and recognition. As the researchers became known to themselves and each other as participants in an economy of generosity, their experiences and desires poured forth along with gratitude for a shared moment of visibility and validation. What had been a relatively tacit, almost bodily source of joy and satisfaction emerged into language in the social space of conversation. *An alternative discourse of economy had begun to find its subjects and to circulate productively.*

CONVERSATION NUMBER 3:
On/in class

We had brought to the project our own subjugated knowledge of economic diversity, more focused on class relations than on alternatives to the marketplace. Perhaps surprisingly, our language of economic difference was drawn from Marx's *Capital,* where capitalist class relations are foregrounded against a diverse field occupied by various noncapitalist forms of economy: feudal, slave, independent or individual, communal or communist, among others. One of our goals was to bring the different forms of class relations to the fore, to highlight them in the contemporary economic terrain, and to make them a topic of conversation, not just among ourselves but in our widening circle of co-conversants. In doing this we sought to provide opportunities for individuals to identify themselves not solely in terms of capitalism, and to make a space for alternative desires and practices of economy.

When we speak of class, we are not referring to social groups or rankings, but to processes of producing, appropriating, and distributing surplus labor, whether in money, product, or labor form.[21] Surplus labor is labor that produces a surplus, something over and above what is necessary for the worker's reproduction at the cultural norm. As Marx defines it, exploitation involves the appropriation of surplus by nonproducers. In Volume 1 of *Capital* Marx theorized the production and appropriation of surplus in specifically capitalist relations of exploitation. In Volumes 2 and 3 he explored the distributions of surplus that enable the reproduction of capitalist economic practices and processes. Taken together, the three volumes provide the elements of a Marxian language of class that can be used in describing not only capitalism but other economic forms.

In a capitalist class process the surplus produced by workers is appropriated as surplus value by the capitalist (or board of directors of a capitalist firm) and distributed by them through a variety of payments (including dividends, salaries, and bonuses to managers, interest payments, rents, and taxes, as well as payments to the capitalists' accumulation fund). In a noncapitalist class process the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus are differently arranged. For example, in a feudal class process the surplus might be appropriated in the form of rents, under relations of mutual obligation and fealty. In a slave class

process surplus is appropriated from workers without freedom of contract. In an independent class process, an individual produces and appropriates her/his own surplus; and in a communal (or communist) class process, the producers as a group are the appropriators and first distributors. Any one class process is shaped by its entire social context — property ownership, gender relations, access to resources and markets, environmental politics, control over production processes, levels of debt and interest rates, and questions of legality, to name just a few of the conditions that vary across social spaces. Thus its meaning cannot be grasped abstractly, for it is constituted in place and in process. Moreover, an enumeration of different class processes is not a fixed typology but a fluid and openended series, signaling the existence and possibility of economic differentiation.

As a category, class allowed us to "take back" the space of economy that had been colonized by capitalism in both left and popular representations and to see that space as home to a diverse range of class practices, subjects, and processes of becoming. But while we had a relatively developed language of class difference, we had difficulty finding the meaning of class on the visceral, bodily level from which motivation and commitment powerfully emerge.[22] Where were our class passions? What were our class desires? What problems was class politics designed to attenuate or eliminate, and what new possibilities would it inaugurate? If exploitation was an outrage, as the word itself served to remind us, what specific injury produced its symptoms and scars? Believing (or refusing to call into question the belief) that exploitation was "wrong," we were haunted by the theoretical conundrum of what exactly was wrong with it. For many Marxists, it seemed, exploitation was ultimately theft, since those who produced the surplus were not the appropriators; in this view, communal surplus appropriation would restore to workers what was rightfully theirs. But did we want to espouse a discourse of property rights to labor and its fruits? Was the proprietary individual to be the subject of class becoming, and the proprietary commune its desired end? We labored under the burden of these questions...until we began to think about Mondragón.

