

Economization and Beyond: (Re)composing Livelihoods in Maine, USA

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Abstract

Effectively engaging questions of sustainable regional development requires a substantive rethinking of the pervasive categories of “economy,” “society” and “environment.” Çaliskan and Callon's analytical approach to “economization,” a tracing of the material-discursive production of the economic, is one important starting point for such work. Taking the contemporary field of economic development in the state of Maine (USA) as a case study, and drawing on 15 recent interviews with a wide array of development professionals in this region, I pursue a critical analysis of regional economization and its accompanying constructions of society and environment. While affirming the economization concept as a useful tool for ethico-political analysis, I challenge this strategy at its limits. The tracing of successful framings and their overflows risks performatively affirming these constructions by assuming that the composition of collective well-being takes the ultimate and successful form of an “economy.” Analysis of economization must be accompanied by other explorations of the ways in which the work of regional economic developers might be articulated. I propose a reading of development processes and struggles in terms of the *composition of livelihoods*—destabilizing economy, society and environment and beckoning toward a “transversal” politics that might open up possibilities for unexpected alliances and alternative regional development pathways.

Introduction

Struggles over regional development and sustainable futures are often posed as a conflicted encounter between economy, society and environment. Amidst multiple assumed scarcities, we must

negotiate necessary “trade-offs” between these distinct spheres of interest. How do apparently non-negotiable “economic” demands for regional competitiveness and quantitative growth square with equally-crucial “social” demands for equity and community stability, or with urgent “environmental” demands for habitat protection, pollution reduction, and climate change action? Anyone who advocates for one domain may be accused of ignoring or undermining the concerns of the others, and the only reasonable position often appears to be a “balance” or a “harmonization” between domains. This is an approach animating much of the discourse on “sustainable development” (see, for example, Gallopín and Raskin, 2002; Strange and Bayley, 2008). The Maine Development Foundation (2013) is not alone in presenting a vision of reconciliation in terms of a three-circle Venn diagram [Figure 1].

V I S I O N

A high quality of life for all Maine people.

Achieving this vision requires a vibrant and sustainable economy supported by vital communities and a healthy environment.



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Figure 1: The opening page of *Measures of Growth in Focus* (Maine Development Foundation, 2013).

By accepting these terms of engagement, however, we risk reinforcing a particular historically-produced configuration as inevitable and thus obscuring crucial possibilities for alternative

development pathways. How might we repoliticize the terrain on which such struggles play out? Might we explore a politics beyond the assumption of an economy, an environment and a society—one that enables different framings of the ethical and political negotiation of collective livelihoods? This paper makes two interventions in this regard. First, I mobilize Çaliskan and Callon's notion of “economization” to trace ways in which “the economy,” and with it, “society” and “environment,” are produced as presumed contexts of action or objects of intervention among regional economic development professionals in Maine (USA). I argue that a hegemonic configuration of these three domains (one might call it “neoliberal”) is accompanied by a set of alternative mobilizations that highlight the provisional and contestable nature of economic institutions and metrologies. This economization approach, however, is pushed to its limits by my encounters with Maine's economic developers. Secondly, then, I argue that the tracing of framings and overflows relative to already-hegemonic articulations such as “economy” risks performatively reinforcing these very constructions. Crucial dimensions of what I will refer to as “livelihoods” *escape* economization (or, for that matter, environmentalization or socialization) and beckon toward other articulations. A key task is to become attentive to these “lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) and assist in their cultivation.

From Economy to Economization

The discourse of economy, society and environment draws its strength from an ontology which divides reality into “spheres” animated by distinct logics, dynamics, and interests. These spheres are not produced by human agency, but rather constitute the domains in or against which agency must be enacted (Barry and Slater, 2002; Latour, 2004). Knowledge produced by social and natural sciences—even while internally disputed—is understood to correspond more or less with a reality external to the apparatuses of research. As Latour (2004) contends, such an ontology relies on the notion of a stable,

objective “nature” untarnished by human values or politics. By appealing to this nature, or by linking certain objects with it, one can “short circuit” debate and render key relationships immune to political contestation (Latour, 2004, page 13). This is precisely how “the economy” is often posed (Gibson-Graham, 1995). If competition, growth, commodification, privatization and deregulation can be associated with “objective reality,” constituted as a set of demands emanating from a pre-social “beyond,” then possibilities for thinking and acting otherwise may be significantly foreclosed.

A variety of approaches in recent social theory have challenged such reification by asserting that these categories are not simply present in the world but must be continually *performed* through a variety of practices, techniques and enrollments (e.g., Callon, 1998b; Jessop, 2004; Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008; Latour, 2004, 2005; Law, 2004). The specific approach I pursue here is what Haraway (1992) and Law (2007) have called “material-semiotics.” Refusing a division between materiality and meaning-making, material-semiotics proposes that worlds are made through complex processes of *matter*ing, in both senses of the word (Cheah, 1996). Semiosis is thoroughly material, and our access to a matter that escapes signification is profoundly limited. One can no longer posit “structural properties” (Jessop, 2004, page 161) as given external constraints against which “cultural” construction must contend. Rather, we must view even “structure” as a contingent and provisional assemblage of active human and nonhuman elements. Material-semiotics demands that we remain uncertain and open with regard to the constraints and possibilities that such assemblages present.

