Explorations in Heterotopia: Local Exchange Trading Schemes (LETS) and the Micro-Politics of Money and Livelihood.

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Abstract: This paper examines the politics behind the establishment of Local Exchange Trading Schemes or LETS. Deploying concepts of the 'heterotopia' and of 'micro-politics', the paper examines the extent to which advocates of LETS as a resistant space have developed a micro-political tool that enables the realisation of resistant conceptions of money and exchange; and of livelihood, community and co-operation. A fourfold conception of the heterotopia is developed to examine firstly the multiplicity of resistant conceptions of money and work developed by participants. Secondly, LETS is held to be effective micro-politics if these benefits are realisable, irrespective of the attitudes of elites, for any length of time within this resistant space. Thirdly, the paper considers whether participation in LETS transforms the values of network members who do not initially share these changed cultural codes, and if not, whether, fourthly LETS is consequently best thought of as a vision of a presently 'impossible' - i.e. unrealisable - space. In conclusion, it is argued that LETS is a resistant social movement that has developed an effective micro-political technology that enables members to temporarily but discernably actualise their changed cultural codes within this resistant space, restricted by exclusion from the access to economic resources beyond participants private ownership or control.

> *"What if we just went ahead as though the revolution were over and we had won?"* Rudy from Twin Oaks Commune 1970, quoted by Houriet (1970:266).

> "*We are the little folk - we! - too little to love or to hate. Leave us alone and you'll see, how we shall bring down the state!.... Mistletoe killing an oak! Rats gnawing cables in two, moths making holes in a cloak - how they must love what they do! Yes - and we little folk too, we are busy as*

they - working our works out of view,....watch and you'll see it some day!... How we shall bring down the State!" Kipling, "A Pict Song", as sung at a LETS event 1995.

1. Introduction

Local Exchange Trading Schemes, or LETS, are essentially trading networks using a form of local currency with a locally significant name (‘Bobbins’ in Manchester, 'Olivers' in Bath, 'Wharfes' in Ilkley - and 'Brads' in Bradford). To establish a LETS scheme, a directory of services provided by network members is put together and trading takes place between members using this local currency in the form of a local cheque book, whenever possible without the need for national currency. Accounts are kept on a usually on a computer, and start with an opening balance of zero. To commission work, a credit is simply created to pay for that work through the writing of a cheque, backed by a ‘commitment’ from the issuer of the cheque to earn, at their later convenience, credits from someone else that will return their account to zero. As credits do not have to be earned before they are spent, some members will inevitably go into 'debt' while others simultaneously earn. The person commissioning the work has their account debited, and the person doing the work's account is credited the same amount; so the totality of credits paid in and out of all network members’ accounts balances out at zero. Secondly, a virtual currency builds on one-to-one barter in that reciprocal exchange between partners for each trade is not required. For example, trader one can get trader two to fix his sink, and earn the currency back by providing trader three with childcare and trader four with singing lessons. Finally, all network members’ balances and turnovers are publicly available, and members are expected to take their accounts back to zero before they leave the network to prevent defection by a member in commitment before they have provided reciprocal services to network members for services

previously received. These latter facets are designed to ensure trust between members of the network.

That is the heart of LETS - a virtual currency, a chequebook, a directory, and an open accounting system based on trust and community regulation (Linton and Soutar 1994, Lang 1994, Dauncey 1989:50-70, Dobson 1993:169-217). Putting the needs and skills of a community first, and then providing a method of exchange that enables skills and needs to be put together irrespective of the prior existence of enough value to pay for needed services, it is argued by proponents, re-inscribes money as a mere *measurement* of the skills of a community rather than a thing of itself. They therefore argue that a claim that a lack of money limits needs being met is as unsustainable as a claim that houses cannot be built as there are not enough inches available to build them (Leach and Clifford 1997). Consequently, they argue that LETS is a new form of money that enables the living of alternative livelihoods without the prior wholesale transformation from above of the capitalist system. The extent that these hopes are realised is the subject of this paper.

2. Local currency systems and ways of thinking about them.

Local currencies are not new. Alternative currency models and financial innovations of all types have a rich history (see Galbraith 1975, Greco 1995, Douthwaite 1996, Tibbett 1997), as do co-operative experiments and attempts to theorise them (Buber 1949, Kantor 1972, Abrams and McCullogh 1972, Levitas 1990, Pepper 1990, 1993; Bahro 1995). To alternative currencies and

experiments in co-operation can be added a multitude of community-led empowerment mechanisms and financial tools from Community Development Trusts, Credit Unions and community-supported agriculture in the North to Grameen-style micro-lending circuits in the South (see Ekins 1992, Groh 1995, Douthwaite 1996, NEF 1997, Gibson 1997, Leyshon and Thrift 1997). This paper concentrates on LETS as but one alternative currency movement, and on LETS as a form of political protest. A detailed history of these experiments is consequently beyond the scope of this paper, as would be an attempt to draw together the totality of lessons learned, but some scene setting is necessary to place this article alongside other writings on alternative financial institutions.

The overall tone of academic writing on LETS is to conceptualise LETS primarily as a response to financial exclusion (Williams 1995, 1996a, 1996b; North 1996a, 1996c: Barnes, North and Walker 1996, Pacione 1997). LETS here is seen as an attempt to gain resources primarily through the adoption of a new form of money that straddles domestic exchange and the money economy (Thorne 1996:1632) and re-localises interpersonal social and economic identity in areas suffering from economic restructuring and financial disinvestment (Pacione 1997:1180). LETS is claimed as a technology that empowers atomised, fragmented and excluded communities by rekindling a sense of capacity to make change (North 1996a, 1996c); and promotes economic inclusion through transparent financial relationships (Lee 1996:1380) or through re-embedding economic relations into a form of social regulation controlled by those excluded from mainstream financial relations (Thorne 1996: 1632-4). However, while exclusion is one of the motivating factors that inform participation in LETS: 'economic' reasons are but one of a simple

typology of motivational factors encouraging participation, the others being 'political' (for an alternative to capitalism) and 'community building' (Thorne 1996:1365, Lee 1996:1380).