Mondragón, as many will know, is that complex of industrial cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain that is famed for its more than 30,000 worker owners, for its successes in international markets, for its

flexibility and longevity, for its commitment to social equity. In the communal setting of the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation, workers collectively appropriate their surplus labor and are also first distributors of the surplus, that is, what is left over after meeting all the production expenses (including wages). Their overriding goal is to use the surplus to help keep existing co-ops going and to expand the entire cooperative system to increase opportunities for employment. The founding of a credit union was a key intervention. The surpluses deposited with the credit union have been used not only to establish a growing number of industrial co-ops but to establish a network of service sector co-ops that provide ongoing support to the Mondragón community. There is the social insurance co-op that provides health care, life insurance, and social security to co-op members and their families; the education and training co-op that provides education from day care to university level; the research and development co-ops that undertake scientific and technical research both for cooperative businesses and others; the housing and retail co-ops that touch every aspect of community life. Appropriating and distributing their produced surplus has allowed the cooperators of Mondragón to imagine and construct an unfinished project of community.

What became visible to us in Mondragón was the role of the surplus, not in its familiar guise as *property* but in its alternative guise as *potentiality*. Appropriated surpluses derived from production constitute a vast reservoir of social wealth — which, depending on how it is distributed, has the potential to energize and sustain profoundly different forms of social existence. In Mondragón the cooperators have distributed their surpluses to build their enterprises and support their communities.[23]

Thinking of the surplus not as property and prize but as the origin of distributive flows offered a new understanding of class exploitation. The trauma of exploitation is not that something belonging to you is taken from you. Rather, it is that you are cut off from the conditions of social possibility that the surplus both enables and represents. Restricted to the necessary labor that sustains you, separated from the surplus that sustains the larger society, you are constituted as an "individual" bereft of a possible community and communal subjectivity.[24]

* * *

In the fall of 1999 we find ourselves in a classroom with fourteen students from the Social Thought and Political Economy (STPEC) program at UMass. Julie is teaching a service learning course called "Economic Alternatives," through which we place students as interns with alternative economic organizations (of the noncapitalist sort) in the Valley. Brian, Stephen, Ken, and Becky are participating in various ways, as we attempt to initiate and sustain a semester-long conversation about alternatives to capitalism, both in theory and in the local economy.

The room is tiny, hot, and airless — a cauldron of swirling affect that congeals at moments into utopian hopefulness or leftist rage. Each week before our three-hour class we find it difficult to marshall the energy to meet the affective overload. One strange and remarkable thing about the group is the number of young women who are sullen, demanding, anti-authoritarian, disengaged, work-averse, unresponsive (eye contact is rare and a smile is something to treasure and remark upon); and the equal complement of young men who are inspired, full of energy, cooperative, curious, diligent, committed, even adoring ("lit from within" is the usual description and a smile is the least of it). In this classroom cynicism and negativity are largely female, hope and openness largely male — if not a reversal of gender expectations, at least an unpredictable and unsettling emotional alignment.

As leftists, however, we recognize that it's our good fortune to encounter *any* STPEC students who are hopeful and open to possibility where alternatives to capitalism are concerned. Among these young leftists-in-training, we could easily have found, in passionate preponderance, that caustic blend of cynicism and outrage that Eve Sedgwick identifies as the "paranoid" left sensibility.[25] Viewed through the narrowing eyes of that sensibility, any alternative is simply a version, or aspect, of what it is alternative to, hopelessly compromised by its existence alongside or within "capitalism." To be truly radical is to know with certainty how thoroughly tainted every apparent alternative is. It is to pounce and squelch, to squint and scorn, to obliterate the shimmer of possibility.

Yet hope can be found in the strangest places (perhaps unexpectedness is part of its nature). At the end of the semester Marli — bilious and beautiful — presents her paper on Collective Copies, a long-standing worker collective in Amherst (to be accurate, only half her paper is on this topic — the rest is devoted to a critique of the course and the service learning experience). At Collective Copies, she tells us, cooperators make

up to $19 per hour and entry-level cooperators make $9.50 per hour. This is in contrast to Copy Cat where workers start at $6.50 and Kinko's where they start at $7.50. The manager at Kinko's makes what the entry-level worker at Collective Copies makes.