Material-semiotics enables a shift from focusing on fixed objects of analysis—economy, society, environment—to the *processes* by which these objects are constituted and stabilized. The world, all the way down, must “be composed and not unveiled” (Latour, 2011, page 73). Following this thread analytically means to explore what Foucault calls “eventalization,” the work of “rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies and so on which at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident” (1991, page 76). Through what

eventualizing processes do things come to be “economic,” “social” or “environmental”?

Çalışkan and Callon (2009, 2010) propose, relative to the domain of “economy,” a focus on *economization*, an exploration of “the processes through which behaviours, organizations, institutions and, more generally, objects are constituted as being ‘economic’” (2010, page 2). Such processes involve “heterogeneous constituents,” including “rules and conventions; technical devices; metrological systems; logistical infrastructures; texts, discourses and narratives” (2010, page 3). Economization has been pursued by a number of scholars, often focusing on market constructions (e.g., Busch, 2007; Çalışkan and Callon, 2010; Callon, 1998; MacKenzie et al., 2007). A similar approach has been taken with regard to the assembly of “society” (e.g., Helliwell and Hindess, 1999; Rose, 1999; Rose and Miller, 2008) and “environment” (e.g., Goodie, 2006; Luke, 1995; Macnaghten and Urry, 1998).

Economization is fleshed out by Callon (1998) in terms of “framing and overflowing.” Transposing the economic concept of externalities into the key of sociology, Callon argues that entities such as “the economy” are produced by a material-semiotic boundary-making that simultaneously constitutes an inside and an outside. The framing of action is essential for any decision or calculation, and it depends on both the *exclusion of* and *relation to* that which it has externalized: “A wholly hermetic frame is a contradiction in terms,” writes Callon, “because flows are always bidirectional, overflows simply being the inevitable corollary of the requisite links with the surrounding environment” (1998a, page 255). One can trace how a given construction is framed and how various forms of exclusion necessarily underwrite its success or failure. The political intention here is to render objects such as “the economy” open to contestation and transformation by making their ongoing construction visible—ultimately, “to produce the conditions in which new emerging forces are offered the possibility of becoming stronger [and] to limit the grip of established forces” (Callon, 2005, page 18).

There is an important and often unacknowledged tension here. While tracing the ongoing composition of an “economic” may, indeed, enable interventions in the economizing process, it does not necessarily enable the full array of “new emerging forces” to be strengthened. In seeking an “economy,” the economization approach finds one. Or it finds many. In either case, economization may tacitly reinforce the problematic assumption that the composition of collective livelihoods must take the ultimate form of an “economy.” What if not all livelihood activity can or should be named “economic”? What if some overflows are not the externalized conditions of possibility for economic framing, but in fact escape this meta-frame altogether? Maine's regional development field presents precisely such overflows.

Maine: Context and Methods

With over 3,500 miles of ragged coastline, more than 250 rivers, 2,200 lakes, and 17.7 million acres of forest, human livelihoods in the state of Maine have long been bound together with the living abundance of land and waters. Over the past five decades, extractive resource practices and shifting industries have collided with growing concerns for the well-being of nonhuman species and ecosystems, making Maine a significant site of conflict over how “we” (the very definition of which is at stake) should live together on a shared earth. Maine is one of many places in which something called “the economy” appears to be in conflict with something called “the environment,” with public clashes ranging from the heated “payroll versus pickerel” debates in the state's industrial river towns surrounding Maine senator Edmond Muskie's 1972 Clean Water Act (Colgan, 2006), to more recent conflicts over private resort development along the largely-wild Moosehead Lake (Bell, 2007; Bley, 2007) and an attempt to construct a private “east-west highway” through the forested center of the state

(Philbrook, 2012). At the same time, Maine's "society" appears to be at once threatened by and in desperate need of a robust "economy," with an ever-aging and flat or declining population (Sherwood and Mageean, 2004), rising unemployment, and multiple changes threatening to undermine long-standing rural communities and traditions (Barringer 2004). Maine is a suitable place to explore the effects and limits of the tripartite ontology of economy, society and environment, and the articulations and interventions that might emerge beyond it.

In the analysis that follows, I draw on 15 semi-structured interview-conversations completed in the winter and spring of 2013 with regional economists, private economic development consultants, directors of nonprofit regional development advocacy organizations, state government officials, and staff of state-wide and sub-regional economic development authorities in Maine.¹ These "economists in the wild" (Callon, 2007, page 342) work, in a variety of ways and alongside a variety of socio-technical assemblages, to constitute particular versions of economy, society and environment as objects and sites for intervention. This fieldwork is part of a larger project in which I have also engaged professionals working in the domains of the "social" and the "environmental," but my focus in this paper on regional economic development aims specifically to explore possibilities in a site where one might think neoliberal, capitalist hegemony to be particularly strong. Without rejecting a multitude of other strategies, I hope to catch a glimpse here of openings in which economic development practice and policy might be shifted from a space of capitalist reproduction to a space of ethico-political possibility (Gibson-Graham, 2010).

