

Collectively Performed Reciprocal Labour: Reading for Possibility

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Introduction

Collectively performed reciprocal labour involves a non-monetized exchange of group work done by community members for the benefit usually of one community member or household. Normally it involves a labour intensive task that cannot be achieved by a single person or household, such as harvesting or house construction. The expenditure of group manual labour is rewarded by reciprocation, that is, the practice of group work on another member's task at a later date. Those who benefit at one point of time participate knowing that they will be called upon to benefit another at a later date. The rules of reciprocity vary and are differently enforced according to context. The fact that there are agreed upon rules of exchange distinguish this labour practice from other forms of group voluntary work that is gifted with less formalized expectations of reciprocation.¹ Collective reciprocal labour is performed the world over and is known by a range of other analytic terms, such as 'exchange labour, traditional work groups, communal labour, collective labour, festive labour' (Moore, 1975: 271) or reciprocal work bees (Wilson, 2001). In this chapter I shed light on the ubiquity of collectively performed reciprocal labour exchange, thereby establishing its legitimacy in a diverse economy.

In academic debates about diverse forms of labour and their role in economic development, reciprocal labour exchange is variously positioned as a practice of bare survival, or a practice that is deployed to deal with labour scarcity. Most accounts see the exchange as embedded in relationships of power and obligation (ranging from equal to hierarchical) that are locally negotiated or enforced, but not governed by the 'more efficient' and arms-length operations of a market that places a price on labour. Reciprocated labour is thus seen to be outmoded and inefficient from a modernization perspective wedded to the beneficial impacts of market growth (that is supposed to bring prosperity and allow people to shift from 'getting by' to 'getting ahead'), modernizing technology (that overcomes labour shortage) and modern democratic governance (that eschews the power dynamics of patron-client relations). Given that at various times this practice has been coercively manipulated by both communist regimes and developmental states as a tool for building state assets, it has gained further negative or non-modern connotations. Yet collectively performed reciprocal labour exchange persists, co-existing with individuated paid, or waged, labour. What is intriguing about reciprocal labour is the way in which it combines relations of collective sharing and individual benefit. In this chapter I read for difference and speculate on how this form of labour exchange might be deployed to a variety of ends, including that of building community economies.

Splitting and Naming

Reciprocal labour exchange became a practice of great interest to social scientists in the immediate post WWII decades when minority world development planners were strategizing how to modernize agriculture in the majority world. A major survey of reciprocal farm labour conducted by the American anthropologist Charles Erasmus in 1956 was initially motivated by the interest that social planners working in Haiti had in seeing the practice of *combite* (a form of reciprocal labour) as a base from which to build cooperative self-help projects. Some 20 years later M.P. Moore, a research officer at the UK Institute of Development Studies, revisited the understudied topic of cooperative labour to inquire whether it could be the “evolutionary basis for rural ‘socialism’ with a human face” (1975: 270). In order to test the likelihood that reciprocal labour exchange might morph into instruments for cooperative forms of ‘development’, these authors constructed inventories of ‘types’ of reciprocal labour and began to document their local names.

Erasmus (1956) draws attention to two forms of collectively performed reciprocal labour; ‘festive’ and ‘exchange’ labour. What differentiates festive from standard reciprocal labour exchange is the degree of obligation to reciprocate labour and the quantity and quality of food and drink (and entertainment) served to the workers on the day that labour is performed. Another distinguishing factor is the number of people involved—with exchange labour groups containing up to ten people, and festive work groups sometimes numbering into the hundreds (1956: 446). Mary Hollnsteiner’s field work in the Philippines, conducted in 1959-60, concurs with this division and affords a more explicit parsing of reciprocal labour. She calls exchange labour ‘contractual reciprocity’ and festive labour ‘quasi-contractual reciprocity’ (1961: 388).ⁱⁱ Contractual reciprocity refers to the voluntary agreements between people “to behave toward one another in a specified way for a specified time in the future” (388). Her summary account of this form of exchange labour is as follows:

...in contractual reciprocity, the reciprocal acts are equivalent, their amount and form having been explicitly agreed upon beforehand. The obligation that is felt to return a service is relatively colorless, with minimum of affective sentiment. Fulfilment of the contract is such that there is no doubt in the mind of either party that payment has been made; repayment is unmistakable. The reciprocation terminates that particular relationship, leaving the participants in a state of equilibrium. (1961:389).

