

# Ecological Livelihoods: Rethinking “Development” Beyond Economy, Society, and Environment

Paper presented at the Institute for Culture and Society Seminar Series,  
Western Sydney University, Australia  
13 November 2014

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## Introduction

This paper takes, as its starting point, a particular trio of concepts that are pervasive in contemporary thought and political practice: *economy*, *society*, and *environment*. This is where I begin, though it is not where I hope to end up. These three categories, I will argue, constitute a hegemonic formation that widely and problematically shapes the landscape of imagination and contestation, rendering particular, historically-produced relations seemingly inevitable and closing down possibilities for more generative, ethical modes of relationship. At the same time, however, economy, society, and environment are categories in *crisis*, and the world they aspire to organize and discipline is already escaping their clutches. A key task of our era is to identify, amplify, and connect multiple “lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) beyond these categories, nurturing other ways of thinking that might help to generate and sustain new modes of “living well together” (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013) on an increasingly volatile earth.

In the pages that follow, I will unfold this argument in three stages, all grounded in the particular context of rural development dynamics in the State of Maine (USA), where I conducted field research in 2013. First, I use a hypothetical story of a struggling rural Maine family to illustrate the ethical and political landscape generated by the hegemonic articulation of economy, society, and environment. This is a move that I call *tracing* (following Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 2), in which the contours of a particularly powerful configuration of concepts and institutional relations are made visible. The point here is not to generate an undefeatable monster whom we can resentfully love to hate (Brown 1999; Newman 2000; Gibson-Graham 2006a), but rather to acknowledge the strength of what we are up against and to ward off the dangers of re-capture into its clutches. The second move, *decomposition*, involves the active undoing of any unity or whole. Here, I turn to a set of interviews

conducted with economic developers, social workers, and environmental advocates in Maine. Operating with the assumption that realities are multiple rather than singular (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Law 2004; Mol 2002), and eschewing a reading that would simply turn these professionals into “minions” of hegemonic reproduction (Pignarre and Stengers 2011), I read these interviews “for difference rather than dominance” (Gibson-Graham 2006b, xxxi). I highlight multiple ways in which my interviewees resist assimilation into the hegemonic formation of the three categories, and the ways in which diverse and contradictory articulations suggest their radical blurring and even collapse. Thirdly, I attempt to *recompose* something useful from this compost. Through what Eve Sedgwick calls a “reparative reading,” (2003, 146), I engage renegade elements in my interviews and experiment with a language of *livelihoods* that might help to strengthen these fruitful “lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and open up new pathways for collective thought and action. I return, at the conclusion of the paper, to the story I began with, to see what differences a recomposed articulation of livelihoods might make.

### Tracing: Rick, Theresa, and the Hegemonic Trio

Maine is a significantly rural state located in the farthest northeastern corner of the United States. Widely known for its harsh winters, rocky coastlines, extensive forests, abundant waterways, and rugged, hard-working people, Maine has functioned for centuries as a kind of “internal colony” to wealthier southern New England states (Osborn 1974)—at once a source of inputs for industrial production, a site for locating low-wage manufacturing, and a recreational escape for the wealthy whose industrial endeavors have made their own places unlivable. It has been the perfect set-up, we might say, for a constellation of tensions in which something called an “economy” appears to be in direct conflict with something called an “environment,” while a “society” (often expressed in the form of “community”) remains stuck ambivalently in-between.

This scenario can be illustrated with the semi-fictional story of Rick and Theresa, who live in rural northern Maine with their three children.<sup>1</sup> For nearly 30 years, Rick worked in a sawmill owned by a multinational investment firm. He cut Maine trees into the lumber that fed the housing

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<sup>1</sup> They are made-up characters, but are based on a number of people and stories I have encountered in my fieldwork and in many years living and working in the state. In some cases, elements are drawn from specific contemporary policy documents and will be cited where appropriate.

construction bubble, making what for his part of the world was a decent wage—that is, until the mill's corporate managers decided that it was no longer profitable, shut down the mill, and sold off its equipment. Rick is now unemployed, along with 150 other people in his small rural community. There is no other mill, and no other similar jobs to speak of in the nearby area. His wife, Theresa, works a part time job as a bookkeeper, and her income plus Rick's unemployment benefits and some food stamps are now the only financial sources that support them and their children. Rick is angry: no way of sustaining his family, now “on the god-damn dole like one of those lazy parasites who just *take and take* from hard working Americans.” His family has been in this part of Maine for five generations—it's the only place he knows, and it's *home*. Now he might have to leave, but to where? “Illegal immigrants are taking the jobs everywhere,” he says, “and a hard working man can't make an honest living anymore.” Meanwhile, “a bunch of rich yuppie environmentalists” are coming up here and proposing to turn these woods into a National Park (Kellett and St. Pierre 1996; Power 2001). “These are the same people,” thinks Rick, “whose regulations sent my job packing to places with a better business climate, and now they want to lock up the resource for good so they can have their spiritual experiences in the so-called 'wilderness' that my people have been working in, hunting in, and managing for more than a hundred years!”

Meanwhile, Maine media outlets have reported that the mill closed due to “market pressures,” and that the company was responding to the “economic reality” of an increasingly competitive “global marketplace.” Rick is a casualty of this inevitable response. Experts are now studying and discussing what (if anything) can be done to ensure an “economic recovery,” to encourage “much needed economic growth” in this “hard-hit” area. Economists and economic developers rally to proclaim that Maine needs less red-tape, new job training programs, a more hospitable “business climate,” a revolution of “innovation” that will create new products for people like Rick to manufacture, and a massive influx of capital investment to create the “industries of the future”.<sup>2</sup>

A host of “social” workers are now mobilizing to help Rick “get back on his feet,” to help him cultivate “social capital” and ensure that he becomes an “asset” to the region (Maine Community Foundation 2001). He and Theresa get letters in the mail almost weekly from the cruelly-named Maine Office of Family Independence telling them what they need to do in order to keep getting

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, [businessclimate.com](http://businessclimate.com) 2014; Camoin Associates 2012; Connors and Lachance 2012; O'Hara 2010; O'Hara 2013; Reneault 2014.

benefits. Theresa despairs about their situation, fearing the worst and feeling little but spiteful judgment from institutional landscape that now overtly sustains her family. The message is loud-and-clear, and it only reinforces resentment and despair: When you cease to have a job, when you are no longer able to be part of “the economy,” you become a parasite, a liability to your “society,” someone who needs help. And this “help” comes primarily in the form of pushing you to become—as one Maine Community Action Program mission statement puts it—“self-sufficient.” What this means in practice is: “no longer dependent on a handout,” “employable,” “competitive,” “appropriately skilled,” and “adaptable” for the “dynamic” (i.e., perpetually volatile) economy of the future.

Rick and Theresa's whole community and region have effectively become target zones for economic developers and social workers, all concerned to adjust, adapt, and discipline the population into conformity with the economic necessities of the times. This is not an ill-intentioned conspiracy: it is, for those earnestly involved, a necessary response to crisis.

The shifting fortune of Maine workers, however, is not the only crisis unfolding in this region. “Environmentalists” are also raising urgent concerns about the region: these abundant trees are the “lungs of the world” and are needed for carbon sequestration to mitigate climate change (Carter n.d.); this landscape is filled with endangered and threatened species who need our help (Sierra Club Maine Chapter 2014); humans need “wild places” to be sane and healthy, and we're losing them everywhere (Austin, Bennett, and Kimber 2003). In short, there is something called “the environment” that needs saving, and Rick and Theresa live in this environment but are not part of it. Perhaps they are its enemies; unless, of course, (the message from environmentalists goes) they support the National Park and accept that ecotourist jobs can transform the seeming “trade-offs” between economy and environment into a “win-win” situation of renewed (presumably capitalist, and likely low-paid) wage work (Power 2001; Headwaters Economics 2013).