I call these fieldwork encounters "interview-conversations" because they did not follow the conventional formula of a disengaged researcher observing "subjects." Quite the contrary, I attempted to draw interviewees into dynamic conversations. By posing questions, prompts, and occasional

¹ These interviews were done with a commitment to anonymity, and therefore references to them will take the form of pseudonyms or general descriptions.

propositions, I explored with my interviewees some of the definitions, practices and effects that circulate in the name of economy, environment and society. I focused on cultivating modes of conversation in which our diverse matters of concern could respectfully and generously *meet*, and in which space was made for unexpected lines of flight to emerge. Indeed, I am less interested in what regional economic developers *are* than in what they might *become* if enrolled into different kinds of material-semiotic assemblages.

This paper's focus on the *pronouncements* (written or spoken) of regional development professionals may seem at odds with the kinds of multi-modal analyses that material-semiotics suggests. My intention is not to foreground discourse at the expense of materiality, but rather to refuse such a binary and to locate my intervention primarily in one limited “moment” of a wider material-semiotic chain of articulation. Regional development discourse is a crucial element in the composition of Maine's economy, environment and society, and while it cannot alone generate performative effects, it may catalyze, reinforce or undermine such effects on a number of levels. When I speak, in this paper, of “articulation,” I specifically refer to a material-semiotic process of linkage and composition, one in which the specific relations of various actants (human and nonhuman, linguistic and nonlinguistic) cannot be specified or measured outside of intimate empirical engagement or experimental intervention. The research described here is intended to serve as one small entry point into a wider field of transformative material-semiotic strategies.

A Critical Story: Economy as Objective Law

Maine's economic development field is engaged with the ongoing composition of a particular hegemonic version of “the economy, along with an accompanying configuration of “society” and

“environment,” that exerts a powerful gravitational pull on policy and political imagination. I use the term “hegemony” here in the sense of Laclau and Mouffe (2001), designating an always-partial closure around a particular material-discursive formation. Hegemony involves the construction of a “common sense” (Gramsci, 1971, pages 326–330), a horizon of possibility which attempts to cover over its own contingency and yet remains vulnerable to transformation. To say that a certain economization is hegemonic is to say that a particular “Maine economy” has become for many people an obvious reality, an inevitable context in which human action unfolds.

This context is described repeatedly among Maine's economic development professionals and in the state's media: Maine is a small part within a larger whole to which it is subjected. Far from having the freedom to determine their own future, Maine people must recognize that “economic forces” provide the dynamic, yet non-negotiable parameters within which any creative engagement with development must take place (Barringer 1973; Colgan 2004; The Brookings Institution 2006). As Owen, the director of a prominent nonprofit state-wide economic development organization stated, “Economic forces are gonna happen, and it's gonna go where its gonna go, and we can try to control it, but at the end of the day...at some level it's gonna happen.”

Economization unfolds, first and foremost, as the articulation of a structure of nested containers, each of which exerts asymmetrical force upon its subordinated contents: the global economy upon the national, the national upon the regional, and the regional upon the local (Gibson-Graham, 2002). As Mitchell and others have shown, this systematic and self-contained economy is constructed via a set of institutionalized accounting technologies which work to render “real” that which they purport only to measure (Breslau, 2003; Eyal and Levy, 2014; Mitchell, 1998). The system of national accounts, produced and maintained by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, provides a numerical foundation for benchmarking the work of regional economic development. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in particular, and especially its state-by-state version (GSP), appears as the

crown measure of the “whole economy” itself, and is mobilized in multiple regional analyses and strategy proposals. In this sense, we might say that the Maine Development Foundation's widely-circulated *Measures of Growth in Focus* report—affirming, among other things, a primary strategic emphasis on the metric of “productivity,” measured as “the value added [measured in GDP] per worker in Maine” (2013, 17)—is a material translation site for a whole array of socio-technical devices and practices upon which Maine's contemporary economization relies.

Objectification through measurement sets up the context in which “the economy” can be understood and experienced as a site of law-like dynamics that exceed human agency (Gibson-Graham, 1995). Strong discourses confirm this image across Maine's political spectrum: “You *can't* contradict the laws of supply and demand. I mean, they operate. They *do* operate,” said Ben, an academic focused on sustainable regional development. His work normally emphasizes the role of institutions in structuring the political landscape, yet when it comes to supply and demand dynamics, such analysis does not apply. In a surprisingly identical articulation, a conservative economic think-tank leader (normally antagonistic to Ben's approach) proclaimed confidently that, “politicians think they can repeal the law of supply and demand. It's never been violated. Economists have studied it for hundreds of years. It's a *law*.” Such discourse gains performative strength through its ongoing articulation with (and subsequent invisibilization of) a whole host of contested legal, technical, metrological, and organizational practices and technologies that render an observable supply and demand dynamic possible (Callon et al., 2007).

