

CONSTRUCTING THE COMMUNITY ECONOMY:  
CIVIC PROFESSIONALISM AND THE POLITICS OF SUSTAINABLE REGIONS

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### Introduction

Reid and Taylor's provocative reflection on the state of Appalachian studies calls for a new model of civic professionalism, especially for academics in area studies. As a critical response to globalism, they urge us to practice a "cosmopolitan politics of relocalization," extending and deepening our "efforts toward community partnerships and participatory research" (19). They distinguish this academic direction from the prevalent alternatives—celebrating regional difference (while ignoring issues of social, economic and environmental power and justice) or helping to adjust the region to the demands of capitalist globalization. Civic professionals must be localist without being parochial, globalist without serving the imperatives of transnational capital, activist without displacing the knowledge and experience of community partners.

What is heartening in Reid and Taylor's intervention is their recognition that the discourse and practice of corporate globalization is associated with an emerging counter-discourse and counter-politics. This means that those who take up the call to civic professionalism will not be alone. Rather they will be part of a global effort to seek "postbureaucratic" partnerships between "citizen groups, academic institutes, and governmental agencies" (17). These partners in turn are part of a worldwide movement to create sustainable ways of life—pursuing social justice, democracy, environmental sustainability, and economic wellbeing at the regional and community scales.

As academics who have pursued such goals and partnerships over the past five years, we are encouraged by Reid and Taylor to tell the story of the Rethinking

Economy project,<sup>1</sup> an academy-community collaboration that recently completed participatory action research on the hidden and alternative economies in Western Massachusetts. The goals of this project are to create an alternative knowledge of the regional economy, highlighting the prevalence and viability of non-capitalist economic activities, and to mobilize activism to support those activities and associated organizations. The project is part of a larger effort of an international academic working group, the Community Economies Collective (CEC),<sup>2</sup> engaged in fostering a new politics of economic development in Australia, the United States, and the Asia Pacific region. We work with individuals and organizations in particular regions to develop non-capitalist practices of sustainability and community. A major goal of the CEC is to revalue place in the face of globalization. This necessarily involves “taking back the economy” — in other words, constituting regions as *places* with specific economic histories, capacities and possibilities rather than as *nodes* in a global capitalist system.

### The Rethinking Economy Project

The Rethinking Economy project is based at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, which is located in the Connecticut River Valley region of Massachusetts (more often called the Pioneer Valley). This region is both rural and urban, and its economy is distinguished by a combination of agriculture, higher education, arts and alternative medicine, an emerging high tech sector, and traditional manufacturing in decline. Bifurcated by the “tofu curtain,” the Valley falls easily into two distinct subregions: a northern semi-rural and semi-prosperous area separated by a small east-west mountain range from the more urban and depressed area to the south.

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<sup>1</sup> Supported for three years by the Geography and Regional Science Program of the National Science Foundation (Grant No. BCS-9819138). Academic researchers include Brian Bannon, Carole Biewener, Jeff Boulet, Ken Byrne, Gabriela Delgadillo, Rebecca Forest, Julie Graham, Stephen Healy, Greg Horvath, Beth Rennekamp, AnnaMarie Russo, Sarah Stookey, Anasuya Weil. Of the 13 academic researchers, 3 graduate students and 2 faculty volunteered their time out of intellectual interest and political commitment.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.communityeconomies.org](http://www.communityeconomies.org).

Not surprisingly, residents of the Pioneer Valley tend to conceptualize the region's economy in terms of capitalism. Our project is based on the recognition that this economic "common sense" conditions our political possibilities, discouraging if not precluding efforts to enact new social relations of economy. Thirteen academic researchers and seventeen community researchers drawn from all over the Valley have worked together over five years to develop a different language of economy and to cultivate spaces of conversation where that language could be spoken. We see this as a contribution to an innovative economic politics in the region.

The project has unfolded in 5 stages. Stage 1 involved tracking practical economic knowledge in our region in part by convening focus groups with key participants in the local economic development conversation—planners, governmental officials, labor and business leaders. Although these individuals shared a conventional vision of economic development—involving the recruitment or retention of capitalist firms and the growth of quality employment—the actual practice of economic development was highly differentiated across the region. Understanding economic development practice as marked by such divergences allowed us to see "expert knowledge" as fragmented and inconsistent, and therefore as open to questioning and reworking. This was important for the next phase of the project.