Marshall Sahlins, in *Stone Age Economics* was later to call this “balanced reciprocity” (1972: 185-204). Linked to the expectation of balance is another of regularity, often linked to the natural rhythms of seasonal labour demand.ⁱⁱⁱ

In Hollnsteiner’s categorization quasi-contractual reciprocity is a more intermittent form of labour exchange that is called upon at times of great need, such as when a funeral is to be organized, or when a new fishing raft needs to be constructed or when a house needs repairs or has to be moved. This is more like the cooperative working bee that in the Philippines is known as *bayanihan* (Placino in Gibson et al 2017). The terms of balanced reciprocation are implicit, not explicit. Between events, the reciprocal relationship is dormant, but there is an expectation that when a similar event arises for another in the future, labour will be offered. In both cases non-reciprocation is met with social approbation

and the accompanying sense of shame or *hiya* (1961: 395-6). Sahlins terms this indefinite expectation where the return is “not stipulated by time, quantity, or quality” ‘generalized reciprocity’ (1972: 194). It is the more infrequent temporality, the one off nature of the events and the requirement often for larger numbers of people, that link this kind of reciprocity with festivities (Erasmus 1956: 453). With this clearer conceptual distinction between balanced and generalized reciprocity and a sense of the place-based vocabulary of diversity we can now return to the questions raised by Erasmus and Moore as to how reciprocal labour exchange might play a role in economic transition.

Reciprocal Labour and Economic Transition

This discussion of transition will attempt to read for difference in a selection of texts that take reciprocal labour exchange as their focus. First, I will turn to the role that this collective labour practice played in the settler colonial context of Ontario, Canada as documented by Catherine Anne Wilson (2001). Second, I will draw on late 20th century analyses of this practice in the context of modernization in rural Asia. Third, I will briefly refer to the harnessing of the idea of reciprocal labour exchange in state development projects.

A Tool of Capitalization on Stolen Land

Rich insights meticulously extracted from farm family diaries and letters are provided in Wilson’s account of working bees in 19th century Ontario. This historical study is decidedly place-based, but there are many resonances with other settler contexts where country has been stolen or acquired by nefarious means from Indigenous peoples, and where land was thus ‘available’ but labour and capital were in short supply (Wilson 2001:435).^{iv} With colonization came a complete severing of the interconnections between Indigenous peoples and the nourishing ecosystems they were actively involved in through reciprocated working relationships of care and maintenance. Violent economic transition was brought about by the industrious efforts of settler communities who collectively performed reciprocal labour to clear forest, establish broad scale agriculture and build settlements. ‘Development’ in the colonial context became equated with the private appropriation of wealth generated from the built up fertility of a land that had been managed and nourished for generations by Indigenous peoples. In this context of transition, collectively performed reciprocal labour exchange was in effect a tool of capitalization, squarely implicated in the process of what Marx called ‘primitive accumulation’.

Settler households, especially those with young children, relied on reciprocal labour exchange to accomplish large jobs like clearing land, building a barn or bringing in the harvest. Wilson notes that ‘frontier’ settlers brought practices of reciprocal exchange from the Old World. ‘Working bees’ as they were known, were a regular affair. A day’s work was exchanged for a day’s work and accounting was informal. If one couldn’t attend the working bee, a family member or material contribution, such as food, would be sent in one’s place. This type of labour arrangement was used not only to clear land, build barns and houses, and harvest crops, but also spin yarn, knit winter clothing and make quilts.^v The rhetoric of neighbourliness hid a subtle form of social accounting:

Participation was part of an exchange of labour, skills, equipment, information, hospitality, and good will. Reciprocal work operated much like a bank, in which all made their deposits and were then entitled to make their withdrawals or acquire small loans. One could even attain personal credit for the contributions made by ancestors or close relatives. It was possible to borrow and then abscond, but most settled families probably contributed and received in equal quantities. (Wilson, 2001: 439)

The nature of these labour arrangements fostered, according to Wilson, both mutual reliance *and* individual prosperity (2001: 461). Working bees could be called on in the case of fire or flood, illness or sudden death. In remote settlements, it was important to make connections outside of kin networks to ensure that help would be available when unexpectedly needed. Thus participating in reciprocal labour exchange was a form of insurance—if you helped neighbours out who fell on hard times they would do so in return. Working bees were also a major contributor to community development. They were used to build basic infrastructure such as churches, mills and schools. And in remote places, they were a primary vehicle of social interaction. Wilson notes that

hospitality was an integral part of the exchange and one of the most valued virtues of the social code ... In the early days of sparse settlement and rough ways, hospitality took the form of simple food, entertainment, and plenty of whiskey. (2001: 443)

But despite the collective organizational frame for reciprocal labour exchange, the private and individual nature of ownership was never questioned on the ‘frontier’:

Though people agreed to share their labour, tools, and time, it was always clear whose field had been logged, whose cattle would use the newly raised barn, and who could sleep under the quilt. (2001: 461)

This collective labour practice resulted in individual gain, creating private capital assets for each settler family, producing the accoutrements of ‘improvement’ that ‘justified’ the claim of private property ownership.