The conviction that Maine must follow an inviolable dictate from the economy manifests in a pervasive emphasis among economic development professionals on competition. All strategies for improving lives in Maine must ultimately pass a crucial test: does this make our state or its private enterprises more competitive? Ostensibly cutting-edge approaches focused on “bottom-up” asset-based development, enhancing local capacity, and cultivating “quality of place”—approaches that might, in

another frame, suggest a focus on endogenous development, regional sufficiency, and creative action to meet local needs—are all circumscribed by the necessity of competitive advantage. The only *assets* that count in the framework of Mobilize Maine, a statewide asset-based economic development initiative funded by the U.S. Economic Development Administration, are those that lend Maine an exclusive “competitive edge” over other regions (NADO Research Foundation, 2011). The only *innovation* that counts in Maine Department of Community and Economic Development's *Innovation Index* (2012) is that which can enhance commercial productivity or catalyze the development of new marketable products. Maine's *quality of place* is developed or preserved primarily in the name of attracting, as one interviewee put it, “young, talented, educated people...the hope for the future, for Maine” (Governor’s Council on Maine’s Quality of Place, 2007, 2008; Reilly and Renski, 2008).

There is no escaping the competitive dynamic, and anything that does not directly address it is marginalized or made invisible. Owen, cited above, articulated this perspective clearly: “You know, in an economy, you have to make choices. There are going to be winners and losers. That's how economies work. There's no saving everybody.” Thus even when a diversity of livelihood practices are recognized in Maine, they are rendered marginal in the ranking of priorities, since most cannot be easily folded into competitive practice. Indeed, to the extent that they function as sites of necessity, these practices are seen as elements to eradicate. In a successful development regime, said Owen,

... all of those [non-market] things that people are using to survive hopefully go away, or, [stick around] because they're fixed, meaning “I'm no longer hunting for food, I'm hunting because I like hunting,” and, “yeah I like the taste of deer meat so I kill a deer once a year, but I'm not like have anxiety over if I don't get the deer I don't know how I'm going to eat this winter” ... [We're] trying to get to the place where the other stuff doesn't *matter* as much.

Paid work in competitive capitalist firms becomes the ultimate end-goal, the material-semiotic violence of its own necessities rendered invisible by a tacit discourse of progressive modernization.

The production of the very real dependencies binding Maine people with a particular set of institutions vulnerable to and dependent on a “competitive marketplace” is also effectively naturalized. Adam Smith's (1982) mythological narrative of the movement from the primitive hunter to the pin factory employee is alive and well in Maine.

With the economy restricted to a law-like domain of competitive, monetized, market activity, Maine people can participate in economic life only as adaptive subjects. Innovation and creativity are core themes among development professionals in the state—reflective of a wider turn in regional development theory (e.g., Bröcker et al., 2010; Cooke et al., 1998; Stolarick and Florida, 2006)—but this discourse primarily renders creativity as a tool of *response* to externally-posed “market forces.” Maine communities are constituted as sites of lack, spaces of underdevelopment in need of economic growth, or spaces of potential in need of capitalization.² Practices of “asset-based development,” as promoted by Mobilize Maine and others, are often reinscribed into the very needs-based framing they purport to challenge. Maine communities are not asked to identify their assets for a genuine endogenous development, but rather so that valuable elements of “the community” can be rendered into commodities or amenities to support in-migration. “When you consider your assets,” said a sub-regional organizer of Mobilize Maine, “you've got to continue to look at them in terms of what value do they bring you ... what is the competitive advantage you can get out of them? ” Rather than pursuing an explicitly needs-based “smokestack chasing” (condemned in these terms by many interviewees), Maine people are now asked to import tourists to their “quality places,” export commodities based on local “assets,” and chase entrepreneurial members of the creative class—all strategies that amount to a thinly-disguised version of a conventional export base model. “Community” signifies at once a site of need and a site of potential for attracting external capital(ists). As one

2 For a similar analysis of “regional subjection” in the Australian context, and one which has influenced my own research, see Gibson (2001).

nonprofit development director put it, “It’s something that makes us actually attractive—here’s 400 unique little communities you could live in.” The “you” of this statement can be read as a marketing pitch to the abstract client who is, as they say in Maine, “from away.”

At a more aggregated scale, “community” is transposed into “society,” which occupies a position both similar and distinct. In one sense, society is the collection of communities-in-need, the larger sphere in which adaptation to economic forces must unfold. This is the aggregate often referred to in development policy literature as “Maine,” or “the state,” as when the widely-cited *Charting Maine’s Future* report poses its urgent and thinly-veiled threat: “In sum, a state with much promise seems stuck: surprisingly pessimistic about its future, aware that great change is upon it, but fearful that it isn’t adapting as well as it needs to” (The Brookings Institution, 2006, page 6). Forces beyond us, eliciting the affects of subordination, must be faced with courage. If Maine fails, the report’s tone implies throughout, it will be because “we” (as a society) have failed to rise to the occasion that “the economy” demands.

At the very same time that this articulation of Maine society demands the enthusiastic adoption of adaptive subordination, society also stands as a *scapegoat* for those elements of the “the economy” that might be found objectionable. An economist for the State of Maine, responding in our conversation to a challenge about the economistic reduction of *values* to *exchange value*, said, “I think a lot of that just has to do with our culture and where that comes from over time, how that developed. We, as Americans, tend to value work and money over just about everything else [laughs].” A similar sentiment was expressed—albeit in more neoclassical terms—by a conservative economic policy advocate. If the outcomes of market-based allocations are ecologically destructive, it is society’s “preferences” that are to blame: “I mean... society’s not perfect, and never has been.” Society becomes a conceptual deflection device for contestations over the politics of economization itself.