Stage 2 was a "community economic audit" of nontraditional or undervalued economic activities. This stage was really the heart of the project. It was conducted in collaboration with community researchers drawn from the alternative economic sector or from economically marginal or undervalued populations (the unemployed, housewives/husbands, recent immigrants, welfare recipients, retirees, youth, etc.) The audit was not intended to be exhaustive but to delineate the range of economic activities in the region. We trained the community researchers to engage in individual interviews that formed the basis for alternative economic representations. These interviews and the training and debriefing workshops that preceded and followed them created the social space in which an alternative discourse of economy could emerge.

The audit was not simply a data gathering exercise but a process of bringing a group of people into a longterm relationship and an ongoing economic development conversation. In this conversation, formerly invisible economic activities and actors became visible and validated, and the range of potential initiatives was radically opened up.

Stage 3 of the research involved case studies of alternative economic organizations or activities. The purpose of the case studies was to investigate and promote linkages and synergies between alternative projects in the region. Types of activities/organizations studied included self-employed individuals, worker collectives, family businesses, progressive or alternative capitalist firms, households, intentional communities, a food bank and community farm, alternative currency and barter networks, volunteer and other community organizations.

In Stage 4 we convened the people who participated in the earlier phases—community researchers, academic researchers, participants in the mainstream focus groups, interviewees, and representatives of the case study organizations—to present our findings and to think collectively about how we might enact a shared alternative vision of regional economic development. In these community conferences, the alternative discourse of economy circulated productively as small groups brainstormed the ways that previously unrecognized or undervalued economic activities and actors could be incorporated into economic development planning and link up with other activities in the region.

Stage 5 is actually an ongoing process in which working groups emerging out of the community conferences are trying to bring specific alternative institutions or practices into being. In the year since the community conferences were held, we have formed a regional Alternative Economic Development Council to network and foster the alternative sector (the way the Economic Development Council does for the capitalist sector) and played important roles in establishing a large photovoltaic installation worker cooperative. Many other projects are in the works.

## Diverse Economy, Community Economy

Over the course of the project, the diagram below evolved as an important visual summary of the diverse economy that was emerging into focus:

**Diverse Economy**

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

In constructing and reconstructing this diagram, we were initially inspired by feminist scholars who have produced a powerful critique of conventional economic representation. Their work demonstrates that as much as 50 percent of all economic activity in both rich and poor countries is undertaken by unpaid labor in households and neighborhoods (Beneria 1992; 1996; Ironmonger 1996). Since this non-capitalist, non-market activity is excluded from conventional economic accounts, it is largely invisible and unvalued.

In addition (and perhaps surprisingly), Marxian theory allowed us to conceptualize a certain proportion of market-oriented activity as also non-capitalist. Worker collectives, self-employed individuals, slaves, and indentured workers all produce goods and services for markets, but not under capitalist relations of production (Gibson-Graham et al. 2000; 2001).<sup>3</sup> Taken together, the insights of Marxism, feminism and other traditions enabled us to re-vision the so-called “capitalist” regional economy as a diverse social space that is home to a wide range of economic activities and relations. It is this diversified landscape (especially the shaded part of the diagram) that the community researchers helped us to populate with specific stories and examples.

Over time, we began to call the lower portion of the diagram the “community economy”—a term we used to describe the process of constructing connection and community among the alternative businesses, transactions, and types of labor that are largely invisible to conventional development practitioners.<sup>4</sup> Many of our interviews, for example, gave us glimpses of a hidden economy of generosity in which gifts of money, goods and labor contributed not only to survival but also the growth of alternative businesses. We found numerous instances of self-employment, worker collectives and alternative capitalist enterprise that were enabled by community generosity and social networks. Collective Copies, a worker-owned copy shop borne out of a strike in the late 1970s, received its start-up capital in the form of interest-free loans from customers—a gift from those who wanted to enable and participate in an economic community. Similarly, the environmentally conscious Berkshire Brewing Company has been the recipient of thousands of hours of volunteer labor on the bottling line. Our research revealed that giving was not only ubiquitous but powerful,

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<sup>3</sup> Marx specified a number of types of class relations (defined as relations of surplus production and appropriation) that characterize organizations producing for a market. Independent and communal producers (e.g., worker collectives) are self-appropriating and therefore not exploited; by contrast, slaves, wage workers in capitalist firms, and feudal serfs (who may sometimes be engaged in market-oriented production) are all direct producers whose surplus is appropriated by others in an exploitative class relation.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, we would probably not want to include some aspects of the diverse economy (such as slave and feudal organizations, indentured labor, and black markets) in constructing a community economy.

creating a multiplier effect in the community sector in the same way that paid activity in the capitalist sector does.