Marli's presentation is offhand but powerful. She starkly delineates the differences between capitalist and communal class processes in a single industry in one small town. At Collective Copies the cooperators themselves establish the boundary between necessary and surplus labor, and decide how their surplus is to be distributed. Every year they give 10 percent of profits to local progressive organizations and causes. Recently they've devoted a large portion to establishing another collective copy shop on the other side of the Valley. In addition, they contribute both money and time to fostering the growth of the co-op sector in the local economy. Even on this small scale surplus distributions are visible as a potentiating force — contributing to the construction of a progressive and communal economy in the Pioneer Valley.

In the service learning course, our subterranean class language surfaced and circulated in a group of radical undergraduates who learned to speak, savor, and modify its terms. As they made (a different kind of) sense of their economic experience, they reoriented our gaze — from Mondragón to Amherst, from distant to proximate, from exalted and iconic to familiar and mundane. And although theoretically we had always recognized the worker collectives in the Valley as very different from capitalist firms, the act of tracing their surplus distributions attached us to communality in a way that theory never had. It was as though an abstract ideal had taken root in our locality; we were its neighbors, customers, stakeholders, beneficiaries, proponents, witnesses, and companions in desire.[26] Around this time Anasuya began to think about starting a worker collective with her son and daughter-in-law.[27] We began to call ourselves the Community Economies Collective rather than the Rethinking Economy Project, which had hitherto been our name.

The conversation is ongoing, of course, and writing this paper has afforded us a chance to steep a little longer in the brew. At a table in the Newman Center cafeteria, we huddle around a tape recorder, trying to trace the nascency of "socialist" yearnings:

Becky: When we started it was like, being *for* socialism [which we have come to call communalism] was being *against* exploitation...and what were you gonna do?...You were gonna pronounce the truth of exploita-

tion....I had no desire to do that...zero, zip. But when we tried to move beyond critique, toward something positive, that's when our desire got kindled.

Stephen: ...we began to appreciate communal class relations as involving something other than communal appropriation...as constitutive of community (and a site of community as well). Going beyond property rights, which always left me cold...and which also fed a politics of resentment and entitlement. Seeing surplus distributions as a way of constituting community...connecting productive laborers to others, outside the labor process, in relations of recognized interdependency. I think that's where the desire began.

And that's where we began to be a different kind of "we." *An ethic of the communal economy had become the common ground for our collectivity.*

CONVERSATION NUMBER 4:
On the road to collectivity

In June 2000 we took a trip to Cape Breton to attend the Festival of Community Economics, a conference at the university there. Ten of us piled into a department van for the seven-day outing — including members of our university-based group, community researchers, activists, and local NGO workers.[28] Before our departure, the trip loomed in

The Van

Ferry Ride

some of our minds as potentially difficult — a period of overexposure in the pressure cooker environment of the van. But as we traveled, both exposure and pressure revealed their transformative qualities, and we found ourselves continually surprised by the unfolding pleasures of being together and traveling toward an unknown form of community.

Lots of food, drink, and hilarity, coupled with intense interactions, speaking and listening to cooperators from Mondragón and Valencia in Spain and from Quebec, where there is a large networked cooperative sector — including banks and funeral homes as well as industrial enterprises. One of the things that was both eye-opening and inspiring to those of us working in academia was the presentation by Manuel Campo about the cooperative university in Valencia where he is a member of the faculty.

Talk at the conference focused almost entirely on cooperatives. By contrast the van was a conversational plurispace, with Jim, a community researcher, as conservator of spaciousness. A veteran of alternative enterprises, engaged nonstop — despite his need for solitude — in projects of constructing community, Jim feared that growing the alternative

economy would become a practice of monoculture. "Are co-ops the only answer?" he asked, disturbed by the lack of alternatives (to cooperatives) discussed at the conference.

One afternoon on an outing we found ourselves at a dead end in a bog that must be one of the wonders of Cape Breton. Jim, our naturalist, became our guide, introducing us to the miniature laurels, roses, and irises that flowered there. Leaves low against the wind, roots seeking scarce soil for sustenance, these tiny ancient plants were fragile yet incredibly hardy. In a land both familiar and foreign, we had stumbled as lost travelers upon a thriving yet barely visible ecosystem. What was this bog if not a groundportrait of the diverse economy?