### *The Hegemonic Trio*

Unfolding here is what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe might call a “hegemonic articulation” (2001, 68) of economy, society, and environment—or what I would call, in short, the “hegemonic trio.” It is a material-discursive formation that covers over (though never wholly successfully) its own contingent production and comes to appear as the singular space of thought

and practice for a given collectivity. To say that a particular economy, society and environment is hegemonic in Maine is to say that particular constructions of these categories have become for many people obvious realities, key elements of an inevitable context in which human action must unfold. This pervasive and powerful structure of thought and institution stabilizes and renders seemingly-inevitable a whole host of ethical and political relations.

There is, in this articulation, an “economy,” primarily defined as the domain of capitalist market exchange, on which people are dependent and which acts as a force that exceeds human agency and demands adaptation and institutional subordination. The “social” refers to a whole host of activities and phenomena that are external to this market dynamic yet necessary for its functioning. It is the hidden abode of “preferences,” the domain of consumption, recreation, and their failure. In one sense, society is what is gained by a certain success in “the economy,” as when retirees engage in “community service.” In another sense, it is where one falls upon failing as an economic subject—thus dependent on this community service and on “social programs.” And if the social is a “constitutive other” of the economy, “the environment” stands as the ultimate Other of both the economic and the social: the literal and figurative “outside” or externality from which the economic draws its “resources,” into which it dumps its wastes, and—paradoxically—in which certain people can find romantic recreational refuge from the stress and violence of both the social and the economic. It is source, sink, and escape.

A whole set of modern relations of power are differentially actualized in this trio: divisions between nature and culture (Latour 1993; Plumwood 2002), oscillations between dynamics of state coercion and capital accumulation (De Angelis 2007), and a linear movement of development pushing toward “growth” and a never-achieved Promised Land (Escobar 2012). In this sense, economy, society, and environment constitute a particular “problem-space” (Scott 2004) in which certain relations appear as inevitable, certain questions can be asked and others not, and certain solutions posed as viable while others appear impossible. In Maine, this has entailed the naturalization of capitalist employment and monetary exchange as the only legitimate modes of sustenance; the autonomous, self-sufficient (employed) individual as the model of humanity; a reinforcement of separations between humans and the more-than-human living world; and an obligation for all other concerns to subordinate themselves to the demands of these articulations in order to appear legitimate.

Rick and Theresa, meanwhile, appear to be at the mercy of all three categories, tossed and torn between each of them and their professional advocates—dependent upon the whole trio, yet granted very little agency in conventional accounts within any of them. As embodiments of the problematic “social,” and with clear pressure from the rest of “society,” it would seem that they simply must choose between “economy” and “environment.” When the children are at risk of going hungry, and “the economy” has captured so many of the means of livelihood via an enforced dependence on monetary exchange and employment, the choice is not difficult to make.

### Assembling and Disassembling the Trio

Rick and Theresa's story is but one example of a whole host of conflicts in Maine—and well beyond—that unfold as dynamics between an “economy,” a “society,” and an “environment.” Indeed, not only are multiple, complex problems presented and divided in these terms, but their *solutions* appear within the very same articulation: one must negotiate necessary “trade-offs,” strike “balances,” or “harmonize” the three domains. The Maine Development Foundation (2013) is not alone in offering a particular figure for such resolution [Figure 1], and many others are available.

# 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.*



Prepared for the Maine Economic Growth Council  
by the  
MAINE DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION

Figure 1: Maine Development Foundation's Venn diagram (2013).

Whether in the form of Venn diagrams, triangles, nested spheres, or a “sandwich” separating one from the other, the trio constitutes a *constitutional geometry* of contemporary life [Figure 2]. Three variably-relatable positions can take multiple forms and imply multiple dynamics, yet remain tied to the same core assumptions: that there is something distinctly economic, social, and environmental in the world, or at least that these distinctions are particularly helpful—perhaps even necessary—in making sense out of the complexities we face.

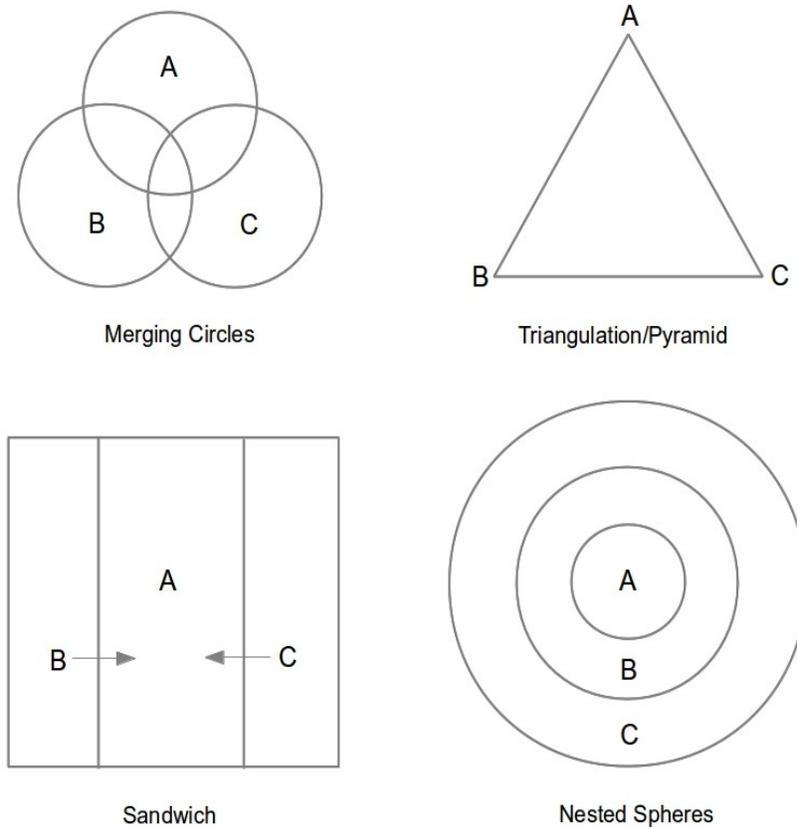


Figure 2: Constitutional Geometries

This assumption is *correct* to the extent that these terms form key elements in a material-semiotic assemblage that has been composed over the course of the past two centuries; they are not just “ideas” or “concepts,” but crucial nodes in processes of world-making. Yet they are not at all inevitable. These categories are historically-produced articulations, born in various forms and guises between the mid 19th and mid 20th centuries.<sup>3</sup> As products of the industrial revolution, capitalist

<sup>3</sup> See, for example Foucault 2002; 2007; Helliwell and Hindess 1999; Macnaghten and Urry 1998; Mitchell 1998; 2002; Polanyi 2001; Poovey 1995; 1998; Rose 1999; Rose and Miller 2008; Schabas 2005; 2009; Williams 1985.

emergence, and a modern ontology shaped by multiple binary divisions, these categories are not *discovered* by scholars but rather must be continually *made*—in Maine as elsewhere. To represent a particular collective struggle in terms of an inherent set of “trade-offs” between “economic” and “environmental” necessities is to occlude the fact that the very *terms* of such a conflict are themselves produced through the contingent convergence of multiple struggles. These interrelations are produced *by* and *as* complex assemblages of material-semiotic relations: concepts, measurements, diagrams, disciplinary apparatuses, legal relations, institutional configurations, subject formations, modes of desire, instruments of violence and seduction, and more.<sup>4</sup>

For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), from whence this notion of “assemblage” derives, such configurations are not once-and-for-all completed realities. Rather, their production is continual, provisional, and always accompanied by a simultaneous “becoming-undone” (Grosz 2011). An assemblage is as much about its multiple forms of “deterritorialization”—the “lines of flight” by which it moves toward other forms of existence—as it is about its modes of “territorialization,” its stabilization into more or less solid forms. We can thus say that reality is *multiple* while also remaining committed to an engaged empiricism: no matter how hegemonic a particular articulation, one can always find its lines of unraveling and tug on them, weave them in new ways, so as to help—in Donna Haraway’s words—“to foster some forms of life and not others” (1994, 62).