The oscillation between a subordinate and a sovereign society is made possible only in relation

to an economy positioned ambiguously between the twin poles of culture and nature, the separated domains of subjects and objects (Latour, 2004, page 132). On one hand, human subjects set the economic process in motion (with “preferences”) and thus legitimate the economy as being, according to the government economist, “really about people.” And yet the translation of these social preferences into a set of ordinal measures animated by a rational, calculating and utility-maximizing “human nature” enables sociality to appear in the aggregate as an objective force of nature. If one critiques “the economy” for elevating exchange value over all else, “society” will be blamed for its problematic preferences. If one attempts to challenge the objective rule of the economy on the grounds that it is a socially-determined process, the law of supply and demand will be presented as a *natural* law that cannot be “repealed” by institutional action.

This binary ontology also undergirds the hegemonic relation between economy and environment in Maine, where “the environment” serves two roles. On one hand, it is a key domain from which to extract economic value in the form of raw materials for conversion into salable commodities or “amenities” that serve to attract capital. As the authors of *Charting Maine's Future* describe, “Maine possesses a globally known 'brand' built in images of livable communities, stunning scenery, and great recreational opportunities” (The Brookings Institution 2006, 6). Ecological concerns appear in this report only as an awareness that “often-haphazard residential development is more and more *blurring those crisp scenes* as it impinges on forests, fields and waterfronts all around the state” (2006, 8 italics mine).

At the same time, “the environment” functions as the domain of a purified nature, the ultimate exterior which verifies the separation of nature and culture, object and subject, fact and value, and serves to legitimate any appeal by economic representation to a “natural” (inevitable and objective) law. Responding in our interview to a challenge regarding the necessity of competition, one private economic development consultant offered a common trope of “nature”: “Yeah, but you gotta compare

yourself to something. We're an animal. We have to be better than others. We are an animal that says I want to be better than you. Everything is competition. It's just the nature of being an animal.” Not only the economy, but the environment itself demands that we compete—or die.

To conclude this analysis, we can return to the triple circles of the Maine Development Foundation [Figure 1] and read them as a graphical ontology—a “cosmogram” (Tresch 2007) depicting a pervasive articulation of the structure of life in Maine. While one might at first view the circles in an equal relation, another reading detects a thinly-disguised pyramid. Achieving “quality of life for all Maine people,” say the report's authors, “requires a vibrant and sustainable economy *supported by* vital communities and a healthy environment” (Maine Development Foundation, 2013, italics mine). Society and environment are accessories to that which is primary. What this means, in practice, is that a particular normative composition of human livelihoods—an economization restricted to market-based creative responses to competitive pressures imposed by the sovereign forces of a larger “economy”—is placed at the apex of policy-making, institutional intervention, and public imagination. Maine's possibilities for responding to the profound challenges of the current and coming decades are thus profoundly limited.

Other Compositions Are Possible

Such hegemony, of course, is always partial, and is sustained by the marginalization of all elements which challenge, weaken, and destabilize the narrative. The articulation of economy as a law-like domain is a powerful material-semiotic assemblage in Maine and cannot therefore be dismissed as “merely a story”; yet neither can it be taken as a reality whose supersession lies only in the future institution of a singular alternative. As Law (2004) proposes, reality is *multiple*, and our task is not to sort out the “right” representation or attempt to replace one exclusive reality with another, but rather to

align ourselves, experimentally, with already-existing or emerging “other” realities. We must engage in the performative “ontological politics” of encouraging some becomings while challenging others (Law, 2004; Mol, 1998). Because the hegemonic articulation of economy, society and environment is underwritten by the exclusion of all that would render it unstable or illegitimate, we are able to challenge it by exploring these always-present overflows. Such “reading for absences,” as Gibson-Graham writes, “excavates what has been actively suppressed or excluded, calling into question the marginalization and 'non-credibility' of the nondominant” (2006, page xxxii).

Multiple Economizations

An initial, and quite striking, dimension of overflow among Maine's economic development professionals is the number of differing and often contradictory definitions of “the economy” they hold and mobilize. These developers are not, in fact, developing the same economy. Among a number of alternative economizations, two stand out: economy as a provisional frame constituted by its measurement, and economy as a site of public conflict, debate and decision.

In a number of interviews the “economy as law” articulation was accompanied by a contradictory notion of economy as a conceptual construct for measurement and comparison. One development consultant who spoke of the economy as a system animated by inevitable competition and demanding “continued human growth” also said, in another breath, “we created the economy. It's a made up thing, a made up way to measure stuff going back and forth, right?” The government economist (cited above), said quite similarly, “A lot of what we talk about with the economy, well it's all just sort of concepts and it works because everybody's bought in to this concept.” The notion of economy as conventional measure was described in more precise terms by Robert, an academic

regional economist who does frequent consulting work in the state:

The question of “what is the economy” ultimately comes down ... to what it is you're exactly measuring and what it is you're doing [with that] measuring. ... we tend to talk about the economy as jobs, but jobs are just another measure. They're not the economy. They're just one more of the numeric measures we use to give form to the economy in order that we can talk about it.