As an approach to life and to economic possibility, Jim offered a passionate tentativeness. "Not tentativeness in the sense of equivocating," Anasuya said, "but in the sense of really not knowing and allowing things to happen — being open, not fixating. It's like beginner's mind, Zen mind." Must there be only one way? Must we wrench sameness and singleness out of multiplicity? Throwing ourselves together in the van, embarking on a trip without a clear or single vision of what our goal might be, we found our desires dispersed and differentiated yet activated by a quest for an alternative economy. The van became a traveling space of conversation and connection among different visions, projects, hopes, languages, experiences, and levels of involvement or commitment. Like our project. Like the left might be. *And co-ops emerged not as the one true form of the socialist economy, but as one way of being in community.*[29]

CONVERSATION NUMBER 5:
Ongoing with other leftists (and ourselves)

Our conversations have ushered us into many hidden worlds of economy, only three of which we have explored here — the household-based neighborhood economy of AnnaMarie's project, the gift economy brought to light by the community researchers and Anasuya, the communal economy of cooperative enterprises in Amherst and the conference in Cape Breton. These "economies" are conceptualizations that give reality to lived experience (just as, transitively, experience gives reality to such conceptualizations). Talking about hidden and alternative economies is for us a way of nourishing the left imagination — presenting what already exists as imaginative raw materials,

but also practical building blocks; circulating the language and affect that can produce subjects and tie bodies together in recognition and intimacy.

As we pursue the brokering of alternative intelligibilities, we find ourselves frequently misunderstood (understandably). People are dismissive and sometimes angry with us. When Stephen presented AnnaMarie's work at a conference she was unable to attend, a young woman in the audience stood up and confronted him: "You're going to celebrate the fact that my neighbor and I have to combine the food in our cupboards to feed our kids? You think that's a good thing?" Identifying with the woman's experience and wishing to honor her feelings and point of view, Becky later reflected on how we might explain ourselves to her:

> I don't want to romanticize raising kids on a very small income — it's something I do every day and find extremely difficult. At the same time, I am angry that welfare reform treated households as if there was nothing going on there...you could just pull these women out of these households and put them in forty-hour jobs, and act as if nothing is being displaced. We want to recognize the labor that takes place in households and neighborhoods, and the contribution that it makes — we want to acknowledge the parts of community livelihood that people value and want to maintain, and that a forty-hour work week might not support. But that's not to deny that it's difficult and painful to live on a very low income with a bunch of kids.

When we speak of the vibrant and vital gift economy, people sometimes hear us saying, along with the Right, that the welfare state can be dismantled because charity and volunteering ("a thousand points of light") will provide a stopgap or a substitute. Here Paul has helped us understand and explain ourselves — Paul, who expresses his outrage that volunteering is necessary in this wealthy society yet at the same time portrays his own volunteer work as the source of his life's great satisfactions. Without denying that the world is unjust and full of misery, Paul has oriented his life around generosity. Without suppressing his rage, indignation, and sorrow, he pursues the passion and transformative joy that he finds in giving. (This bi-valent attitude seems to structure every aspect of his life, right down to his current job, where he fumes about the nepotism that has kept him from advancing and also cooks a fabulous meal for his co-workers each week.) His response to the world is

not just anger but something additional, an antidote: "What can I do to help myself and help others?"

We are often accused of being optimistic, though none of us would predict a rosy future (at least not generally). Instead we are hopeful, which is a very different thing. We would like to extend the range of left emotions — to include not just anger at what is, but pleasure in what we do, and desire for what might be. Anger has been productive for the left — might not pleasure and desire be equivalently generative? Can a politics of protest and rectification be supplemented by a politics of hope and cultivation? Is there room on the left for another way to be (we ask somewhat plaintively)?