With this ontological approach in mind, I engage my interviews with economic, social, and environmental professionals in Maine in order to destabilize hegemonic representations and open up pathways of possibility. I could, of course, also read these interviews for the ways in which they are complicit in performing the hegemonic trio;<sup>5</sup> yet however enmeshed in institutional power my interviewees may be, *they too* are assemblages traversed by lines of flight. I have intentionally spoken with professionals whose daily work is explicitly oriented around at least one of the three categories, and who might be most likely to participate in the ongoing production and mobilization of these articulations—not to affirm their complicity, but to engage their *multiplicity*.<sup>6</sup>

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4 With the term “assemblage,” I follow Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization, referring to an active *site and process* of ontological stabilization and disintegration that includes content (bodies, feelings, states of things) and expression (discourses, intelligible connections, structures) in “reciprocal presupposition” (1987, 67).

5 I do this work in two chapters of my PhD dissertation as well as in Miller (2014).

6 I chose my interviewees primarily by seeking clear and distinct instances of the “economic,” the “social” and the “environmental” among government agencies, non-profit organizations and private consulting firms in Maine. In particular, I aimed to speak with people whose organizations explicitly identify their work as pertaining to economy,

This is a political choice as well as a theoretical challenge, for rather than seeking to identify an enemy and condemn them as hopelessly complicit in that which I seek to transform, I am interested in exploring unexpected possibilities for alliance and connection. Can we identify some of the key openings that traverse even some of the most hegemonic of spaces and subjects? Can we begin to name these lines of flight in ways that might strengthen and encourage them toward the composition of new assemblages? I am not, therefore, interested in attempting to gain a “God’s eye view” (Putnam 1981) of what my interviewees “really” think, but rather in exploring what might emerge from a different kind of engagement. Indeed: what might professional practitioners of the economic, the social and the environmental in Maine *become* if enrolled into new discourses, new framings, and new material-semiotic associations?

### **Decomposition: From Zombie Categories to Fog Bank**

While I began my interview process expecting to find “cracks” in the hegemonic formation, I was not prepared for what I encountered: not a single interviewee was willing to overtly affirm the stability or usefulness of the distinction between economy, society, and environment. Harriet, for example, director of a rural development network, called them “false distinctions.”<sup>7</sup> Chad, director of a state-wide economic development organization, directly questioned the validity of my project framing: asking questions about 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.” Numerous other interviewees spoke of “shades of gray,” of “blurred lines,” or of the arbitrary or merely convenient nature of such distinctions. For all its seeming pervasiveness and power in formatting contemporary life, the hegemonic trio appears—among its professional advocates—to be in crisis. This reflects, in fact, a much wider destabilization of these categories, as forces ranging from climate change to poststructuralist theory render such distinctions highly questionable (Braidotti 2013; Gibson-Graham 2006a; Latour 1993; Latour 2011).

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society, and/or environment, whether via the organizational name or mission statement, whose work is addressed either to statewide policy and action, or to regional-scale work (i.e., at the level of the county or economic development district), and who have had at least five years of experience working in their particular field.

7 Due to my commitment to anonymity in the research process, all interviewees are designated with pseudonyms and their organizational affiliations are described only in generic terms.

At the same time, however, it is not the case that my interviewees proposed an abandonment of the three categories in favor of some other articulation. For every moment of rejection or resistance, there were numerous other moments in which the categories of the trio reappeared as ontological givens or at least stable points of reference. In this sense, two ontological terrains co-exist in a variety of conflictual relations: economy, society, and environment appear to name our reality as an inescapable framework for thought and action, while the obvious mess of a complex lived world utterly defies their division. It is as if my performative questions served to reflect back to my interviewees 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, I propose, have become “zombie categories,” that is, “‘living dead’ categories which govern our thinking but are not really able to capture the contemporary milieu” (Beck 2001, 262). They are terms that we know we must escape, but cannot yet think without. At the same time, they are terms that we are already in the midst of undoing.

Such undoing takes a variety of forms. In multiple interviews, for example, I was confronted with this surprising theme: Despite an often simultaneous acceptance of the categories of economy, society, and environment as ontological givens, interviewees also spoke of them as pragmatic, collective fabrications. Harold, a private economic development consultant, told me, “We created the economy. It’s a made up thing, a made up way to measure stuff going back and forth, right?” Raymond, a government economist, said 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.” When I asked the program director of a major Maine environmental nonprofit how “the environment” gets defined in her work, she responded: “Um, well... by our board ... [laughs] ... staff working with our board!” The environment for Dana, director of another prominent environmental advocacy organization, is “a catch-all term for a variety of things,” and these things are determined as much by the politics of the moment as by any particular conception of “nature.” Jane, director of a statewide philanthropic organization, proposed quite technically that “community is what it is in the context of the statement or sentence that I’m making it.” The social domain, for Fred, director of a statewide community development organization, is constructed by a particular set of “lenses” through which one looks, including a specific “social impact tool” used by his agency to measure (and thus constitute) their work in explicitly “social” terms. The list of such examples could go on.

There is, of course, nothing inherently liberating in the recognition that certain things are *produced* and not simply given. Yet such a move is a crucial precondition for transformative action and agency, offering at least the possibility that things could have been—and might yet be—otherwise. Moreover, the explicit recognition of this construction and contingency may open spaces in which politics can shift from questions of trade-offs and inevitable tensions between unquestionable forces and domains to public struggles and negotiations over political epistemologies and “political ontologies” (Blaser 2009). Can the amplification of professional discourses of construction enable us to ask about the ethical and political effects of certain performative practices of world-making and to open creative spaces to imagine such practices differently? This is one hope worthy of pursuit.

If some interviewees recognized the construction of categories and some of its political stakes, others named a profound provisionality and contingency at the heart of the hegemonic articulation. Chad, an economic development director, began our conversation by expressing the necessity of “established facts” as foundations for development work. His prime example was the relationship between economic productivity—measured as “the value added [in GDP] per worker in Maine” (Maine Development Foundation 2013, 17)—and social well-being. Yet the more I asked him to describe the nature of this linkage and encouraged him to engage his core concepts, the further we got from the notion of the “established fact.” Soon, the whole trio of economy, society (in the form of “community”), and environment became an arbitrary convenience masking an impossible-to-capture complexity:

People's interpretations sometimes are problematic, in that they're looking for definitive black-and white statements of what economy is, community, and environment. And they're looking for very specific relations, and causal relationships, and we just don't live in that world. Once people let go of that, this is a lot easier to digest. But I think we have to start with some kind of diagram, some kind of lines and structure to just begin.

We had moved from a law-like causal relationship, premised on an objective economic dynamic, to a set of “diagrams” meant as prompts for collective exploration. What had been an indisputable foundation, a matter of fact, had become, in Chad's very words, a “good story” or “just a jumping off point.” Looking for a sovereign economy whose mechanisms determine our spaces of possible action

and whose workings can be predicted via causal analysis? Give up the search, because, in Chad's words, "we just don't live in that world."

What emerges from these unruly articulations is a view of the trio that renders their grounding in a singular "reality" wholly questionable: there may be real activities and exchanges that "economic" measurement brings into focus (and also enables), real bodies aggregated (and thus shaped) by "social" statistics, and real nonhuman spaces, beings, and relations that participate (unevenly) in composing an "environment," but these are never fully captured by any representation. An excess of activity, thought, speech, and desire always escapes the accounting framework through which these categories are performatively produced. They are thus de-ontologized, rendered potentially-open for transformation, resignification, and perhaps even abandonment.

But what, really, are these categories *naming* for Maine's policy professionals? For every articulation from interviewees that reproduced hegemonic definitions, numerous others posed threats to the very possibility of such coherence. Let us begin with "the economy": if, in its conventional version, it is the domain of monetary transaction and formal, paid employment (in capitalist firms), my interviewees multiplied the economy into something much larger and more complex. For Harold, a private economic development consultant, the economy is "the interchange of ideas or products or services that lead to, presumably, a positive exchange for both parties." This does not necessarily—though it might also—include exchanges of *money*. Helen, a high-ranking professional in a government community development office, affirmed this: the economy, she said, "may also be the exchange of services *without* dollars. It may be people who are doing  $x$  number of hours of babysitting, you'll give my  $x$  amount of vegetables from your garden. There's a number people bartering ... when there are few dollars within the town." The economy, moreover, does not necessarily end with exchange. Carol, director of another government department involved with social work, expanded the domain further, distinguishing between "the for-profit money world" and something else altogether: "There are huge parts of this state where there *isn't* a cash economy, but there's an amazing, *thriving* economy" (Interview 40). This other economy is characterized primarily by social *labor*: "I think [this economy is defined by] *effort*, and contribution to some kind of a product, whether it's a tangible or it's a service." Carol proceeded to describe a whole world of underground monetary exchange, barter, sharing, self-provisioning, and volunteer work that sustains Maine families.