An understanding that captures the multiplicity of motivations for participation from the perspective of the actors *themselves* is required, on their own terms and by judging what their do by the yardstick of their own definitions of success and failure. This should be undertaken without 'taming' LETS by relating it to prior truth claims (Routledge and Simmons 1995), which impute motivations for participation which the actors themselves would not share. Firstly, activists do not conflate economic motivations into a response to financial exclusion. Designer of LETS Michael Linton and his supporter go out of their way to stress that LETS should not be seen as a form of welfare (Gosling 1997). They see business participation for purely cost-benefit economic reasons as fundamental to the widespread mainstream use of LETS (North 1998b).

Secondly, an explicitly *political* focus would build on Lee's interrogation of the wider project of the 'social construction of economic geographies' (Lee 1996:1380) which, having another focus, pays little attention to questions of political strategy (1996:1387:88). This is particularly important precisely as, given that such political initiatives are not new - are the critiques made of previous alternative currency experiments still valid? Or - in a condition of reflexive late modernity - do they represent a new, powerful form of citizen challenge, building alternative financial spaces from below? This paper therefore focuses in some depth on an aspect of LETS most antithetical to previous institutionalist and functionalist approaches, that adopted by its explicitly anarchist members. These participants do not see LETS as either an institutional or policy innovation to promote economic development (Williams 1995, 1996a, 1996b), or an

unthreatening alternative economic space alongside the mainstream (Thorne 1996:1372); but as a network (rather than an institution) that links participants with distinctive political aims - to create an non-exploitative society that operates by alternative economic values. In contrast with designer of LETS Michael Linton's claim that "this is completely neutral - a bank account....like store budget vouchers or air miles" (North 1997:125), they reclaim LETS as a tool of resistance - or even of emancipation - which, while not taking capitalism 'head on' (Pacione 1997:1180), nevertheless wishes to (in their own words) - *'take the wind out of it'* (North 1996b). I argue that these participants see LETS as a countercultural alternative space that operates under locally-created economic rules.

To take forward a theoretical understanding of the efficacy of this strategy that nonetheless starts from the perspectives of the actors themselves, the work primarily of Foucault, but also of Deleuze and Guatarri, is used to conceptualise LETS as a micro-technology that creates from below a network that operates by changed rules and changed power relations. This enables its anarchist adherents to engage in a micro - rather than meta - resistance which creates, within the capitalist system and avoiding a head on confrontation with it, Foucault's heterotopia; ie a non-geographical, ephemeral, yet temporarily liberated virtual space. While this approach to LETS is in no way to be taken as a totalising claim that all participants in LETS see what they are doing in this light, it does illuminate a motivational force and strategy that emphases on economic development or community empowerment occlude.

3. LETS as Heterotopia?

LETS conceived as micro-political resistance aimed at the realisation of a communal heterotopia starts from the perceptions and analysis of members if LETS themselves, and emphasises their creativity in creating a political tool that addresses specific problems in society in ways that they, as political actors, feel appropriate. A micro-political analysis of LETS would be founded on an understanding of the possibility of the existence of multiple challenges to power relations, and an emphasis on the *pro-active creativeness* and *dynamism* of political action which makes other power relations visible, and then develops technologies and strategies to overcome them. Analysis would therefore be of the extent that LETS illuminates local power circulations, and is an effective local struggle against this local power, valid on its own terms. This provides more a effective conceptualisation either than Marxian dismissal of co-operation as 'dwarfish' in the face of hegemonic state power (Marx 1974) or uncritical (McKay 1996) or "naive" (Boyne and Rattansi 1990:39) boosterism of cyclical if interesting 'others' - new social movements that nonetheless fail to produce real collectivities and social actors with the system-changing potential of the proletariat of Marxist praxis (Harvey 1992:54. Geras 1990:86, Callinicos 1989:85). Rather that either a "*laissez-faire*, 'anything goes' market eclecticism" (Harvey 1992:42), or an *a priori* dismissal based on the experience of similar historical experiments, a heterotopian analysis follows Foucault in valuing "autonomous, non-centralised kind(s) of theoretical production, ... whose validity is not dependent on the approval of the established regimes of thought" (1980:81).

A second concept from Foucault's work that I argue holds explanatory value for LETS is that of the 'heterotopia', or the coexistence of an 'impossible space' of a large number of 'fragmentary possible worlds' existing in the same space simultaneously (Harvey 1992:48). LETS may be 'impossible' as it simultaneously contains may visions and aspirations of the 'good life' - which are contradictory, mutually exclusive, and unsustainable in the traditional political analyses developed in response to previous local currency and communal exprementation. Following Foucault, LETS conceptualised as 'impossible' challenges unitary concepts of liberation, of a unified history moving forward towards *one* 'free' or 'liberated' condition. The concept of heterotopia therefore envisages the development of multiple spaces in which different political relationships can exist side by side, neither privileged, nor any less or more real. Heterotopia values politics as process rather than as end, and located not in political society (the state) but in the lifeworld. Heterotopia means the death of a unitary end-state vision (a single utopia being by definition repressive over other possible visions of the good life), and therefore political actors should not discipline and focus themselves and their actions to achieve any future goal but concentrate on localised resistance to power relations - *'micro-politics'*.

The concept of heterotopia is, understandably, itself heterogeneous. LETS operates as a heterotopia firstly in that it is a space in which multiple claims about money and livelihood are raised and which then knock up against each other: in other words, as a hetero(genious ut)opia. In this case LETS is a struggle against specific, local power relations that govern work and livelihood that results in multiple outcomes - contrasting values of money and livelihood held by different participants within the network, with no single value-claim being successfully imposed

on other network members in what is a heterotopia as *multiple space*. Secondly, LETS is heterotopia in that attention to the power held by participants illuminates the extent that network members are able to deploy this power within the structure of opportunities they find themselves, ie, through interaction with other actors in this heterogeneous utopia. Heterotopia here stresses the extent of creativity of LETS: the extent that this is a new technology that creates new, fecund forms of liberatory technology rather than a passive reaction to dominant and constraining power. While heterotopia insists that this liberatory technology enables alternative livelihoods to be created *alongside* the mainstream (one of many possible lifeworlds) rather than going *beyond* or replacing it, this heterotopia might be a resistant space that operates for a sustainable length of time by these changed rules - heterotopia as *temporal spac*e. Heterotopia might then mean the existence of multiple, temporally lasting alternative economic spaces, alongside each other, living by different rules.