For the practice to continue, there needed to be an equal distribution of reciprocity. Social rules and expectations mediated this distribution. Unofficial monitoring of reciprocity extended to the amount and quality of food that was offered during the working bees, the frequency with which the rotation circulated, the acceptance of newcomers into the community and how much front ending they needed to do before they could draw on the neighbourhood labour exchange. Debts of gratitude bound people together and there was fear of the shame associated with breaking the social bond.

During the 20th century, with increasing farm mechanization such as tractors and combine harvesters, the demand for large numbers of farm workers declined and reciprocal labour exchange became less common in the colonial settler agricultural world. With the rise of insurance companies and the welfare state the informal social safety net offered by neighbourhood labour was no longer necessary. And as cash payment for work became more generalized, many saw the benefit of dis-embedding labour transactions from the social ties that governed reciprocity. As Wilson notes:

That reciprocal work often resulted in a warm sense of generosity, belonging, and security within a larger community was an important by-product deeply appreciated by people at the time and lamented later when lost. When given the opportunity to be

released from the constraints of scarce labour and capital, however, many people chose to leave the obligations and inconvenience of cooperative work behind for other ways over which they had greater control. (462).

It is timely to reflect on the impact this diverse economy transaction had on the transformation of a commons that had supported Indigenous people for millennia. Collectively performed reciprocal labour was the means by which enclosure took place and by which capitalist family farming and later agribusiness capitalized the landscape and life-worlds of Indigenous people. The question we need to keep open-ended is whether this labour practice can be deployed to other ends?

A Disappearing Practice in Modernizing Rural Asia

The mid-late 20th century analyses of contemporary collective reciprocal labour exchange referred to earlier in this chapter unequivocally position this practice in a narrative of inevitable disintegration, decline and disappearance as modernization gathers pace (Erasmus, 1956: 444; Moore, 1975: 276). From an anti-capitalocentric diverse economies perspective, the assumed inevitability of the disappearance of reciprocal labour exchange is notable. The factors identified that contribute to this presumed inevitability are numerous. Rural mechanization is one, as Erasmus notes:

...technological changes which supplement men's strength and speed modify reciprocal labor patterns and decrease their incidence. (1956:455)

Rural population growth and the increasing inequality of land distribution is another:

...a member of an exchange group may find he has rights to more labour than he requires [because his land is quite small]: these right[s] he may sell for cash... or a larger farmer may begin to fail to turn up for work, sending a cash payment...or a paid replacement instead. (Moore 1975: 274 inserts added).

The rise of rural landlessness is a further contributor to the breakdown of non-monetized reciprocity. The formation of 'age-set' exchange labour groups, for example, of young men who comprise a community labour force, is seen as an inevitable transition towards an agricultural labourers' co-operative. But once cash begins to stand in for the 'right' to claim or offer reciprocity, Moore argues that:

...the group may increasingly come to resemble a group of labourers hiring themselves out for the benefit of each member in turn (1975:274).

For many analysts the infiltration of cash into the payment for reciprocal labour signals the move towards proletarianization. Moore, for example, argues that festive labour "appears to function as an entrée for capitalist employment relationships...it appears to be replaced fairly quickly, as a method of labour mobilisation, by pure wage labour" (1975: 275).

Other researchers are not so willing to see the operations of a waged labour market in every appearance of cash in return for collectively performed reciprocal labour. Frank Hirtz (1998) presents a nuanced analysis of the *kabesilya*, a group of landless labourers, mainly women, who are employed to transplant and harvest rice in a lowland rural area of the Philippines.^{vi} The amount of cash remuneration they receive for transplanting rice seedlings is below that of hired waged agricultural labour in surrounding areas, but this amount is negotiated with the proviso that the farmers are obligated to employ the group again at harvest time. Hirtz resists viewing this case as evidence of a capitalist transformation, arguing that employment

of these young unmarried women is part of a meshwork of familial obligations that ensure they enjoy a measure of financial independence and maintain a “quasi-right to the land” even though they are not owners of it (1998: 260). The cooperative labour group is thus kept within the social safety net of the community and the pressure to migrate to maintain a livelihood is reduced. Hirtz argues that this commitment to interdependence and collective access and control of land explains the resistance to land reform and independent land rights (1998: 261). His perceptive analysis is an instructive example of reading for difference against the grain of dominant theories of agrarian transition.