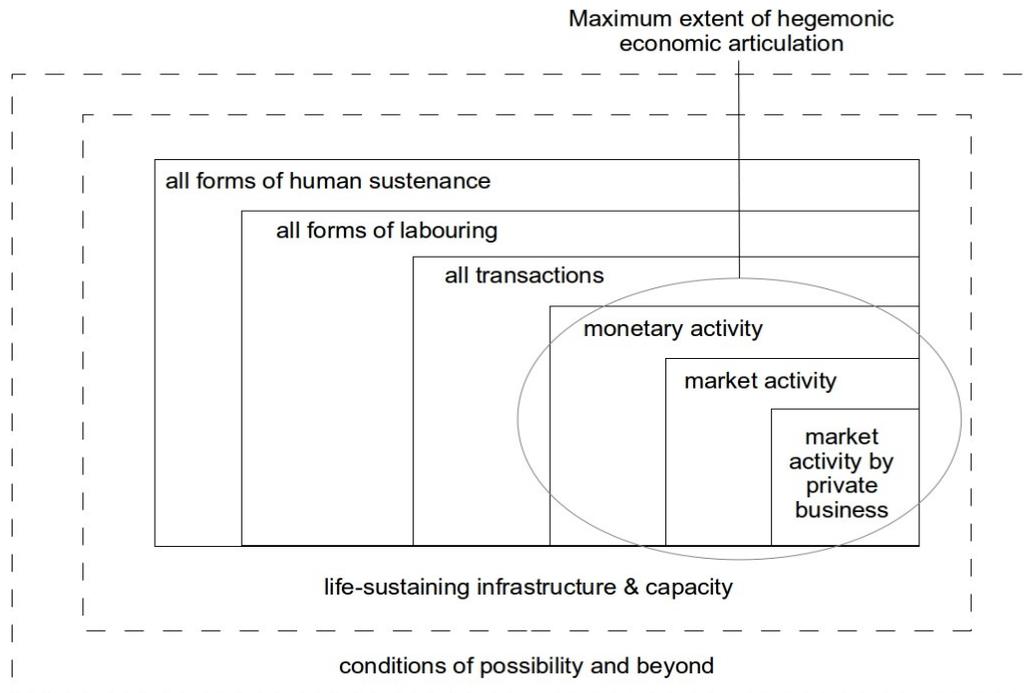
The expansion of the economic does not end here, however, for a few interviewees also acknowledged a larger set of relations that must be included in any articulation of an economy: our constitutive relations with nonhuman forces, or “nature.” When Oscar, economic development director for a sub-regional planning agency, described the object of economic development, it was about the creation of and care for *infrastructure*: “roads, bridges, highways, sewage systems, lighting, the *capacity* to sustain social interaction, [and this] would *include* ecology.” I was hard-pressed to find Oscar speaking of anything like an “environment,” since all infrastructural elements that sustain human life were included as part of a now quite-nebulous economy. Furthermore, these were not referenced in terms of “ecosystem services” or any clearly-quantifiable value, but were subsumed as part of an also-vague and inclusive notion of “quality of place” and “quality of life.” While such “quality” was, for the many interviewees who spoke of it, primarily about *humans*, Sandra was a notable exception. Director of a sub-regional economic growth council (of all people to say this, given the hegemonic expectations of her role), she asserted that quality of life

needs to be for our rivers and for our fish and for the animals. Yeah. You can't exploit that at the cost of humans. You know, the old 'man at the top of the chain and everything under it just for man's use' is baloney, but that's kind of a cultural heritage that kind of came down. I hope and think that's changing.

The economic domain thus expands dramatically [Figure 3], radically blurring into hegemonic domains of both the social and the environmental. What has “the economy” become? More than a domain of monetary transactions, of exchange in general, or even of human provisioning labor, “the economy” morphs into something that involves *the entirety of constitutive relationships that make life possible*. Can this even be called an “economy”? Can it reasonably be seen as a “domain”?

Precisely the same kinds of questions arise with the category of the social. In my conversation with Dorothy, director of a community health initiative, the economic and social were effectively collapsed into each other. When asked, at separate moments, how she would define a “healthy community” and a “healthy economy” (terms she had used), her answers were nearly identical. In an effective community:

People's needs are met. They're in safe housing. They have access to healthy foods. Access to physical activity ... safe sidewalks, safe walking opportunities. ... You know,



*Figure 3: The economic, multiplied.*

it's safe. Think of the lead issues. And environmental issues, safe as far as the water is safe to drink, the air is safe to breathe. ... People are supportive of each other.

In a “healthy economy,” Dorothy described later in our conversation, “I’m not seeing that there isn’t any *want*. There’s always want, but it would be nice if there wasn’t *need*. You know? There are things that people need. Safe housing, good food, you know, a safe environment, opportunities to stay healthy, you know, good medical care.” Community is economy is community, at least when both are “healthy.” One could interpret government economist Raymond’s proposal in a similar way: “The economy is about how *people* are doing. Because, really, it all comes down to *people*.” The social, would seem to expand here to include all dimensions of human activity and well-being.

Does the social end, then, at the boundaries of humanity? Sandra’s extension of “quality of life” to include rivers, fish, and other animals would suggest otherwise. Dorothy also affirmed a kind of more-than-human social ethic:

EM: Healthy people, healthy communities: Does that include other species?

Dorothy: Oh yeah! You’re talking animals and... and, yeah, like pets and... well, yeah. I mean, we all should live together in harmony [chuckles] and... I’m not *thrilled* about

hornets by any means, but I won't kill one if I don't have to! [chuckles] ... I have houseplants that I've had for 45 years. ... And again, when you talk about diets and everything, all these dogs being poisoned by these treats and foods, that's really scary. And you look at the social factor, how important pets are to people... that *connection*.

Donna Haraway (2008) would not be surprised to find “companion species” challenging the line between the social and the environmental, rupturing a wall that will then be difficult to close. As soon as intimate nonhuman co-habitants are brought into human community, “the Great Divides of animal/human, nature/culture, organic/technical, and wild/domesticated flatten into mundane differences—the kind that have consequences and demand respect and response” (2008, 15).

What *does* demand response? For Jeff Popke (2003; 2009), drawing together threads from Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and others, this is the fundamental question of ethical practice. Rather than encountering a pre-defined space in which care is to be enacted, the “being-in-common” (Nancy 1991) that is our shared condition of existence calls us to continually ask and struggle over questions of *who* to care for and *how*. “What we deem ‘the social,’” writes Popke, “should thus be seen as an agonistic space of negotiation over the very meaning and contours of the in-common” (2009, 18). The social comes to signify, in this articulation, an ever-open sphere of possible relations to which we might be responsible.<sup>8</sup>

This was precisely what emerged from some of my interviewees: “For me,” said Brenda, research director of a nonprofit youth advocacy organisation, “I think of community as being, ‘What is our interconnectedness?’ And that occurs in all kinds of different ways, not just relationships but through our taxes and through our commerce ... all of that coming together creates community.” Brenda resisted the kind of notion of community that demands a definition of who is “in” and “out,” instead calling forth an articulation which begins with a fundamental question: “how do we all be together in that space of community, and *help* each other?” We shift, here, away from the very notion of a “domain” towards something much more fluid and processual, where society and community are constituted as continual, open processes of negotiation and decision-making. The social becomes the very *work* of imagining and crafting a collective future: in the words of the environmental nonprofit director Paula, “Fundamentally what I think we're trying to do is figure out

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<sup>8</sup> This notion of ethics as an open question of responsibility amidst complex interdependency is also shared and further elaborated by J.K. Gibson-Graham and others in the Community Economies Collective (see, for example, Gibson-Graham 2006b; Roelvink and Gibson-Graham 2009; Miller 2013; Hill 2014).

how we're going to share this planet together, and what are going to be the rules of the game.”