However, if boosterism is to be avoided, a third form of heterotopia might be the best theorisation of LETS as micro-political resistance. In this case, if the transformed codes that members create are realisable only fleetingly, then LETS is a temporal, cognitive heterotopia. LETS would be what Bey (1995) called a "Temporary Autonomous Zone", a momentary effervescence structurally limited in its implementability and suggesting the need for meta-narrative solutions rather than micro-solutions. LETS would be unable to create its own values *outside* its network of traders who support its aims, unable to impose its values on others, and, as members do not themselves have the resourses to establish a 'socialism in one LETS Scheme', unlikely to last. It therefore operates as a *tactic of resistance* rather than a *strategy for power* likely to be achievable for any length of time within the mass of society (de Certeau 1984:34-9

quoted by Pile 1997:15**)**. In this case, hetrotopia is an *effervescent space*: a fleeting liberation, effective only ”below the threshold where the systematic imperatives of power and money become so dominant” (White 1991:67, quoted by Harvey 1993:54). Fourthly, above that threshold, LETS becomes heterotopia as an ‘*impossible* space’, a declaration of resistance to the rules of the game set by the powerful operating at the level of information, a Baudrillardian sign, a vision of an alternative, unrealisable yet inspiring 'mobilising utopia' - a *utopian space*. However, in this case, LETS would reinscribe Marx’s pessimistic dismissal of the co-operators of his day, of the “dwarfish forms to which individual wage-slaves can elaborate it, by their own individual efforts”, relegating co-operative experimentation to the mere demonstration of the possibility of a “republican and beneficent association of free and equal producers” (Marx 1863, in Fernbach (ed) 1974:90).

Thirdly, a Foucualdian conception of power will be employed in this analysis of LETS. For Foucault (1980:98), power circulates within a decentered net or grid in which actors are simultaneously entrapped and resisting. Rather than theorising power as hegemonic, held by some (who have it all) over others (who have none) for Foucault power is found in all relations, and is anonymous and all-pervasive (1980:89); found in multiple, local, decentered forms of subjugation (1980:96), in an all inclusive 'capillary' flow (Gledhill 1994:150). Foucault wishes to understand power and domination *so they can be fought*, and to analyse power "where it is in direct and immediate relationship with that which we can provisionally call its object, its target, its field of application.....where it installs itself and produces its real effects" (Foucault 1980:97).

Finally, the work of Deleuze and Guattari will be used to build on Foucault as they stress ***resistance*** over domination. In contrast with the tone of Foucault's work, which tends to envisage actors caught, fly-like, in a spider's web of domination, struggling vainly to escape all powerful systems of control, discipline and surveillance (Best and Kellner 1990:96-97), Deleuze and Guatarri emphasise the identification of creative "lines of flight" - what they call positive reterritorialisations of unconstrained and undominated territory through creative local political action (Best and Kellner 1990:101, Callinicos 1989:84). Innovative political action enables actors to ***create*** their futures, going past resistance to pre-existing and constraining power relations (Callinicos 1989:84). In collaboration with the Italian Autonomist Antonio Negri, Guattari calls for "a thousand machines of art, life and solidarity to sweep away the stupid and sclerotic arrogance of the old organisations!" (quoted in Best and Kellner, 1990:93). LETS will therefore be seen as a creative effervescence, as a technology of liberation, rather than a defensive resistance to a Foucauldian system of overarching domination.

As Gledhill (1994 123-150) cautions, however, the unproblematic valorisation of local struggles and of interesting "others" is inadequate without grounded research identifying the nature of the resistance and the domination it opposes, and an understanding of the capacity of the actors to, in Marx's evocative term, 'make history'. While LETS may be one of Guattari and Negri's 'thousand machines of art, life and solidarity', grounded analysis of the creativity of LETS as nomadic micro-politics will uncover the capacity it has to make the changes it seeks to make. The task is to observe the extent to which the benefits LETS claims it can deliver are realisable

from day-to-day participation on a micro-political basis; and the extent to which the local rules by which LETS works are internally consistent, thereby allowing alternative lifestyles to be lived irrespective of the actions of elites. This would be captured within an identifiable time and space within an observable 'structure of political opportunities' (Tilly 1977), or identifiable structure of allies, resources, enemies, opportunities and resistances, expected and unexpected, that advocates of LETS work their way through in pursuing their objectives.

Consequently, the method adopted to investigate LETS was primarily ethnographic and conducted in Manchester, UK, from January to September 1995. Fieldwork consisted of participant observation among members of Manchester LETS (a system which then had some 500 members), which identified the way members of LETS categorised themselves and the range of perspectives that informed their participation. These perspectives were explored in a series of three focus groups inspired and informed by social movement theory (Touraine 1981:150-183, Melucci 1989:235-249). Touraine's method of 'sociological intervention' (SI) takes participants on a semi-structured process to examine in some considerable detail reasons for participation in LETS what claims participants make about their world, and who is likely to be supportive and antagonistic to them (for a fuller discussion see North 1998a). Focus group work was supplemented secondly with a series of semi-structured interviews with active and inactive participants (both individuals and businesses) in both Manchester LETS and Linton's LETSGo project in Manchester which aimed to kick off LETS at a far larger scale than had been achieved by small local LETS Schemes and widening the range of services available through the encouragement of encourage significant business participation in LETS (for a full description, see North 1997 pp92-105).