Many of our interlocutors want us to provide lasting outcomes, visible effects, durability. But what might the "results" of conversation be? Conversation is movement, a zone of engagement, hard to reduce to the calculus of cause and effect. Nevertheless it affords the space for different languages of economy to circulate productively. So that's where we might start in answering our questioners: *language is the principal ingredient and a major product of our conversational adventures.* Without a language in which to identify and name different economic practices, we are at a loss when describing or performing noncapitalist activity, trying to carve out a discursive space for it. A "politics of re-presentation" is a requisite for a different society and economy.[30]

Language projects do not merely yield new domains of intelligibility, they are also conditions of political desire. Without a discourse of the diverse economy, our desire for a different relation to things economic is inarticulate and unformed, perhaps nonexistent. So too the subjects of the alternative economy: we are unborn, hidden even to ourselves, silent and alone in our invisibility.

In producing a discourse of the diverse economy, Ernesto Laclau would say that we are "widening the field of intelligibility in order to enlarge the scope of possibility."[31] But as Foucault and William Connolly have argued, it is not enough to produce a new discourse of economy because "it is not just in the play of symbols that the subject is constituted. It is constituted in real practices" that "fix dispositional patterns of desire...by acting on the body."[32] We are engaging in conversations not only to immerse our desiccated imaginations in the warm waters of language and conviviality; we are also attempting to cultivate ourselves and others as subjects of something other than a capitalist economy.

Cultivation of alternative subjectivities is difficult because the field is already sown and the ground is already occupied. We are all already economic subjects, shaped by the dominant discourse of capitalist development, with desires for employment, wealth, or entrepreneurial activity. We wake up in the morning wanting a job, not an alternative economy. Cultivation takes time, and time seems scarce when suffering and injustice press their urgency. It also takes space and that's what we've been trying to create: space in which to convene the denizens of the hidden and alternative economies, space in which to speak a language of economic difference and possibility, spaces where individuals may see themselves reflected in each other's experience, or connect across differences in a zone of safety.

In the van, that confined and oddly comforting space, people who identified with the neighborhood, or the gift, or the cooperative economies came together in a temporary, mobile community. Over the course of the trip, the three economies were stitched together personally, emotionally, and theoretically. We came to see the affinities between the distributions of the gift economy and those of the cooperative economy, whose surplus flows energize and sustain a larger community (and this linked Anasuya's Buddhism to the Marxism that informed many of us theoretically); we recognized in the largesse of the neighborhood and gift economies a source of primitive accumulation for cooperatives and for the communal economy more generally; we reconceived "the economy" as a skein of relationships rather than a logic or a sphere of activity; we connected with each other and became identified, not only with each other but with each other's worlds, values, and economic experiences. As the trip neared its end we fantasized a future together, acknowledging and in the same moment bringing into being our collectivity.[33]

The work of cultivation can't just be work — it has to be pleasure too. We need to enjoy being together before we can desire the communal economy. That's one reason we have such wonderful food at our gatherings. It's why we have so many parties. At one of these we invited activists, friends, and strangers to Anasuya's house, providing great pizza and time for socializing as well as for viewing and discussing a short video of the Cape Breton conference and travel highlights. We even urged people to bring sleeping bags and stay the night, which some chose to do. This "conference report" introduced people in the Valley

to the highly developed cooperative sector in other parts of the world — and it also widened the circle of those who speak the language of the communal economy.

All of this is part of a politics of becoming, cultivating not only communal economic subjects, and moments of energized collectivity, but the capabilities and institutions of an emerging community. So we go to meetings and participate in projects (even initiating some): a network of co-ops in the region, an alternative economic development council, a Valley-wide finance initiative, a vocational school that wants to develop curriculum about economic alternatives. What we hope to engender is not just institutions and individuals — the tender plants of the alternative economy — but a durable infrastructure of capacities, both imaginative and practical. Along the way other things are cultivated and created as well: friendships and other relationships; love and trust; individual growth and self-discovery; alternative avenues of masculinity, to name just a few.[34]

Ken summed it up the other day, harking back to a meeting he had attended with Becky:

> 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 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.