### Different Economy, Same Old Desire

As Reid and Taylor observe, however, academic knowledge production is often ineffective. Speaking of environmental issues, they note that “alarming studies in this or that academic discipline fade away like puffs of smoke with little effect on either public discourse or general academic life” (10). We read this as saying that in order to contribute to “more imaginative and effective forms for community self-protection and reconstruction” (4), we must do more than simply create a new knowledge of the economy.

Development experts, community researchers and other citizens in the Valley region were readily convinced of the existence of a diverse community economy. But it was considerably more difficult to convince them that this economy was a legitimate object of policy and activism in its own right rather than merely a supplement to capitalist enterprise and wage labor. This led us to reflect on the way that capitalism, in addition to being a set of social relations, functions as an economic “imaginary” — which is the psychoanalytic term for a narrative element that provides a sense of coherence and identity. The imaginary is not to be understood as opposed to or distinct from reality but as a necessary aspect of social existence. It structures a landscape in which individual fantasies are situated and political and other desires are aroused and pursued. Like the imaginary, such fantasies and desires are not illusionary but are the medium through which subjectivity is constituted and maintained.

Capitalism constitutes the economic imaginary—and thus the ground of fantasy—for both those who love it and those who love to hate it. We see its familiar form as a self-regulating system, for example, in a quote from one of our region’s more prominent development professionals:

The economy kind of works on its own—it always has worked on its own and what we are trying to do with economic development resources that



we bring to bear is to shift the trend line a little. Move this ship, a little, off its predestined course. (Allan Blair, Director, Economic Development Council of Western Massachusetts, focus group participant, 1999)

The economy is not ours to make and remake, but is instead self-made. It is not therefore an object of politics but of micro-adjustments and manipulations.

This fantasy of an independent and self-powering economy is matched by capitalism's imaginary function in many left anti-capitalist discourses. Among our community researchers, capitalism emerged as a concentration of power—the power of wealthy individuals, large corporations, and international institutions. Whereas the mainstream development practitioners harbored a more benign vision of a self-regulating system, the community researchers saw capitalism as an unstoppable force against which resistance is largely futile. Despite this difference, for each group the domain of politics is minimal and constrained, and desire is fixated upon capitalism as that which must be promoted or opposed.

Confronting these fantasmatic representations, we were better able to understand the slavishness of mainstream development practice and the paralysis of left economic politics (fixed as it was on opposing a powerful capitalism rather than enacting a non-capitalist economy). In both instances, individuals are invested in an economic fantasy of obeisance or opposition, played out upon an imaginary landscape in which capitalism is the only game in town. This prompted us to ask the question, “What would it take to actively de-link our economic and social imaginary from capitalism?” Obviously it would require more than simply “rethinking the economy.” We would need to cultivate an alternative imaginary—like the community economy—which could differently orient our fantasies and desires. This would involve not simply a project of “re-presentation” but the active cultivation of economic subjects of an alternative kind.

In the wake of this recognition, we have found the task of creating ourselves as alternative economic subjects to be challenging and multidimensional. It has meant cultivating the ability to disinvest in, or disidentify with, capitalism (thus abandoning

the primacy of anti-capitalism in our political projects). And it has also meant nurturing our fragile identification with non-capitalist forms of economy in both our professional and personal lives. In our university teaching, our community-based research, and our activism we have begun to turn away from capitalism, to turn toward the community economy, thereby becoming non-capitalist rather than simply anti-capitalist in our visions and desires.

### Civic Professionalism and the Non-capitalist Imaginary

At the University of Kentucky...some German Studies faculty appear to be explicitly recasting their program both in terms of the *human capital* needs of corporations and political capitol/capital appeals to *global competitiveness*. (Reid and Taylor, 2, italics in original)

In recognizing the possibility, but also the difficulty, of instilling a desire for non-capitalist identities and practices in ourselves, our students, and our community partners, we have come to understand the central role that various social institutions play in creating and sustaining the economic imaginary. The quote above reminds us not only that academics (even in the most unexpected places) are often complicit with capitalism but that capitalism's resilience as an imaginary is critically dependent on the work of academic institutions to install and maintain it. Primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions are actively involved in producing subjects who can speak the language of the capitalism and experience its desires.