In this understanding—not unlike that of Callon—the economy is constituted through a socio-technical framing, overtly produced and inevitably selective. “Measurement increases precision,” said Robert, “but creates its own distortion.” This is a view of economy that renders its singular “reality” wholly questionable: there may be real activities that measurements bring into focus (and also enable), but these are never fully captured by representation. An excess of livelihood activity always escapes the accounting framework through which “the economy” is produced and thus challenges the very notion of a systemic totality. If a totality is known only through its provisional measurement, how are we to assume that its “laws” pre-exist this measurement rather than emerge from it?

The question of measurement is a site of nascent or potential conflict among Maine's economic developers (not to mention between them and other constituencies). Sandra, the director of a sub-regional economic development council in the northern (very rural) part of the state, described the economy quite dramatically as an “ethnocentric” process of “colonization,” the domination of human communities by a universal standard to which all differences must be subordinated:

People like to use Gross Domestic Product and all those ways to measure, and I don't pay much attention to those, because [sighs] ... I think it's a bunch of baloney, frankly. I think you can't compare [this town] with a town of 4200 in another state ... How would you compare that? Incomes? Median incomes? Maybe. The percentage of income in heating your house? Maybe, maybe you're getting closer to it? How much it costs to feed your family? Would you count the farmers market then, or would you just count what's at the [supermarket]? You know? Would you count the tomatoes I ate this

summer from my backyard, you know? So really, no. I don't think you can compare.

What is at stake here, for Sandra and others, is which activities, aspirations and modes of evaluation will be considered legitimate expressions of “success” in economic development. The question is not what “the economy” demands, but rather what measurement enforces or renders invisible. Radically different measures would be needed, Sandra's account suggests, if “economy” referred to the diverse processes of, in her words, “having people work together as a community to get ... their needs met, and some of their wants and desires.” This is precisely the kind of substantive definition of economy offered by Polanyi (1977) and more recently adopted and developed by Jessop (2004) and Lee (2002, 2006) among others.

Another common (and, again, often contradictory) theme among interviewees was the possibility that members of a given community might substitute a strict adaptation to “economic forces” for a deliberative *process* of determining economic life. To varying degrees, a crucial ethical impulse suggested that economic development should be a democratically-decided affair. Regarding the question of whether certain parcels of land should be put to the “highest and best use... in terms of economic value,” one sub-regional economic development council director suggested that the market is not—and should not be—the final arbiter: “I think the public decides for you.” He was referring to various public forums through which development of public land is contested, debated and ultimately determined. Even Owen, cited above as wedded to “market forces,” made it clear in another moment that Maine people do (and should) determine values-based limits to conventional development: “In Maine, we do pretty darn well because we made some choices, about MaineCare [a public health insurance program], and dental care, and a whole bunch of other things that make our state even more expensive, but we care about our people here. You know? In a way that Texas doesn't, to be clear.”

From Economization to Livelihoods

Tracing these alternative economizations enables a destabilization of the certainties and closures that accompany the hegemonic articulation of “economy as law.” Yet the analysis cannot end here, for even highlighting economization's plurality runs a profound performative risk: that in looking for economizations—even alternative ones—*we ourselves become the economizers*. There is, in fact, far more than an “economy” already emerging within this field. Many elements of what regional development professionals presented to me escape even a notion of *alternative* economization and beckon, instead, towards entirely different ontological compositions. It is economization, in fact, that may play a role in obstructing the emergence of other articulations.

Indeed, when examining the dynamics of my interviews through the lens of performativity, I find a surprising and unsettling dynamic. If there was an economizer present in my interviews, it was often *me*, as my questions formatted reality in terms that my interviewees sometimes resisted. I demanded that they describe the world to me in terms of these three categories. They refused. In some cases, resistance took the form of evasion, with interviewees eliding the questions and then describing the details of their daily work in terms of specific meetings, projects, negotiations, and interventions. In other instances interviewees answered my questions but with visible discomfort—hesitation not reducible to an unexpected query. One state-wide development agency director went so far as to question the validity of my project framing. Focusing on these distinct categories, he said, “is wrong. It'll get you to some place, but it won't get you to talking about the things... the whole package that makes us good.”

He had few alternatives to offer, and most of our conversation was riddled with references to “the economy” as a distinct sphere, and to the importance of generating “basic facts” that could form the basis for objective policy conversations. This interviewee and others, however, recognized the

profound limits of the very mode of thought that they also embraced. It is as if my questions served to reflect back to these developers a self-image that they wanted to refuse, an articulation seen as problematic only from an outside that our conversation helped to generate. Economy, society and environment are terms that we can neither fully endorse nor yet think without.