In my own field research in the Philippines and that of colleagues in the Community Economies Research Network in India and Asia, we have found that reciprocal labour exchange is a practice that is alive and well, though not widely acknowledged and studied. For example, as part of an action research project that documented community assets in the central Philippines we encountered still vibrant practices of group reciprocal labour exchange for rice farming (*hungus*) and individual reciprocal labour exchange (*badsanay*) (Gibson, Cahill and McKay 2010). Other community economy researchers have also encountered live practices of reciprocal exchange including: caulking and sealing fishing boat hulls in maritime Indonesia (Carnegie, 2008: 363); the *dagyaw* system for harvesting rice in Puno rural Philippines (Wright, 2010: 304); the practice of *kamañidungan* or reciprocated building labour in the northern region of Batanes in the Philippines where strong stone houses with grass rooves are traditionally constructed and regularly maintained to withstand frequent cyclonic winds (Hill in Gibson et al, 2018); and collective farm labouring in *Kondh* communities in Odisha, India (Chitranshi, 2019:124). The diverse economies perspective encourages us to validate the specificity and potential promise of these practices of economic diversity. Released from the inevitability of capitalist development, we can explore the role that collectively performed reciprocal labour might play in building (and capitalizing) enterprises within community economies.

State Co-option and Contestation

Before moving on to consider how to productively appropriate reciprocal labour exchange into a politics of community economy building, it is worth noting that, as with any diverse economy practices, it can and has been be co-opted by the powerful and put to work in questionable ways. One transition that has attracted some scholarly attention is the way that in some majority world contexts reciprocal labour arrangements were harnessed by the state to promote development agendas. Bowen discusses the generic Indonesian term *gotong royong* (mutual and reciprocal assistance in Javanese) and how it became tied to the idea of the Indonesian nation and used as a slogan of national unity and a tool of state intervention into village life under Suharto’s anti-communist *Orde Baru* (New Order) regime of 1966-1998 (1986: 549, 552). This term is rarely used in practice to refer to reciprocal labour exchange as there are already locally specific terms that are in use. However, because *gotong royong* evokes “genuinely indigenous notions of moral obligation and generalized reciprocity, ... it has been reworked by the state to become a cultural-ideological instrument for the mobilization of village labor” (Bowen 1986:546). Its informal and negotiated village based meaning has been blended with that of obligatory or corvée labour historically demanded by the politically powerful.

Under the New Order, rural development programs were financed by a fixed grant or ‘village subsidy’ for which the village was expected to provide free labour, “in *gotong royong* fashion, that is without pay” (553). Critics of the appropriation of *gotong royong* into state policy highlight the shift from an exchange between equals that is mutually beneficial, to a demand for labour inputs to infrastructure maintenance and improvement that, in an environment where landlessness is increasing, benefits the landed class and the more powerful (Bowen, 1986: 555). In a skilful manipulation of meaning, village values are used to endorse local subordination to the state. Bowen is careful, however, to emphasize the variations in the success of this strategy across the nation (559).

A somewhat different situation can be seen in the Philippines where the term *bayanihan* was mobilized as part of the ‘people power’ movement that overthrew the Marcos regime in the late 1980s. The term *bayanihan* from the root word for ‘hero’ refers to the practice of communal cooperation and collectively performed reciprocal labour (Placino in Gibson et al 2018). The term is usually associated with the practice of moving a lightweight village house with those who have helped being rewarded with a meal in the vein of the practice of festive labour outlined above. In the post-Marcos era the ‘bayanihan spirit’ was evoked to call up community cooperation around rebuilding democracy (Pascual, 1990).

In these two different national contexts reciprocal labour exchange has been deployed to different ends—in both cases taking the language of labour reciprocity far beyond its initial quite grounded meaning. However, co-option, or creative appropriation, can work in many ways. In the conclusion of this chapter I turn to speculate on whether practices of collectively performed reciprocal labour might be turned towards the project of building post-capitalist futures.