We're in the middle of our project now. Where we are going? We still don't know. But we have a future, and planning it together is one way we constitute ourselves as a hopeful collectivity. And we have a sense of the left as potential, a reservoir of invention and possibility. *Be not conformed to this world but transformed be.*

The End

Jeff

Notes

1. Adapted from M. Moon and E.K.Sedgwick, "On Being Squiddy," paper delivered at the Northeastern Victorian Society Meeting, New York, April 1998.
2. W. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
3. F. Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
4. Here we are inspired and encouraged by a long tradition of research and politics that has attempted to understand and create forms of socialism that are not so constrained by images of capitalism. We are indebted, for example, to economic sociologists and anthropologists, anarchists, and socialists of many nations who have sought a vision outside the contours of capitalism's reflection.
5. J.K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).
6. In approaching this task, we take inspiration from a number of traditions, the most radical of which is queer theory. Queer theorists are attempting not simply to insert gay and lesbian identities into the sexual landscape but to queer the entire

domain of sexuality, disrupting our sense of what's normal or dominant in that domain. Pointing out, for example, that the most common sexual practice is masturbation (and thus neither heterosexual nor homosexual), queer theorists call into question the presumed prevalence of heterosexuality. In the same way, we hope to queer the economy, reading the economic landscape for difference rather than dominance.

7. L. Beneria, "Accounting for Women's Work: The Progress of Two Decades," *World Development* 20, no. 11 (1992): 1547-60; L. Beneria, "Thou Shalt Not Live by Statistics Along, But It Might Help," *Feminist Economics* 2, no. 3 (1996): 139-42; D. Ironmonger, "Counting Outputs, Capital Inputs and Caring Labor: Estimating Gross Household Output," *Feminist Economics* 2, no. 3 (1996): 37-64.
8. S. Bowles and R. Edwards, *Understanding Capitalism: Competition, Command and Control in the U.S. Economy*, 2d ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 99.
9. This diagram is based on estimates of hours of labor spent on each type of activity, but the argument is the same if you measure output, in dollars or other units. See Ironmonger.
10. "By itself, commodity production does not define capitalism....For commodity production also to be called capitalist production, there must be employers and workers...the capital goods...must be privately owned...the labor employed must be primarily wage labor." Bowles and Edwards, 98-99.
11. This is not to imply that economic concepts and categories are flimsy or inconsequential. On the contrary, they are powerful and productive—it is upon this recognition that our project is based. Feminist theorists, for example, have noted the profound effects of the economic categories installed in national accounting practices of the post-World War II period. By excluding unpaid and noncapitalist activity from the gross national product, the system of national accounts has focused attention, resources, and positive valuation upon capitalist activities while obscuring and devaluing others. Replicated on an annual basis for every nation, these accounts are a powerful example of the "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names." J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.
12. After several years of applying for grants, our New England-based group was funded by the Geography and Regional Science Program of the National Science Foundation (Grant No. BCS-9819138) to do a project of action research on the hidden and alternative economies in the Pioneer Valley.
13. Some people have asked us whether we are endangering people, exposing them to government surveillance and especially the IRS. We have been careful to protect the identity of individuals. Only those people who wanted their names to be used are identified and identifiable. As for the IRS, they already know that a very large

proportion of economic activity goes unreported; our project has nothing to teach them in that respect.