Guided by social movement theory (Touraine 1981:1-27, Melucci 1989, 1992; Eyerman and Jamison 1991, Diani 1992), this fieldwork sought to analyse LETS from the perspective of the participants themselves. It uncovered and illuminated the competing discourses, or 'frames' (Snow et al. 1986) produced by the actors as they debated, created, deployed, abandoned and adjusted their frames reflexively in the light of other actors' reactions to them, and in the light of their experiences. Ethnography revealed that the frames produced by members of LETS were truly heterogeneous. Members produced a spectrum of perspectives from claims by those actively promoting LETS to the business community and local authorities that it was an apolitical policy innovation (see North 1998b), through those that felt that through 'relationship trading' (see below), LETS subtly and subversively 'greens' and 'humanises' participants who join for instrumental reasons, to those who had an explicitly countercultural focus (see North 1997:115-155 for an extended discussion). This paper illuminates LETS from the perspective of one group within these competing voices: its anarchist participants.

4. An exploration in heterotopia.

Manchester LETS' anarchist members emerged from a wider network of oppositional institutions organised around community, 'permaculture', organic methods, food co-ops, and conflict resolution circles, and which provided a wider network in which LETS was embedded. They argued that LETS increasingly enabled members to live outside the mainstream economy in the here and now, as a realisable aim given the resources they had themselves rather than as a hoped

for future contingent on the actions of supportive elites and businesses. They were not interested in attempting to transform these mainstream institutions, as they did not believe that LETS was capable of the task, or they felt that the mainstream was unresponsive. They were concerned that in attempting to make LETS more acceptable to these, LETS was losing its core value base. They believed that social change comes from alternative institution building and therefore sought to 'deepen' LETS, through developing the resources they had within their countercultural network (developing new housing co-operatives, organising food co-operatives, spreading knowledge of organic techniques etc), rather than 'widening' it by making it more acceptable to mainstream institutions. They saw LETS as a scaffold around which a counter-cultural alternative to the mainstream could be built. They sought to reduce to a minimum their connection with the mainstream economy and world of work, by building an alternative community that functioned ***now:***

> "*LETS schemes..... seemed like a way of living without having recourse to the mainstream economy, ...I wanted to support community and relationships with people and get us back to a(n).....aware(ness) that we can relate to each other in a happier and more comfortable way 'cos that fits in with how people are, people I think. Because I think basically are community creatures, and I think things like LETS schemes actually force us that way*"

At the risk of an unwarranted imposition, I organise their political positions under the banner of 'anarchism' in view of the strong resonance between their views and the long standing anarchist strategy of non-violent social change through the building of resistant alternative institutions from below advocated by Ward (1988), Bookchin (1980, 1986, 1995a, 1995b, 1995) or Bahro (1995). The anarchists' views can be contrasted with their colleagues who see LETS as an

uncontentious, unpolitical policy of use to business, local authorites, and other mainstream organisations.

The core claim the anarchists within LETS make is that social change springs from trading with local currency (in Manchester LETS, the 'Bobbin'), an experience altogether different from trading governed by the values that dominate capitalist regulation. Based on relationships, and building community as a by-product of 'relationship trading', they argue that LETS operates under completely changed cultural codes around money and livelihood. Members argue that they have created a new currency that is more liberating than Sterling, that revalues work, and that builds community values into economic transactions in a micro-politics of livelihood. The task of this paper is now to show what ethnographic observation indicated about the effectiveness of these micro-political claims, and to examine which conception of heterotopia fits LETS: firstly as contested multiple space, secondly as realisable alternative space, thirdly as fleeting effervescence, or fourthly as unrealisable resistance that provides an image of a presently impossible future.

(a) "I wouldn't pay him in Bobbins!": Changing conceptions of money.

Claims about money made by members of LETS are encapsulated by the following extract from a presentation made to members of a partnership aimed at the revitalisation of an outer housing estate in Manchester:

> "*I was reading a local paper in Leicestershire, and ...I was intrigued to know that in Leicester 12, 000 houses were unfit for human habitation and in need of renovation ... but the council haven't got the money. What a shame I thought, then I turn the page*

over and I see that builders are going out of business. So you've got substandard houses and unemployed builders, and you all lose out. And I thought, what a perfect example of the need for LETS.

"What are the problems of money? It's scarce - there's not enough of it about. It moves: out of the community to wherever it can get the highest rate of interest. It comes from them. In every country, there is a central issuing authority for money, they control how much money is in circulation. If there's too much money in circulation you've got inflation, if there's not enough there's no activity, so the job of the Chancellor of the Exchequer is to keep it scarce so that it has a value. If you could wade out down (the road) knee deep in £20 notes...money would have no value. It would just be litter. The only thing that gives money value, is our agreement.... to ***give*** *it value. You can't eat a £20 note, it has no intrinsic value at all, you can't wear it, you can't shelter under it. It has no value, only the value we give it.*

"And the problem with money is that it is scarce, it moves mostly away from us, away from our communities, and it's always produced by somebody else...not us. So we need a money that's plentiful....stays....(and comes) *from us. So what we've got is a money where there's always as much as you need - always - stays, and I'm in charge of it.*"

If the frames produced are examined, the heart of the micro-political challenge to the politics of money becomes claims clear. Firstly, the frame is produced that money is limited, that there is not enough of it about, and consequently needs are not met. To rectify this, a call is made for there always to be 'enough' money. Secondly, the problem is framed as one of control. Money is

not controlled by us, but by 'them', 'others', 'away from our community'. To rectify this a claim is made for control: that money should come from 'us'. Third comes the frame that 'we' should have 'enough' money in 'our community', but presently it flows to 'somewhere else'. So, statements that ‘there is not enough money’ are linked to a call for ‘enough’; that ‘we can't hold on to money’ to a call for it to ‘stay in our community’; and a statement that ‘we don't control money’ to a call for community currencies.

A solution is then provided: ‘create your own money’. If ‘money does not have value in and of itself’, money is ‘hypereal’, a floating signifier with no reference to a signified (to frame the argument in Baudrillardian terms). Consequently, a micro-political response is rather than attempting to take on the money system in total, it is possible to assign value to a community-created currency *from below*. A hypereal currency becomes real if we assign it value. A new form of society, co-operatively organised, will then spring from this design which changes the premise on which economic life takes place within the capitalist system. In this reading, LETS is a micro-political attack on the power relations of money, which, by being limited, enforces the labour discipline on which rests the capitalist system: labour discipline allowing the accumulation of capital and the extraction of surplus value, from which exploitation, alienation and inequality all follow. Rather, then, than being encaptured in a Foucauldian web of financial power relations that forced them to become wage slaves, members of LETS attempted a micro-political break out. They were creative.