Conclusion

Julie Graham once suggested that gifting acts as a form of ‘primitive accumulation’ from which community economies emerge. Perhaps we can also see collectively performed reciprocal labour as another non-monetized accumulative strategy that has the potential to build collective prosperity? In a world where the challenges of the Anthropocene call for new ways of living on this planet, we could start to revalue some of the diverse economic practices that have sustained communities over the long durée.

Despite its dismissal as a last resort practice of bare survival that is on the way out, the benefits of collectively performed reciprocal labour exchange remain pertinent in many contexts. It remains important in near subsistence agricultural economies; it is a good way of mobilizing a large workforce for efficient work; it affords economies of scale and a division of labour, for example, between old and young; it saves time when harvesting; it allows for the rotation of certain kinds of jobs such as protecting crops from predators, or watching water flow in irrigation channels; and there are marked psychological effects with greater jollity and singing that makes the repetitive work pass more quickly (Moore 1975: 278-280).

Collectively performed reciprocal labour might be seen as a tool of capitalization for a community economy. For example, in the Municipality of Jagna, Bohol Province in the Philippines, elderly farming women deployed *hungus*, their traditional practice of reciprocated farming labour exchange to support the development of a community enterprise value adding to the local ginger grown in the area by making *salabat* a powdered ginger tea. In order to fit this enterprise development into their pre-existing workloads they organised to take turns in production and marketing and sent other family members along to work sessions if they were ill or otherwise engaged. The collective work of the group was channelled not into individual prosperity or capitalization but into building up a shared asset that would benefit the community. Not only did the Laca Ginger Tea community enterprise produce a low priced beverage for the local market with health benefits for target groups such as pregnant women, they also grew the market for ginger producers and offered opportunities for younger women to earn cash and thus resist the pull to leave the community to work overseas as a contract labourer (Community Economies Collective and Gibson, 2009).

Speculating a bit further, collectively performed reciprocal human and more-than-human exchanges might be one way we can begin to repair our planet and build multi-species community economies. For example, in Australian cities a form of collective reciprocal labour is performed by citizens who are members of Bushcare groups. Local residents of urban areas with remnant native forest volunteer for a few hours once a month to weed and improve the environment for native plants to thrive. The work put into removing invasive species by hand is rewarded over time by the increased growth of species endemic to the locality. This practice establishes new connections between human and nonhuman members. As residents become more aware of the cooling effects of green spaces and especially of the capacity of native bush to combat rising heat in the city, perhaps they will see their voluntary labour not as a gift but as a form of reciprocation for the ecological work of our resident plant communities.

Clearly, collectively performed reciprocal labour exchange is context specific and its benefits and pitfalls have to be approached with an open mind. What is evident is that this practice is by no means dead and that it has the potential to make a major contribution to building different kinds of economies in which equitable exchange, collective care and festivity might be recombined.

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ⁱ Some readers may be familiar with working bees organized to support a local kindergarten or school, or to help community or family members to move or paint a house. These practices bear some relationship to reciprocal labour exchange but can be seen at one end of a continuum between gifted voluntary labour (with a weak degree of accountability) and collectively performed reciprocal labour exchange (with a stronger set of rules of account that are enforced by community norms).

ⁱⁱ Hollnsteiner also identifies a third type: *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) reciprocity which refers to the complex reciprocity that exists between people of different groups or status, which is often referred to as ‘patron-client relationships’ (Scott, 1972).

ⁱⁱⁱ Various researchers have compiled collections of terms used to name collectively performed reciprocal labour in parts of South America and Southeast Asia (see, for example, Erasmus 1956, Bowen 1986, Bankoff 2007 and Gibson et al 2010, 2018). To an English speaker, the variety of these terms is remarkable. They exemplify the ecologies of productivity that have been made invisible by mainstream economic discourse (Santos,

2014). They also attest to the degree to which diverse economic practices have experienced language loss in parts of the Anglocene (see Chapter by Hyvärinen and Alhojärvi in this volume).

^{iv} In some settler colonial states unfree labour, such as slaves or convicts, may well have provided the means to achieve many of the tasks Wilson argues were performed by reciprocal labour exchange in Ontario.

^v The practice of reciprocating group labour to produce quilts is carried on to this day in communities such as that of Gees Bend in the southern USA (Wilson, 2018).

^{vi} It is interesting to note the similarity of the term, but slightly different meaning as documented by Bankoff (2007:345) who writes that the term *kabisilya* referred to the headman in a village who was tasked to record the days of labour contributed by each family and their buffalo on another's behalf and, at the end of the season, to tally up the credits and debts to ensure equality, with any difference being made up in distributions of unhusked rice.