“Society” has expanded well beyond the bounded space of non-economic human activity [Figure 4].

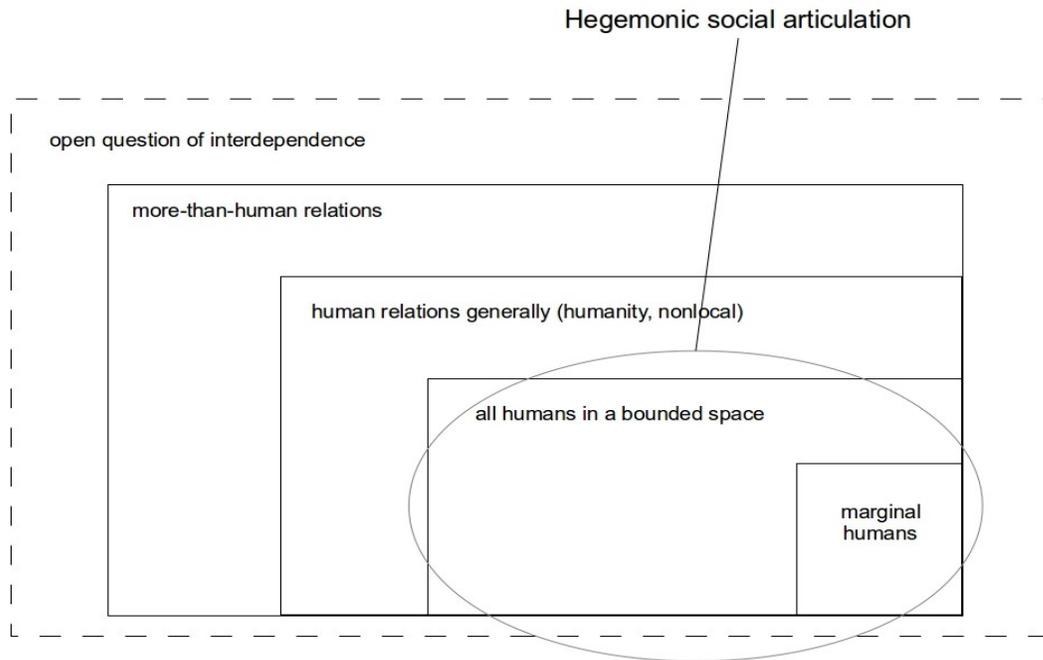


Figure 4: *The social, multiplied.*

If economy and society can be seen as having multiplied and opened *outward* including more-and-more, the environment moved in two directions at once. From a domain of measurable externality and otherness, it became both everything and nothing: appearing *inside* the very places where it should not be, and at the very same time disappearing *as an environment* when located at any of its supposed sites. “What *is* the environment?” I asked my interviewees. Rather than offering definitions, they most often told me stories and described particular struggles, challenges, threats, hopes, or commitments. Witness Dorothy, the nonprofit community health director:

EM: When you think about the environment, what is that for you?

Dorothy: I'm concerned about my neighbors' outside wood boiler, when I can smell plastic burning in it. I'm concerned about the river that used to run clear, now there's a campground with a hundred sites up it, and now it's green. Algae, green, slimy stuff because more and more people are using it. I'm concerned about the person whose culvert keeps washing out and they keep dumping more and more dirt into it and all that gravel is working it's way down the river.

Indeed, none of Maine's "environmental" organizations can truly be said to focus on protecting, conserving, stewarding, or healing an "environment." Everything comes down to a specific project in a specific place, a particular species or watershed, a chemical, a toxic production process, a particular causal chain that leads from a specific human (often industrial) action to a specific harm. In Bruno Latour's terms, "it is always *this* invertebrate, *this* branch of a river, *this* rubbish dump or *this* land-use plan which finds itself the subject of concern, protection, criticism or demonstration" (1998, 221). The environment is a "floating signifier" (Laclau 2005, 131) that functions to link together otherwise disparate matters of concern into something that can be articulated as a seeming whole. Behind this signifier is—once again—a radically (and perhaps terrifyingly) open question about interdependence and ethical responsibility to beings and forces with whom we did not even know we were connected.

On the other hand, where "the environment" was taken as an actual object or domain by my interviewees, a multiplication spiraled out of control and dissolved the category by *diffusion* rather than magnification. The discourse of "environmental health" is a case in point. Here, at the intersection of an external context and the intimate space of the human body, the director of a nonprofit conservation collaborative asked, "Is lead paint an environmental issue or not? ... Certain environmentalists would say, 'No, that's not the environment!' And yet what could be more 'environment' than the place you live?" Yet the place one lives—the household—is precisely *not* the environment of the hegemonic articulation, since it is ostensibly a *human* space, a civilized space, an "inside" space of culture as opposed to an "outside" of nature.

Once "the environment" is let in to the space of the household, it immediately blurs into the very tissue of the human body itself, for the "environment" as a source of lead and other toxins is an environment that exists for humans only in its active *circulation*. Lead in raw form, buried as ore in the ground, is not the environment. Lead mixed into a matrix of paint on an old windowsill, peeling, flaking, entering bodies and lodging itself there: *this*, then, is the environment. This environment is what we breathe and what we eat, and since breathing and eating are acts of intimate ingestion—in which air and food enter us and touch us from the inside—the environment is inevitably located *within* our very bodies. Humans make "the environment," eat "the environment," and *are* "the environment." What is *not* the environment?

The environment as a domain implodes, then, while also multiplying [Figure 5]: appearing in the home and the workplace, then inside the body itself, then from an outside beyond the domain of

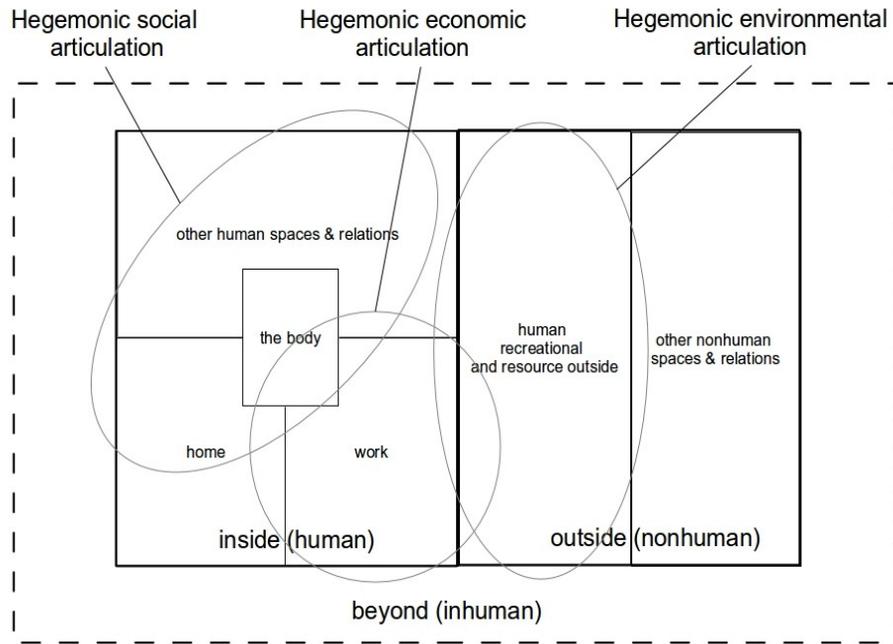


Figure 5: The multiplication of environment that has made it "everything" and "nothing."

named and measured resources, and finally from an outside beyond even the “human” and “nonhuman”—an “inhuman” (Clark 2011) that is our collective exposure to an existence that utterly exceeds us and about which we can only ask questions to which there are no answers. This destabilization of certainties and solidities is radically different than the deterritorializing force of capital as described by Marx and Engels (1988). Rather than rendering a world in which “all that is solid melts into air,” the environment in the form of what Timothy Morton (2010) calls “the ecological thought” suggests that all that is solid may in fact be *connected* to air in ways that we cannot even begin to know.