14. Foucault's approach understands discourse as a term that encompasses both the conceptual and the material aspects of power and is not to be confused with approaches that separate "ideas" from other aspects of material reality.
15. It is interesting to consider what kind of reaction would ensue if a "poor" city like Holyoke experienced such an epidemic of syphilis among teens. No doubt the behavior would be connected to poverty, welfare dependency, and female-headed households.
16. This is the story of "development," which involved designating most of the world as poor and attempting to install capitalist industrialization worldwide in the name of eradicating poverty. What is the effect of defining development in terms of one form of economy and seeing all others as nonexistent or deficient with respect to the developed? We lose the positive recognition of difference and the possibility that life might be other, that other lives are viable.
17. In his free time, Paul sees his two teenagers (usually Sunday), goes to therapy, works as a community researcher (most recently in our project and previously for two years in another one), keeps house, and tends his garden. Soon he'll become a full-time student in a nursing certificate program to qualify him as a paid hospice worker.
18. Recently her daughter got a scholarship to Berkeley and made her mother a web page. Now she sells quilts not only with an honor box in her garage but to people in other countries.
19. J. Bennett, "The Enchantments of Modernity: Paracelsus, Kant and Deleuze," *Cultural Values* (winter 1997).
20. This formulation is drawn from S. Gudeman, "Theorizing the Gift," paper presented at the conference on *Marxism 2000,* University of Massachusetts Amherst, September 2000.
21. See J.K. Gibson-Graham, S. Resnick, and R. Wolff, *Class and Its Others* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); S. Resnick and R. Wolff, *Knowledge and Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
22. Connolly.
23. Whereas one of our prominent local capitalists has used it to buy up all the land around his house, convert the house into a mansion, and build a million dollar gym for his personal use.
24. At this moment of recognition, our ongoing conversation with Yahya Madra became central and salient.Yahya is a graduate student at UMass who argues that exploitation should not be defined as theft. The trauma of exploitation involves not the violation of the rights of a pre-given individual but the very constitution of the subject as an "individual" and the concomitant rupture with a possible community

and communal subjectivity. Under capitalist relations of exploitation, the surplus is appropriated by the capitalist or the board of directors of the capitalist firm. They then distribute it — it may go into capital accumulation, higher management salaries and consumption, acquisition of other firms, speculation in real estate, bribes to officials, dividends to shareholders, or a wide variety of other destinations, in the process constructing "society" and social possibility. At the same time the laborer is paid a wage, which is the monetary form of her necessary labor and presumably sufficient to reproduce her. The wage payment restricts the worker to her necessary labor, imposing an imaginary completeness as a self-contained individual. Though connected to the larger community through the distributions of her surplus that sustain and nourish it, she is not aware of her connectedness; though sustained and reproduced by that larger community, she is not aware of her incompleteness (in the dimension of labor, at least). Communism, or communalism, in this vision becomes not only the communal appropriation and distribution of surplus labor but the conditions of possibility of a communal subject: connected and incomplete, living in the awareness that the existence of others is the effect and also the condition of one's own being. Y. Madra, untitled paper presented at the conference of the Association for Economic and Social Analysis, Hancock, Mass., July 1999.

25. E.K. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. E.K. Sedgwick (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1997), 1-37.
26. We were also reclaiming the market as a condition of community. We understood Collective Copies as a noncapitalist, communal enterprise that is not just market-oriented but profit-making and capital-accumulating as well. As Gayatri Spivak has observed, "Marx is not talking about the nongeneration of capital but the nonutilization of capital for capitalism....You can agree to the production of capital, but restrict it (by common consent) so that...it becomes a dynamic for social redistribution." G. Spivak and D. Plotke, "A Dialogue on Democracy," *Socialist Review* 3 (1994): 7.
27. This communal enterprise has not come into being, perhaps because the desire that has been produced in Anasuya over the course of our many conversations has not been correspondingly generated in her son.
28. Carole raised most of the money for the trip, making it possible to offer subsidies to those who needed them.
29. Jean-Luc Nancy distinguishes the form of community he calls "being-in-common" from "common being," where the basis of community is sameness or commonality. The former was what we found among the left microcosm assembled in vanspace. See J.-L. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. P. Connor, trans. P. Connor, L.

Garbus, M. Holland, and S. Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

30. See A. Escobar, "Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization," *Political Geography* (forthcoming), 2001.
31. Gleaned and paraphrased from a number of different texts.
32. The first quotation is from M. Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow (New York: Pantheon,1984), 369, quoted in W. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 57. The second quotation is from Connolly, 57.
33. When Kathie and Jenny visited from Australia, we all planned a future together and became a wider collective through that activity. What became clear to us in the process was the geographic unboundedness of community.
34. Brian notes the decorative masculinities of the hidden economy, and the obligated, feudal manhood of the gift economy; Stephen sees a resurgent "frontier" masculinity, where being a man means contributing to your community. As these notes suggest, gender has always had a strong pull on our analyses, where it is insistently present yet largely untheorized. Therein lies another paper, perhaps, on alternative genderings in the diverse economy.