These claims - that if 'money is just information' it can therefore be socially created - were accepted without dispute by members of LETS in Manchester. Conflict came over what sort of socially-created money should replace Sterling, and multiple claims about how the new form of money should operate were made. Participants concerned that LETS had the potential to become a mainstream institution, of use to business, felt strongly that the 'Bobbin' should have the same value as national currency: one Pound to one Bobbin. However, the anarchists were concerned that the Bobbin should be worth one hour, or one job, or whatever they pleased. They were concerned that linking the Bobbin to the Pound would re-inscribe capitalist valuations that, for example, paid a solicitor more than a careworker, men more than women, the educated more than those with no qualifications. Consequently, they led the original call for the unit of currency to be called the 'Bobbin' to reflect the Mancunian colloquialism *'that's Bobbins'* (meaning *'that's worthless'*); whereas Linton's LETSGo project called its currency the more neutral "Manchester Pound". Secondly, anarchists and those concerned to maintain attractiveness to business disagreed on the *status* of the currency. The latter saw LETS as a semi-permanent institution which would, in the future, involve mainstream organisations. They regarded LETS as a demonstration project for what could in the future become a widely accepted financial institution like a Bank or a Credit Union. They saw participation in LETS as the opportunity to gain access to a currency that would enable them participate in mainstream consumption patterns, once, they argued, mainstream institutions saw the claimed benefits and accepted local currency (as they now accept air miles, or use loyalty cards). In contrast, the anarchists regarded Bobbins as a temporary transitional mechanism into a non-money economy based on friendship, trust and mutual aid:

"When I started it's hard to get away from the notion of money and that you've got to have some before you spend some...but the more I got into it the less that seemed important. Now I'm not really bothered by Bobbins, and there are a few people that I know quite well and we don't bother with Bobbins, they do things for me and we just 'do it'.. I think the more relaxed you get about it....the less important Bobbins become."

Consequently, anarchists often would not take the Bobbin seriously, did work for people without accepting payment, did not bank the cheque, or charged one Bobbin for many hours work. In passing we should note the consequence of this perception by the anarchists is that statistical analyses of trading records fail to recognise that an anarchist participant's trading balance does not reflect the level of his or her activity, and does violence to the heterogeneity of value-systems around money within LETS.

Here we see a perception that LETS is a micro-political attack on the way that conventional money values work, and a wish not to re-inscribe these values through linking the value of LETS to national currency. Secondly, as this claim was disputed, LETS is not a unitary space, but contested. Anarchists and their more conventionally-minded co-traders had to knock up against each other, some claiming that a Bobbin was worth an hour, some that it was worth a Pound Sterling, some that it had value of itself (in that it stored value to be redeemed in later trades), some embarrassed at what they saw as the commodification of mutuality. LETS here is a contested, heterogeneous utopia - a heterotopia.

The second question is to examine the extent that the anarchist members were, if they so chose, able to create the own conceptions of money that were both divergent from mainstream valuations; and sustainable for any apreciable length of time. Were they able to trade effectively with a unit of currency based on equality of time; one unit per job; avoiding commodification of co-operative exchange relationships by refusing to use Bobbins, or stopping use once trust and reciprocity had been established. Given that a micro-political analysis would hold that actors have power, are able to resist, are creative, and should not be seen as mere recipients of structural domination the question arises as to the extent that the anarchists could revalue money as they hoped and create a heterotopia that operates for any length of time alongside the mainstream without either falling apart under its own inadequacies (as did Owen's Labour Notes) or provoking the reaction of the authorities encountered by the 1930s scrip movement. We have seen that more conventional participants in LETS did not wish to revalue money - that they could create money, valued at parity with national currency, was enough for them. The anarchists wanted to be more creative.

Certainly, anarchists *were* able to create a currency that operated as an alternative measure of value; as one explained:

> *"I base it partly on what the other person thinks a Bobbin is worth, (b) whether they've got lots of them that they want to get rid of, or they haven't got many and they don't want to spend very many, and (c) other people might think that my negative balance, I ought to do something, get my act together and make it a positive balance for a while. So I take into account a sort of mish-mash of thing...whether I take 10 Bobbins or 50 Bobbins is rather*

irrelevant to it. And to be honest the only reason why I think I ought to get my account into credit sooner or later is what, what some other people might think."

However, another member saw immediately the potential of LETS but felt that as she had spent more than she had earned she felt in 'debt'. She could not translate 'debt' into 'commitment' and felt that as common sense says 'debt is bad', others would think that she was not 'pulling her weight'. She therefore felt limited innovation was being made, and could not understand why others were less creative than she:

"*I was unemployed, and very very skint, and it was like...amazing for me to be part of this scheme which meant that things would be accepted that weren't acceptable for Sterling. I thought it was wild that all these things I'd needed doing for a long time that I hadn't got done as I didn't have enough Sterling, all of a sudden I could get them done.....But I quite quickly found that, I got frustrated that.... things weren't moving very quickly, and that often the people I got to do things for me, often that was the first time that anyone had called them and asked them to do anything. So I was quite shocked that we've got this amazing new scheme.....and I couldn't understand why people weren't using it in the same way. (But) I was quite creative...1 managed to coax people to do things that they weren't necessarily offering in the directory....And then I sort of panicked as I owed so many Bobbins! I was earning a few but it was really out of balance with what I was spending so I sort of reigned myself in, and I started working, stuffing envelopes and delivering to pay some of it back. I've been consciously not spending Bobbins as I've been aware of being in commitment and I feel quite responsible."*

This member's experience was typical. While analysis of turnover does not fully reflect economic activity, ethnographic observation supplements statistical evidence from Manchester LETS' accounts that levels of trading activity were low. Only 142 of the 550 members had a turnover of over 160 Bobbins (in the then two years of the systems operation), so had a limited amount of trading experience when contrasted with the magnitude of economic and social

interactions governed by mainstream logic, and this severely limited the amount of cultural innovation possible. Some were limited in what they could do by a lack of time, some were without a telephone (even in some cases those without an answerphone found that people did not call back). Others lived some distance away and found prospective traders were unwilling to travel; or lacked confidence to make the first move, and pick up the telephone to commission work from strangers. Some were wary of going into commitment. Others did not have skills members wanted. Consequently, the power of members to create their own value systems was limited (the second conception of heterotopia) by the sheer paucity of trading opportunities, even with those who shared their value base.