As each category is unsettled and multiplied, as “lines of flight” scatter in multiple directions, what remains of the economic, the social, and the environmental? What *should* remain? Christine, a regional development economist, suggested a provocative image for the trio: “We draw neat little Venn diagrams that imply that the boundaries are crisp and clean,” she told me, “but in fact it would probably be more accurate to say that you have *three fog-banks of different densities colliding with one another*” (emphasis added). Economy, society, and environment are no longer stable domains, but rather become diffused clouds of intensity, clusters of wild particles converging, mixing, combining, diverging. When fog banks collide, what is left of each bank? Are we not faced with a *single cloud*, a nebula, itself demarcated from the surrounding air only by diffuse gradients?

Perhaps, but it is crucial that this “fog bank” image not be reduced to one of simple blurring and confusion, and certainly not to a mess that must be contained or cleaned up. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) provide a different figure for thinking and encountering the fog bank: the “body without organs” or “BwO” (1987, 153). This concept enables us to refuse an ontology of *being*, and the inevitability of whatever *is* in the world, in favor of an ontology of *becoming*—without, that is, also rejecting the possibility of new forms of stabilization and organization. If “organs” are understood as discrete zones of territorialization that render a body into an organism, an identity, or a subject, then the BwO is the virtual zone of endless becoming that simultaneously renders all forms of organization possible and continually threatens them to the core. The BwO is the “molecular intensity” always *virtually* present at the heart of every assemblage, yet can never be encountered as such since its virtuality is always actualized in particular form of organization. At the same time, its presence forms the condition of possibility for the becomings-otherwise of all seemingly-stable things. To “become a body without organs” is not to be lost in chaos or to refuse any movement beyond decomposition (or, to use a more common term, “deconstruction”), but rather to continually experiment with what the presence of the BwO might enable. Far from being the place where all meaning is lost, where differences are dissolved, and where possibilities end, the fog bank is a space of radically-creative difference from which the *new* may be born. Let the zombies return, then, to the fog bank and dissolve into the mist from whence they came. From this “continuum of intensities” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 70), some *other* paths might be composed.

### **Recomposing: Toward a Politics of Livelihood**

Let us begin with a pivotal moment in my conversation with Sandra, director of a regional economic development council. As a prompt, I had shown her the image of the three overlapping circles of economy, community, and environment published in the *Maine Measures of Growth in Focus* report [see Figure 1]. Sandra essentially rejected these categories. Looking at the triple circles with a furrowed brow, she paused, and then proposed, “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?” I had neglected, up to that point, to notice a particular geometric dynamic at play where the three circles meet: a space is formed in which all circles overlap and blur. This is the

*fog bank*, where one ceases to be distinguishable from another. While the image does, in one sense, perform the purification of categories, separating “economy,” “community” (society) and “environment” as three distinct dimensions in need of connection, it also connects them in such a way as to generate a radical 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 deeply 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. This is where I want to begin speaking of “livelihoods.”

Livelihoods, I propose, offers a language with which to shift the terrain of conversation and contestation. It names, in fact, something about which my interviewees were trying to speak but for which they did not have adequate words. “I don't think there's *any* conflict between the environment or the economy,” said a prominent environmental activist Caleb, “There shouldn't be. It's a myth.” Caleb's rapid movement from an ontological (“there isn't”) to a normative (“there shouldn't”) assertion is telling, as two distinct propositions are articulated at the same time: on one hand, there is no distinction, since the “environment” is clearly a fundamental part of what we need to survive. On the other hand, there *is* a distinction, since “the economy” also refers to a domain or process that appears to be systematically undermining the ecological conditions of life and well-being—the economy of the hegemonic articulation. The problem is that there often appears to be no word other than “economy” with which to refer to these radically different things. The term “livelihoods” can enact this crucial differentiation, avoiding the problem of having to resignify a term (economy) that comes laden with such heavy hegemonic baggage, and challenging the continual re-enactment of separation that comes with asserting that an “economy” and an “environment” can be reconciled.

Why “livelihood”? It is a common word, widely used in Maine and elsewhere to refer very generally to the making of a living, the securing of sustenance. It has been used in English, via a variety of spellings (*lifelode*, *lyvelode*, *livelyhoode*) since at least the 13th century (OED, 2015) and unlike the three terms of the hegemonic trio, it has meant roughly the same thing for all of this time, weathering the fall of feudalism and the rise of industrial modernity. It names a kind of steady undercurrent, an everyday word that has continually resisted new significations in the name of the

common. As a term of *practice*, of experience, livelihood refers to a complex life lived and negotiated from the *inside*, rather than categorized from without. As such, it resists reproduction of any clear distinctions between anything “economic” that is not always already “social” and “environmental,” and vice versa. As Paula, director of a conservation organization, suggested, “You can't talk about livelihoods without talking about taking care of the environment as well ... you know, it's all connected.” Indeed, livelihood exceeds the three hegemonic categories while also refusing a totalization that would subsume them. Moreover, livelihood also has the nice resonance of *lively*, which beckons toward a normative commitment to *joy* in the Spinozan sense (Deleuze 1988, 19), of enhancing a body's capacities through connection, and it also serves to remind us of the “lively matter” (Bennett 2010) in which we participate and from which we continually emerge.

The language of “livelihoods” as an intervention in the field of development is not, of course, a new proposition. It has been previously mobilized in a number of forms, from Karl Polanyi's *The Livelihood of Man* (1977) to the “Sustainable Livelihoods Approach” in international development practice (e.g., Ashley and Carney 1999; Bebbington 1999; 2007; Chambers and Conway 1991; De Haan and Zoomers 2005; Scoones 1998; 2009). In all of these cases, this language is used to displace the hegemony of paid-work and monetary exchange via capitalist markets: humans make livings, through all kinds of activities and in relation to all kinds of institutions, motivations, and contexts. At the same time, however, these approaches all tend to merge the economic and social without challenging an articulation of “the environment” as a domain of resources. The *human* remains at the center of action, and (often in the form of individuals and households) still navigates—even “optimizes”—amidst a world of objects or resources. To develop a truly “transversal” articulation (Guattari 1996; Yuval-Davis 1999) that cuts across and through the hegemonic categories and opens new ethical and political space, livelihoods must be articulated in a more radically *ecological* sense.

By “ecological” I do not refer to a synonym for “environmental,” nor to its common mobilization as a kind of scientific holism. Rather, I mean it as precisely that which escapes domestication or even signification (Lyotard 1993), “not the name of a totality but of the impossibility of any such totality” (Szerszynski 2010, 14). This is Timothy Morton's sense of ecology in *The Ecological Thought* (2010), the mind-boggling interdependence that we can never master, never know, and that calls us toward an ethics we have only begun to explore. Livelihoods would indicate, then, not the ways in which we—the “autonomous” agents—make a living for ourselves in relation to

some “outside,” or in the midst of “enabling resources” and “constraints,” but rather the complex, reciprocally-negotiated composition of habitat (*oikos*) and that which inhabits (*us*, along with *others*). Livelihoods must refer to an “ecopoiesis”: the active creation (*poiesis*) of *oikos*.