This was highlighted recently when an undergraduate friend of ours came to us with the syllabus for a GIS course at a local community college. The syllabus described how students would be working with municipal authorities in the city of Holyoke to improve the delivery of services to the city's largely Latino minority population. The city had conducted a survey and determined that transportation and day care were the most significant challenges to poor minorities, preventing them from being integrated into wage employment, assumed to be the key factor in quality of life. As an assignment

for the course, students were asked to produce a map that would combine a list of work sites (capitalist firms presumably) offering jobs, bus routes with a quarter mile buffer, and existing day care facilities.

Here we see the performative integration of both the city's ethnic minority and the GIS students into the capitalist imaginary. The Latino population is being reconciled with a vision of capitalist development, in the process satisfying and buttressing the economic development fantasy of Holyoke's municipal leaders, whose anxiety over capitalism's failure to integrate Latino workers is being cartographically assuaged. (If Latino workers still don't find jobs when they have access to information about transportation and day care, that will not be the planner's or the cartographer's fault.) Moreover, the student herself is being constituted as a civic professional in support of capitalist development. This latter function of the assignment was frustratingly evident to our student friend, who wondered why neither the Latino population nor the students were involved in deciding what information was relevant for the map, or whose needs should be served by it.

Our friend's frustration prompted us to re-imagine the syllabus for this GIS class with the community economy in mind, coming up with a project based on the economic role of *Nuestras Raices* ("our roots") in Holyoke. *Nuestras* is an innovative community organization, serving the mostly Latino population, which began by organizing a series of community gardens around the city. The success of these gardens has resulted in part from donations of labor, money, design work, materials and enthusiasm, and the gardens themselves have grown over the years to be a vital part of the local economy for the people who participate in them and the larger community as well. Not only are they sites of family and community labor and innumerable gift transactions, but they are also sources of inputs to households and to independent, collective, and other non-capitalist sites of production.

In our re-imagined GIS class, our friend and her fellow students could engage with this community organization in designing maps, while also working with municipal

officials. Perhaps they could trace the (actual and potential) input and output flows of the community gardens and their linkages with non-capitalist or alternative capitalist businesses, to suggest ways that these linkages might be fostered by the city. Perhaps they could map the connections between the gardens and the Latino arts sector, which has recently been recognized (and mapped) as a previously unacknowledged contribution to quality of life and economic development. Or perhaps they could identify problems associated with the gardens (pollution and runoff, redevelopment on privately owned lots, lack of transportation for participating families) and suggest ways to redress them. As important as these maps might be for the city of Holyoke and the Latino community, they would be equally important to the student mapmaker, shaping her economic imaginary and her desires as a civic professional.

## Conclusion

We believe, along with Reid and Taylor, that it is time for academics in all places to engage in collaborative partnerships with community organizations. But we also believe that these collaborations will remain vulnerable to capitalist “colonization” if capitalism’s dominance in the (left as well as rightwing) imaginary is left unchallenged. The question we need to ask ourselves as civic professionals is whether we are more invested in the hope that the community economy gives us or more attached to the resentment that grounds us in the capitalist imaginary. Cultivating non-capitalist practices and identities will produce subjects whose desires are no longer oriented by resentment toward or identification with capitalism. This does not demand that we lose sight of injustices specific to concrete capitalist class relations but that we renounce the capitalist imaginary and its systematic hold on economic becoming. From our perspective the transition towards more socially and environmentally viable communities, and the globalization of this movement, requires that we reject economic monism as it comes from critic and advocate alike.

One last example to support this point, drawn from our experience with a recent service learning class on Economic Alternatives. Students came to us already angry at something called “capitalism,” which they had studied in a number of other undergraduate classes at UMass. It took considerable effort to attenuate their attachment to this powerful object and to focus their attention on the community economy. The service learning experience (which was sort of a civic professional training) was instrumental in this process of dis- and re-identification. During the semester, students were placed with alternative economic organizations—including a number of worker collectives and a militant low-income housing organization that had created five large tenant-owned apartment complexes in the region. As a result of this hands-on experience, many of the students took jobs with these or similar organizations after graduating. Dave Minasian started a landscaping cooperative for the housing organization, which enabled tenant worker owners to take over the landscaping contracts for the five apartment complexes they owned. Students who had come in angrily anti-capitalist and cynical about alternatives emerged from the class committed to constructing a non-capitalist community economy. And in the process, our own role as civic professionals and community partners was enlarged and transformed.

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