Harriet, director of a state-wide rural development coalition, rejected the trio outright as “false divisions” and instead described her work in terms of a grassroots, democratic process. “We want the community to own the economy, if that's possible,” she said, at the same time refusing to give this “economy” any systemic integrity. For her, development cannot mean the alignment of community strategy with the demands of an “economy,” but must be a process through which “the community decide[s] what it wants to accomplish, and then you try and figure out how can we gauge where we are now and where we should go.” Harriet and her co-workers are not compelled by a demand for competition or for more jobs at all costs: “It is about jobs, or is it about well-being and sufficient wherewithal to take care of yourself? What would you rather have—more jobs, or enough where you can enjoy your life?” She does not suggest that anything is possible, but rather shifts the emphasis of action from pre-determination by a space (or theory) of constraint to an exploration of possibilities based on democratically-articulated need and vision.

The “economy” as an ontological ground is effectively left behind, and this emphasis on negotiation opens spaces in which one cannot decide “beforehand” how the substantive elements of a good life might be composed. Will it take the form of an “economy”? Only to the extent that collective processes of world-making are captured by economizations. Cameron and Gibson-Graham's (2003) radical refiguring of “economy” beckons toward precisely this opening. It should be engaged, they argue, as a space “emptied of any essential identity, logic, organizing principle or determinant” (2003, page 152), not a distinct sphere but an “open-ended” process of instituting and negotiating diverse

modes of transaction, labor, and surplus organization (2003, page 153).

Rather than “economy,” I mobilize the language of *livelihoods* to designate such processes of material-semiotic life-constituting activity. This term was used by Polanyi (1977) to name a non-economistic field of diverse provisioning activity and has been more recently adopted by the development discourse of “sustainable livelihoods” (Carney, 2003; Chambers and Conway, 1991; Scoones, 1998, 2009). My intention in this paper is not to engage these theorizations directly, but rather to use the term as an open invitation to think beyond various economizations. Widely used in Maine to refer to the general work of “making a living,” livelihoods can loosely indicate the very *question* of how we compose that which sustains us, where both the nature of “sustenance” and the composition of the “us” is open for negotiation.³ This conception builds on, and at the same time re-frames, work by members of the Community Economies Collective on “diverse community economies” (Gibson-Graham, 2006, 2008; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Roelvink and Gibson-Graham, 2009). I prefer to speak of diverse *livelihood* practices through which we “negotiate our interdependence” (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, page xix).

As a preliminary engagement, I suggest that livelihood struggles in Maine can be partly understood in terms of power-laden contestations and negotiations over: (1) the *practices and institutions* that constitute livelihoods; (2) the *constituencies* that can and should participate in such composition; (3) varying notions of *possibility and constraint*; and (4) the kinds of *normative demands and motivations* that are understood to animate processes of “making a living.”

First, the scope of legitimate economic practice is, for many developers, the production of commodities by capitalist firms, the regime of paid employment, and the domain of private individual consumption. For others, however, like Sandra and Harriet, it is the *entire array* of practices and

³ This is effectively how Emery and Pierce (2005) make of the term, and I think the spirit in which Roger Lee refers to the diverse ways in which people must always “get on with sustaining the social and material means of their own sustenance” (Lee, 2006, page 442).

institutions through which people determine and meet their needs and desires—including, for example, taking care of “the critters, the flora and fauna, air, all of it” (Harriet) and the unpaid labor of producing and sharing backyard tomatoes (Sandra). What activities, processes and relationships are permitted to appear as legitimate contributors to livelihood composition in public debate? Regional development professionals variously recognized, in our conversations, the existence of hunting, fishing, trapping, foraging, home gardening, barter, gifting, parenting, housework, informal marketing of subsistence surplus, government redistributions, voluntary reduction of consumption needs, worker- and community-owned cooperative businesses, caring for land and waters, and the work of “ecosystem services” as some of the many ways that Maine people make a living. These elements cannot be entirely captured by a concept of “economy,” and the conventional trio cuts across and through this proliferation, marginalizing many practices as “non-economic” and therefore non-serious.

Secondly, the question of who should count as a legitimate participant in livelihood processes is far from settled. When Sandra suggested that “quality of life ... needs to be for our rivers and for our fish and the animals,” she scrambled the conventional solution to the question of who counts in “the economy.” Similarly, when Keith, economic development director of a sub-regional planning council, proposed that “economic infrastructure” must include not only “roads, bridges, highways, [and] sewage systems,” but also “the capacity to sustain social interaction ... which would include ecology,” he introduced a profound instability into the heart of the “economic.” Who is included? Where should this inclusion end? Development controversies cannot avoid the emergence of multiple interested constituencies, attached via myriad motivations and energies, to many common and obscure beings. When asked about whether the discourse of “quality of place” includes elements that do not directly contribute to scenic amenity values for the creative class, Keith noted that “there's always a group of people who are focused on the preservation of the small things, whether it's birdwatchers or salamander preservers or people who want to harvest...the little ferns... there's always a constituency

for that.” Conventional divisions of economy, society and environment divide these multiple constituencies, rendering many into “externalities” of an exclusively human economy. From a livelihoods perspective, however, they must all be seen as having (potentially) constitutive roles in the dynamics of composition. The “little ferns” are fiddleheads (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*), an important traditional food collected for subsistence and market in the early spring. Are birds and salamanders any less crucial? Given that we are constituted by immense and complex interdependencies, and that we do not know who or what we “really” need, which beings will be allowed to participate in public negotiations regarding the provisional outcomes of development processes?