### *Three Dimensions of Livelihood*

While I begin to depart here from the specific languages mobilized in my conversations with Maine policy professionals, I remain grounded in the possibility that this shift toward “livelihoods” might usefully articulate some of their most fruitful lines of flight. The operative strategic question at this point is one of a “fleshing out” of concepts: how, specifically, might we think about livelihoods in ways that can re-signify and re-direct collective ethical and political negotiation in Maine’s “development” struggles? While there are many possible avenues, I will conclude this paper by exploring one. Livelihoods, I propose, can be partially and usefully conceptualized in terms of another trio, only this time not a geometry of domains, but a *triadic relation*. Livelihood entails *making* a living, having a living *made for us* by others (human and nonhuman), and making livings *for others*. “I” am, “we” are, continually emergent at the convergence of these three dimensions [Figure 6]. Development, detached from a linear, “progressive” movement and taken, instead, as an *event* (as in “there is a new development here”), can be engaged in terms of the kinds of self-making it enables, the kinds of relations of being-made that it cultivates or denies, the kinds of relations of making-others it entails, and the extent to which these relations are (or are not) made visible as sites of ethical engagement and democratic contestation.<sup>9</sup>

The dimension of livelihoods most often and overtly acknowledged is that of *making* a living, the active work of doing, producing, procuring—“us” (whoever we are) engaged in crafting and securing the means of our subsistence. This is the classic site often associated with “agency,” in which humans or others exercise particular forms of perception, skill, knowledge, and power to engage in self-making or, to extend a term developed by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1980), “autopoiesis.” It might be more helpful to say that this is the key site where agency condenses,

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<sup>9</sup> My aim is to do something quite similar to—and indeed deeply inspired by and indebted to—Gibson-Graham’s notion of “community economy” (Gibson-Graham 2006b; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013). The difference is my interest in transposing this language and framework out of the “key” of economy and into a key that refuses the categories of the hegemonic articulation entirely. This is really, then, an appreciative development of aspirations articulated by Roelvink and Gibson-Graham (2009) regarding a more-than-human notion of “community economy.”

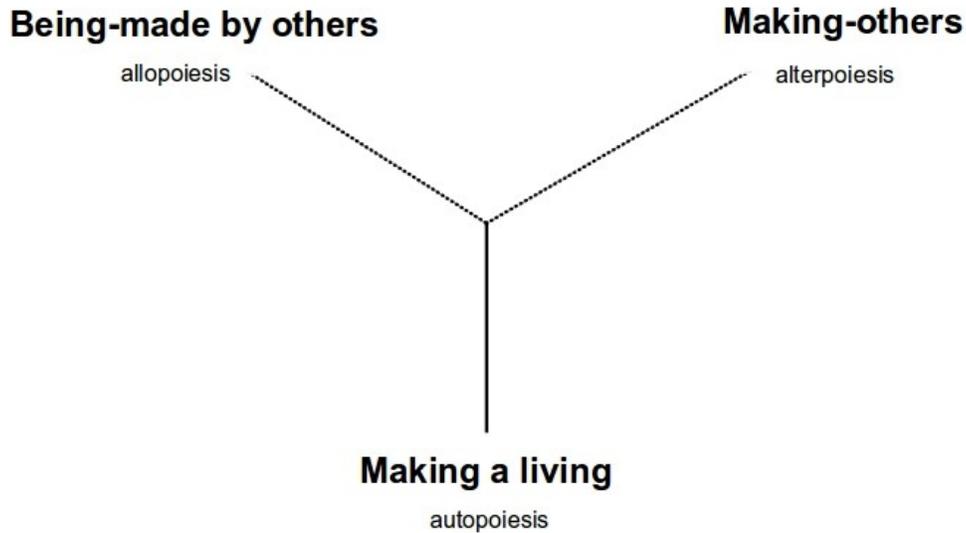


Figure 6: Three sides of livelihood: making, being-made, and making-others.

congeals, or is momentarily *realized*, even as its sources are “distributed” (Bennett 2010) throughout the whole triple assemblage of livelihood relations. Key ethical and political questions of this dimension include: What actions and strategies are available to a person or collective in a given situation? Which might be made available but are blocked or hindered by particular forces or relations? How are desires for different forms of action cultivated or suppressed? To what extent does a given proposition or articulation open up possibilities for the increase of agential expression, for whom, in what combinations, and at what costs to others?

While such question of “agency” are crucial, of course, their over-emphasis always risks reinscribing an impossible normative demand toward a notion of autonomy that we need to confront and transform (Whatmore 1997). As our increasingly-visible interdependencies with a more-than-human living world make clear, we are all *utterly dependent* on beings and forces that exceed us. We are made by others in the dimension that we can also call “allopoiesis” (*allo*, from the outside). I draw this term from Maturana, Varela and Uribe (1974) who contrast it with autopoiesis as the production and maintenance of a system's organization from forces outside that system. Autopoiesis and allopoiesis are not, however, mutually exclusive dynamics. As microbiologist Scott Gilbert (2013) argues, building on the work of Lynn Margulis (1981; 1999), dependence on relations with others is a constitutive property of life itself. No autopoiesis without allopoiesis: prior to any making of a

living, we must be *given* one.<sup>10</sup> We are all on the dole. In one sense, being-made involves various relations by which others “provide” energy, matter, and meaning that sustain us. Prominent examples in the human domain include birth, parenting, language acquisition, support in times of sickness, physical nourishment and the beings that produce (or embody) it, and those from whom our money comes (whether via simple exchange, our own exploitation, or our exploitation of others). The discourse of “ecosystem services,” increasingly common in Maine as an attempt to value more-than-human constitutive relations in terms often amenable to the hegemonic articulation (Moore, Gunn, and Troy 2012; Troy 2012), also names key relations of being-made. Sue Jackson and Lisa Palmer propose to re-signify and re-orient this discourse toward “a relational ethic of care and responsibility” by focusing on concrete, constitutive relations of “communicative reciprocity within and across human–non-human realms” (2014, 2).

Being-made is not just about the provision of materials that feed autopoiesis; it also names what Elizabeth Grosz calls the “non-normative imperatives of an outside that weighs on individuals and groups, in ways that they cannot control but are implicated in and are effects of” (2005, 51). The *allo* may be parents, friends, bosses, exploited employees, or the living beings who become our food, but it is also gravity, genetic variety, the emergent properties of myriad forms of energy and matter that not only produce limits to action, but also incite it, provoke it, and constitute its conditions of possibility (Grosz 2005, 43–44). To recognize our being-made, and the being-made of all that is actualized in our world(s), is to foreground a constitutive dependence that simultaneously demands reciprocity and utterly exceeds any possibility of it. What does it mean to be alive and capable of limited yet precious action—that is, to embody *response-ability*—in the presence of a *creation* that can never be mastered?<sup>11</sup> A whole host of ethical questions are opened up here, since *we do not even know with whom we are connected* (Latour 1998). How might we render our interdependencies more

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10 To be precise, there may be allopoiesis without autopoiesis, as when particular relations of mass and gravity compose a durable body of rock in space, but this does not work the other way around. All autopoietic entities are also, at the same time, allopoietic.

11 One can glimpse, in the presence of such a question, how religious fundamentalisms may seem so appealing in a moment when the hegemonic trio is coming unraveled as a dominant orienting map for collective life. In a sense, the trio has insulated us from confronting the profoundly spiritual questions that lie beneath our quotidian political struggles by banishing “God” to a separate sphere. One dimension of the “anthropocene,” however, may be an exposure of hubris and a growing confrontation with the forces of creation beyond us. In the face of such exposure, it is all-too-tempting to fall back on forms of certainty that, once again, might insulate or anesthetize us from the ethical demands of the present.

visible while also recognizing the impossibility of any complete accounting? What forms of responsibility can we construct towards the myriad others (beings, places, times) whose bodies and worlds are shaped by the “makings” that we take and receive from them? How do we gain, as the well-known “serenity prayer” has it (Niebuhr 1987, 251), the wisdom to discern the difference between those dependencies that can be transformed and those to which we are truly at the mercy?<sup>12</sup>

The third dimension of the livelihoods triad, that of *making-others*, entails “us” (whoever we may be) standing in the very position of those others whom we are made by, acting ourselves as forces of creation. So much of the energies of self-making are, in fact, oriented toward making livings *for* others. I call this dimension “alterpoiesis” (*alter* as in other). In some cases, it takes the form of involuntary relations: exploitation in capitalist firms that provides surplus for owners at the expense of producers, playing host to (other kinds of) parasites, or becoming compost when we die. In other cases, making-others forms a core part of the intention or vector of agency of a living being: giving birth, raising children, contributing to the sustenance of various collectivities, caring for places and things, supporting elders and others, and enacting solidarities.