If an alternative money as measure of *value* was possible for the individual trader and those around them that shared their value base, the power to create an alternative system of value that could then be *exchanged* for goods and services was further limited. When compared with the volume of interactions in the mainstream economy, the low volume of trading and the absence of mainstream institutions within the network did not form a local structure of political opportunities open enough for the anarchists to gain access to the vast majority of things they needed, which were controlled by mainstream institutions which did not allow them to use their alternative money as a method of exchange to gain these resources. The limits to the effectiveness of their micro-political challenge, they recognised:

> *I don't think LETS on its own can create localised economies.....If you don't want a telly, and you are prepared to live on an allotment in a bender, that sort of thing, then LETS, no doubt, could do that now, provided you were the one growing the food because I don't think anyone else in Manchester is doing it...on the LETS system! But if you want a public transport network, if you*

want to be able to manufacture a bicycle, that sort of thing, then we really need local economies and that will take political action

Consequently, some anarchists were happy for LETS to remain as a first level heterotopia - a heterogeneous space that might in future attract the mainstream organisations that held the resources they needed. They did not have the confidence to try to create a second level heterotopia as a temporally maintainable resistant space

They were not able to build a second level heterotopia precisely as LETS was a hetero(genous u)opia rather than a unitary network operating by agreed measure of value. As a result of the success of LETS in attracting membership outside anarchist subcultural networks, anarchists claimed that others were trying to impose exchange relationships governed by mainstream logic. These members attempted to charge what the anarchists regarded as unreasonable levels of Sterling in trades. As one member wrote:

> "I feel that LETS is becoming rather too money-orientated. More members are asking for Sterling and Bobbins for their labour as well as for their products/services..... LETS is, in certain senses, beginning to mirror the money economy and the capitalist class system. Given when Bobbins only are charged there is a tendency for those middle class members whose talents and skills are highly valued in the money economy to charge pro rata for Bobbins. I believe this is wrong and devalues the original LETS ideal which was to subvert the money economy.

"Unless we can get back to the notion that an hour of my time is worth an hour of anyone else's, then I fear many whose skills are poorly used/not valued at all in the £ economy will feel disillusioned and will leave". (Unnamed member's letter, January 1995)

This drew a reply from the core group, who were responsible for co-ordinating the administration of accounts:

"I want to say to people "get real". People still have to live and make their way and pay their bills so they would have to charge Sterling.....and people needed to understand that the self-employed person had a right to a good income as well and to respect that. I'm more and more telling people not to be backward about putting up the Sterling component of their charges and not exploit themselves."

The core group regarded it as the individual right of every member to set their own value - that LETS should remain a heterotopia rather than one agreed utopia. This set limits of how much cultural innovation was possible from the perspective of the anarchists who found they had to wage individual wars against those who had values different to their own, and who would not agree a trade on a basis of equality. The most active members with a more explicitly counter-cultural perspective were able to create networks that traded using their changed value system, a unitary sub-utopia within heterotopia, but for most the small volume of transactions through which these individual wars could be fought ensured that attempts to trade if succesfull would be rare effervescences of free exchange ('heterotopia three'). More often, they ended with a refusal to trade with those who did not accept the an hourly rate rather than a collective process of redefining cultural concepts around money. Consequently, unless the member had a prior political commitment to trading at an equality of value, individual trading levels did not provide enough of a volume for experimentation with changed cultural codes around monetary value, and

the influence of structural forces in terms of common-sense values about money - that 'debt is wrong', 'it's good to have savings', 'you can't spend what you haven't got' - remained to govern the value base of those whose experiences of alternatives were limited.

Micro-politics then was often too 'micro' in the face of structural logic, and cultural revaluation of money was limited for most if possible for the active - as long as they restricted trade to others within heterotopia who shared their values of equal exchange; and as long as they did not regard the paucity of resources available within the system as a major defect. While the anarchists were not able to export their values out of their network and impose them on others who wished to value money conventionally, they *were* able to maintain their networks if members did not expect and wish to purchase resources only the mainstream economy produced. Their aim was to develop the potential of LETS more effectively to provide locally produced, organic food or opportunities to live in a housing co-op that could later accept local currency, rather than hoping that LETS would enable them to participate in mainstream consumption patterns. As they did not particularly wish to participate in the mainstream, they did not regard the failure of LETS to access it as fatal to their project. As trading within these limits using changed values around money *was* possible within the network of anarchists with alternative ways of valuing money, LETS was more than the fourth conception of heterotopia: a presently 'impossible' vision of what could be.

b) "Right Livelihood?": Changing conceptions of work.

The second claim members made was that LETS revalues work, employment and livelihood. Again, an analysis of LETS as heterotopia will examine the creativity of members of LETS in redefining work and the extent that these were contested values of the good life within the heterotopia that is LETS (Heterotopia One - multiple space). Secondly, analysis will uncover the extent to which the anarchists were able to gain access to the livelihoods and work they desired within the local structure of political opportunities and that this was sustainable for any length of time (Heterotopia Two - temporal space) or whether LETS provided fleeting opportunities to experience changed livelihoods (Heterotopia Three - effervescent space). Finally, the reformulation of codes around livelihood is not sustainable, LETS may provide a vision of how liberated work and livelihood ***could*** be organised (Heterotopia Four - utopian space).