Thirdly, for some developers, there are clearly indisputable “economic” necessities to which their work must conform; for others, however, the question of possibility and constraint is one to be answered only in the process of organizing. No “law” should serve to short-circuit development driven by democratic debate and decision. Indeed, the actual daily *work* of Maine's economic developers does not reproduce an articulation of a law-like economy or a distinct society and environment; rather, it reveals a world that can be variably *made* and *altered*, an array of sites for ongoing intervention that scramble distinctions between the three spheres. Economic developers are not simply responding, for example, to the demands of “market forces,” they are participating *as forces themselves*, seeking to transform key dimensions of public life by mobilizing allies and settling debates. In this sense, they may have more in common (ironically, perhaps) with environmental and social justice activists than they do with academic “economizers” performing an autonomous “economy.” As Owen asserted, “Nothing ever really, really gets done. So... we've got to change that. And in order to change that, you've got to create a movement... Because there's power in the group.” Far from facing a world structured by conflicts between “economy,” “society” and “environment,” we navigate here in a power-laden field of *organizers* struggling to constitute provisional closures around concepts and patterns of livelihood. What will they struggle for?

Finally, while some developers mobilize economic theories animated by the motivations of rational optimization, others articulate a wide range of normative aspirations driving development, including (to draw specific terms from interviewees): the impulse to “contribute” to family or community; to “sacrifice” income for other forms of well-being; to generate “just enough to keep mom and dad working”; to “protect” or “preserve” that which we care about; or to “balance” individual or community needs with the needs of human and nonhuman others. None of these can be delineated as “social” or “environmental” as opposed to “economic” interests, and this muddle reveals that such discrete motives can barely be said to exist “in the wild.” As Callon (1998a) points out, framing practices may generate moments in which humans behave like the *Homo economicus* described in theory, but as Daniel Miller (one of Callon's critics) responds, it is also crucial to recognize that these moments are only isolable in theory and that real human beings continually navigate complex relational webs that exceed economization (Miller, 2005; Slater, 2002). Livelihoods are constituted by *all kinds* of motivations, attachments, and “interests” in Isabelle Stengers' sense—constitutive commitments that render us vulnerable to transformation (1997, page 82).

Conclusion: From Economization to the Composition of Livelihoods

Let us return again to the three circles of *Measures of Growth in Focus* [Figure 1], but with fresh eyes. We can see, in one sense, that the image performs the purification of categories, separating “economy,” “community” (society) and “environment” as three distinct dimensions in need of connection. At the same time, their points of overlap generate an instability. If, in fact, the center is the site where “quality of life” resides, and if quality of life is the purpose of the image's existence, then the spaces beyond this center are rendered suspect. They signify, suddenly, *non-quality* of life, something partial, pale, sickly. Economy, society and environment begin to shrivel up as free-standing

domains, capable of sustaining their own logics, values, interests, or needs. The only space that counts is that into which they have dissolved: the space of the very question of *life* itself.

Looking at this very image as a prompt for conversation, Sandra told me: “It’s almost like you want to start in the center, you want to start with quality of life. What’s the most important thing? ... What makes your quality of life good?” This is to say that we must start with the *question of livelihoods*, in its broadest sense. If, in fact, there is no “economy” as a stable, shared referent for collective subordination or action, and if, in fact, the articulation of this very economy is what is at stake in development controversies, then we are confronted with a radically-altered landscape of negotiation. Far from having to decide on a fixed set of “trade-offs” between “protecting our environment” and “growing our economy,” we face a set of diverse struggles over the basic concepts with which we engage our realities, the parameters of possibility within which we must work, the nature of the processes in which we are enmeshed, and the ends to which we aspire. These struggles are not between people appealing to the logics or values of distinct domains of reality, but are rather *internal* to economic development itself, rupturing the purification of categories and rendering the “economic,” the “social” and the “environmental” vulnerable to multiple pathways of disruption and resignification.

To identify and amplify the instabilities and spaces of possibility within economic development discourse and practice is not to downplay the ways in which some development practitioners (will) remain faithfully complicit in sustaining relations of exploitation and democratic closure, nor to underestimate the ways in which the material-semiotic assemblages that constitute a hegemonic economy, society and environment (may) continue to achieve durability. Rather it suggests that we might explore new sites for disruption and connection through which “economic development” is destabilized as a unified field and its energies co-opted for new (noncapitalist and noneconomic) becomings. Such work must involve not only discursive strategies, but also the construction,

enrollment and assembly of new and existing livelihood constituencies, practices, metrological technologies, and institutions.

What this work points toward practically is a politics capable of engaging and resignifying key conflicts in Maine by challenging conventional polarizations, opening up previously submerged questions and conflicts for public contestation, and assembling new constellations of connection and action. Might such an approach begin to offer us some further elaborated contours of a radically-democratic politics of livelihood? Might this help us to move beyond thinking “the economy” as a systemic process, discovered and mapped, determinate and law-like, and towards ways of mobilizing a self-consciously performative process of knowledge-production that makes explicit the political and ethical stakes of its own interventions?

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