Manchester LETS' anarchists claimed that work and livelihood in LETS is governed by completely different mores than those within the mainstream economy; and that therefore work in LETS is liberated - unlike that grounded in relations of exploitation under capitalism. In the capitalist economy, work must be done to earn limited amounts of money to gain access to resources to reproduce life - i.e. the wage earner under capitalism is alienated from the means of production and forced to become a wage slave. Wage slaves must earn from employers who have the upper hand in the exchange, controlling as they do the means of production. Within LETS, it is argued, there are no power relations that force wage earners to work. As money is unlimited there are no disciplining measures to force the selling of labour from one to another. Consequently, if a member can get resources simply by writing a cheque they will, as long as their cheques are accepted. If anyone wants services, they are likely to find that their requests are not met if they attempt to treat their fellow LETS member as an employee or tradesperson to be

ordered about. As traders do not have to earn before they spend, they need not accept work if not treated as they would like. Therefore, for trade to be successful, attention must be paid to the quality of the relationship and the enjoyability of the job, or it will not be done. This changed relationship between employer and employed, members call ‘relationship trading’:

> "*The LETS community does look at a transaction as a relationship whereas the commercial world looks upon a transaction as a transaction. You need some respect for the person you are dealing with as you know they don't have to do it. It's got to be mutually beneficial, whereas a transaction in the real world does not have to be...there's an imbalance of power.”*
>
> "*I don't think that LETS can actually be exploitative as my view of the currency is that it isn't actually currency and it's not actually worth anything. There's no actual legal enforcement - it's all voluntary and it hasn't got the capacity for a power relationship that the money economy has got..*"

The anarchists therefore looked to redefine work away from conventional full-time employment to a freer, more informal economy involving a blur of work and leisure and a portfolio of varied work opportunities:

> *"(work is) creativity!..... leisure can be work. You can have leisure that you create through working for some people."*

They seek to achieve this through breaking the division of labour down into a more flexible process of what one called 'energy transfer':

> "*swapping energies.... when you just don't **like** doing something, or.... it's a job that I can do - but, I can't be bothered! But I can do certain things for people that they would take four times as long to do! So why do all the shitty jobs that you find shitty, if someone else enjoys doing? It's wonderful that. Apart from...that, which I call energy transfer, was in my own case was having time on my hands as I deliberately under-employ myself in the mainstream if you like. I refuse to involve myself in a lot of mainstream activity, therefore I do have time and I do believe in it...you are empowering yourself and empowering others.*"

The anarchists therefore look to build friendship out of economic activity, and to have a relationship with their co-traders:

"I suppose I kind of expected to trade with people and like have a ***relationship*** *with them....and also particularly some of the people that I have met through the LETS system, like, it has occurred.. It's like...let's forget all the institutional structures around things, we are talking about being alive on the earth and the experience of being a human being and how we all connect with each other...and what do we fundamentally have in common outside all the social and cultural structures. It has that sort of rootedness about it. And sometimes I've met people where I've felt like, you know, I've.... I've really, struck, struck a chord there. There's a kind of resonance."*

So again, members were creatively able to create an alternative vision of work; an alternative to wage slavery that operated by changed rules around work. A creative micro-politics of work.

Again LETS was a heterogeneous utopia in which those who simply wanted to earn Bobbins for instrumental reasons knocked up with those who valued the quality of the relationship above the chance simply to earn money. However, those with less of a focus on building relationships did not want to spend the time getting to know each other, building networks and friendships. As a result, either they chose not to trade as they were not prepared or able to pay the opportunity cost of building relationships to facilitate trade; or they found they were being accused of using the network for exploitative reasons:

"I remember trading with someone and I got some very strange kind of feelings about it, you know, some real uncertainties.....I wanted to check this person out so I went to the directory, to see what else they do to build up a profile, and the person wasn't in there! So I'm sort of....wow! And so somebody's rung me up out of the blue, I don't know them from Adam, they've told me they are from LETS but they are not in there. I believe this person used LETS as a market place basically.....Hey - it's a good marketing technique. I think that made us realise how vulnerable it was, and how vulnerable you were making yourself with your name appearing in lots of people's houses that you didn't know and, and that you could be being rung up by people that you assumed had been, kind of vetted, not in a horrible way, but in a

personal way that is important if you are in a big city. You know? You don't know everybody. You can be done all the time. And it feels like a dangerous process there. I think that that shows our naiveté."

They found that they did not get the discipline and quality that they associated with the mainstream economy:

"I had a person...and her performance was not a valued performance. She treated it like it didn't matter! And therefore I in good faith was paying her money and Bobbins, and in good faith there was for me a contract around a quality of performance, and that is not my experience sometimes with LETS. Sometimes I find, I feel, (people) don't give the same commitment with their giving as they do with their receiving! And that's not a judgement but a sadness because I think well, LETS will only survive and grow if the....if the Bobbins are earned with respect. And the tasks are performed with respect."

Consequently, those with more conventional attitudes to work - those that wanted a job done for LETS purely as it saved them money - either found that they could not get commitment for the work to be done, or done to the extent that they wanted. Consequently, they decided not to break existing relationships for the provision of goods and services within the mainstream economy, and the network did not spread out of a core of anarchists providing alternative goods and services. Businesses especially were reluctant to break existing relations for an undisciplinable and uncertain relationship in which they were structurally weaker. LETS as a heterogeneous space operated in a way that discouraged conventional economic relationships based around compulsion, efficiency and quality in favour of co-operation, conviviality and softness.

To move to the second conception of heterotopia - as space that operates successfully alongside the mainstream for some time under changed codes - how temporally sustainable were livelihoods within LETS? Those who recognised that LETS was an alternative economic system that operated under changed market rules, found that Bobbins could be earned for services that most people would be unwilling or unable to purchase for Sterling. Market signals within LETS pointed to the possibility of alternative livelihoods, for example as a "psychic healer":

> *"The great perk for me being in the first directory, I was one of the first people to offer healing in the directory, and when the BBC Breakfast News did a piece on Manchester LETS, my entry appeared on TV, you know, a page saying..."Psychic healing", "Chakras".....so that I could say, you know, "as seen on TV!" (laughter*

Livelihoods could be created that would not occur to the participant in the mainstream economy - livelihoods that would not be viable or that would be unattractive. Active traders managed, often, to redefine work for example as a wormery builder, as a faith healer, as an astrologer, or bike workshop facilitator. If a job was not done well, often traders would look to help the person do a better job and pay them anyway*:*

> *"I do decorating, and I heard of one bloke that did decorating and the person had to ask them politely to stop working as he just was not good. In that instance the person said that they didn't mind because, is all a part of, that's what LETS is all about, it was a learning experience for them as to whether they were going to say anything, and they got something positive out of it."*

Softness developed through practising co-operation, sharing and support for others:

> *"My initial thing was to, LETS, this feels good, this is an organisation where there is an attempt to swap skills with respect and equal value, which are things I hold dear to my heart. There is*

perhaps an opportunity for people who don't work in mainstream employment to still have a way of earning some sort of currency which they can use to purchase things for themselves."

Alternative work became available for those who recognised it. In work, the anarchists created a liberated space operating on a day to day basis by *their* rules, with different market signals. If anyone wanted to trade for any length of time within LETS, they had to accommodate the values of 'relationship trading' - or find that their requests would not be met. However, again the number of services available within LETS was limited by the lack of mainstream organisations (especially businesses) to provide the diversity of services to complement those offered by the anarchists - and if a trader is not interested in tarot, reflexology or organic bread then few services can be available. Heterotopia was limited by the sheer number of economic relationships that participants had to operate through governed by mainstream values as members did not have the resources that they needed to bypass the mainstream.

As livelihood was defined on the anarchists terms, it was unattractive to (and not appropriate for) participation by mainstream organisations and businesses who could find neither the labour discipline they required or a suitably large range of services to take advantage of. Consequently, where mainstream resources were required, LETS was ineffective - but as LETS was creative enough to provide alternative forms of work for those who wanted it, it was more than an effervescence. To move to the fourth concept of heterotopia as information, as vision; as with the micro-politics of money, outside anarchist networks operating at a leve constrained by a lack of resourses, LETS operated as a sign of what could be, not an actuality that is. This did not trouble the anarchists unduly. Irrespective of low trading levels, they spoke movingly about what they called the 'spirituality' of livelihood and the psychic benefits of participation in an

economy that valued and included them and their potential contribution; as much as about the chance to use pre-existing skills and cost-benefit calculations about tangible benefits. As a result, they were more concerned to stress the intangible value of the feelings that they got from work in LETS:

> *"What I really got was the value of people coming together with something that they all supported and with a commitment that they all shared. It's something that's difficult to put into words, difficult to categorise, there's something almost political about it, if certainly not party-political, that had never happened before. The catalysing of all the potential energy which I'd never seen before, and I couldn't believe that all these people who'd been kept apart before had come together and I got most out of actually mixing with them and meeting with them."*

Being there - was enough.

5 Conclusion: the limits of Heterotopia.

So what of LETS as Heterotopia? Could Manchester LETS anarchists live 'as if the revolution was over and we had won', or were they "renounc(ing) the revolutionising of the old world by means of the (working class's) own great, combined resources, and seek(ing), rather, to achieve its salvation behind society's back, in private fashion, within its limited conditions of existence, and hence necessarily suffer(ing) shipwreck" (Marx 1852, quoted by Levitas 1990). Is Heterotopia sustainable, an ephemeral space that gives a vision of an alternative, entered only spasmodically by members through their limited trading experiences, or even impossible to realise beyond that of a message of a presently unachievable ideal?

While members could decide individually to change the way they valued money and livelihood, create new codes and live by them to a large extent, they *were* constrained in their ability to maintain this utopia by their limited resources. Where they needed resources held by the mainstream, they found themselves unable to export their codes out of their network to gain them. However, for the anarchists: that was not the point. Rather than being concerned at low trading levels, they revelled in the *creativeness* of LETS, in the challenge that they represented, irrespective of how sustainable it was:

> *"I think we are also interested in challenging, challenging the order of the day.....We tend to do things in an arse-about-face way no matter how hard we try. And I, at the risk of being hopelessly inarticulate I like the arse about face-ness of the LETSsystem. I like the fact that it isn't a mainstream institution. I'm someone that's never been particularly happy in the mainstream and quite happy on the fringes. Anything with a hint of weirdness attracts me like a magnet! It also has imagination... the fact of people imagining that they can set up a whole economic system. I personally find that attractive as it's based on imagination. The fact that people start to identify their own resources and what they have to trade in, the kind of weird economic exchanges that take place. I think that's great as it forces people to think for themselves rather than accept the shit that's fed to them. And I like that."*

In this, the anarchists were considerably more tranquil than their co-traders who felt that these ephemeral liberated moments through relationship trading were an indulgence. These activists felt that the anarchists were taking their eyes off the prize of larger, more widespread transformation of mainstream institutions who would join for economic reasons and then find that they were subtly drawn into 'relationship trading' and transformed economically from exploitative to co-operative trading relationships. Listening to this argument, the anarchists did not insist that all participants in LETS shared their value base *a priori*, and were happy to see the extent that (for example) businesses that participated in LETS would take on the values of LETS

through trading. They accepted the negotiation of heterotopia. Here can be found the strength of LETS - as well as its downfall.

The strength was that in agreeing to share the network with members who did not share their conceptions of value and livelihood, the anarchists built an alliance with those outside their network, and gained, when they persuaded these others of their value base - access to their resources. Consequently, unlike many of the micro-political movements theorists like Foucault value, they did not disempower themselves by cutting themselves of from the possibility of accessing other sources of power and resources (Harvey 1992:117). The weakness was in the unattractiveness to capitalist enterprises of a system that operates under micro-political rules set by advocates of free and undisciplined work, and of money that you don't need to work for to get. What is effective micro-politics to anarchists, is not necessarily acceptable to captains of industry or to bankers. The strategy of the anarchists accepting LETS as a heterotopia was limited precisely as LETS is effective anarchist politics that others. Consequently, the extent that the concept of 'relationship trading' and equality of work was exportable outside that network to other actors who do not share its (anarchist) value base was limited. The anarchists could have maintained their liberated approach to work and livelihood within their resources, without compromising their values in an unsuccessful attempt to widen their network onto less favourable territory.

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