The making of others is not reducible either to altruism—“because I care”—or to instrumentalism—“if I care for you, you’ll care for me”—precisely because of the ecological nature of livelihood relations. One may not ever know if one’s making of others will help to make oneself in turn; and indeed, where are the boundaries of this self in a context in which we emerge at the very intersection of an *auto*, an *allo*, and an *alter*? As Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber (2012) reminds us in their work on symbiosis and the collective emergence of the self, “we have never been individuals.” Key ethical questions in this dimension of making-others include: To whom are we obliged, called, or pulled to offer ourselves, our energies, and our lives? To what extent are these relations shaped by forms of coercion and violence, and to what extent can we transform such relations? How are our makings-of-others connected with our being-made, recirculating energies and matter in ways that maintain our habitats and those of others, and to what extent is this connection severed by various extractive mediations?

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<sup>12</sup> As the prayer goes: “God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.” I would only add that courage must include the fortitude to relentlessly experiment with—and participate in transforming—the *line* between that which can and cannot be changed.

This schema of making, being-made, and making-others is, ironically, another trio, but as a triadic relation it is radically different from the geometry that characterizes the hegemonic formation. This livelihoods triad cannot be turned into a triangle, a Venn diagram, or a series of nested spheres without isolating, de-animating, or freezing the dynamic relations it is intended to foreground. Indeed, no term can stand alone and nor can it be connected to another without passing through the point of encounter and emergence at the heart of the diagram. A single triad, therefore, never stands alone but is always already on the way to becoming part of another triad (figure 21). Being-made by others emerges only in relation to that which is made; making a living is only made possible in its relation to being-made; and making a living stands as a relative *relay* between two realms of making (poiesis) that require its connection or mediation. One's making of others becomes, *for* those others, the dynamic of being-made. “I” and “we” emerge as a site of continually-enacted agential articulation between a *habitat that makes us* and the *habitats of others that we participate in making*. “I” and “we” become relays in a complex ecological meshwork (Morton 2010), and a politics of the negotiation of ecological livelihoods unfolds here. *Life is the negotiation of multiple, overlapping, distinct, co-constitutive habitats*. Or, in Haraway's terms, “we are in a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down” (2008, 42).

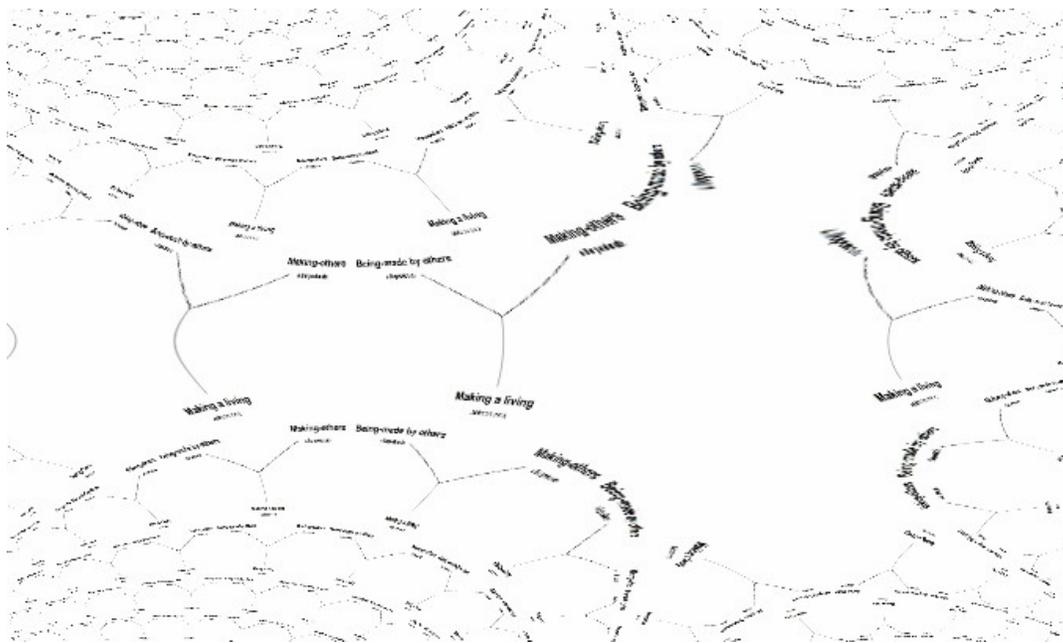


Figure 7: The "mesh" of livelihood relations.

Here we are, then: the very effects of multiple encounter(s) between being-made, making, and making others, nodes in a complex mesh of intersecting and overlapping livelihood assemblages unfolding in various relations of conflict, synergy, and indifference. As Morton puns, “*What a fine mesh we've gotten ourselves into*” (2010, 61). Since we cannot get ourselves out, we must, as the impossible task of ecology demands, go *in*. In such a context, to “make an honest living”—a crucial and common aspiration in Maine—would not entail severing or even reducing one's dependencies on others as is often suggested. Rather, it would entail taking active responsibility for interdependence, for one's constitutive reliance on others and the ethical questions this reliance entails, for the dynamics of self-making, and for the many ways in which one participates (or not) in making others.

### **Conclusion: Mobilizing Livelihoods**

To conclude, I return to the story of Rick and Theresa with which the paper began. Viewing their lives through the kaleidoscope of the livelihoods triad, a different picture begins to emerge. In the dimension of *making* a living, it turns out that the couple's jobs are far from the only source of active sustenance. They grow gardens, hunt for deer and moose, fix their own house and vehicles, cut firewood for heating, share cleaning and cooking work, barter with friends and neighbors for multiple goods and services, and care for their community and the land they live on and near in multiple ways. In the dimension of having a living *made for them* by others, Rick and Theresa rely on oxygen produced by the forests, soil bacteria in the garden, a relatively stable climate system, and migrant laborers who grow and harvest their purchased food. They rely on Theresa's mother for help with the kids, on friends and neighbors for all kinds of things, on other taxpayers to support them via social programs when times get hard, on deer and moose and their habitats, and on people in nearby and distant places whose land is mined, polluted, or stolen in order to make the phones, cars, microwaves, and televisions that they have come to want or “need.” At the same time, as *makers of others*, Rick and Theresa are hosts to millions of nonhuman bacteria, they sustain their children in myriad ways, they care for Rick's elderly parents, they go to bean suppers to support local families in need. Rick, in his old job (and with little choice) supported the vacations, second homes, and private school educations of the mill owners, and he provided lumber for homes and

businesses all over the region. Rick participates in the Maine Sportsman's Alliance which advocates for (among other things) the protection of deer and fish habitats. One could go on with examples.

There is no economy, society, or environment here, except and to the extent that media, researchers, policy-makers, and other professionals mobilize forms of measurement and enforce modes of institution that render Rick and Theresa's complex relations intelligible in these terms. If we engage, instead, in terms of *ecological livelihoods*, we confront complex ethical-material negotiations among multiple beings. There are no “laws” of the market, no essential or inevitable categories into which everything fits, no pre-determined outcomes. Rick and Theresa are no longer marginal to the action; or, at least, they are not marginal in the same way—no more or less marginal than any other tiny humans in a web of constitutive interrelations. At the same time, Rick and Theresa are not simply pre-given individuals standing amidst a field of conflicting domains, but rather emerge as such from a complex assemblage. Rick's resentment and Theresa's despair have a *habitat*, and it is this habitat that a politics of livelihood must aim to transform—thus making other affects, openings, and alliances possible.

The transformation of such habitat is no small task. It is all-too-easy, for example, for me to write about ethical exposure, vulnerability, and becoming present to the open (and terrifying) questions of ecology. I live in relative safety, in a well-made house, on fertile and secure land, in a strong community of skilled and loving people, and with access to a vast network of livelihood relations that extend far beyond the place I call “home.” In some sense, I am insulated from having to even confront the very questions I have raised: I am not currently forced by relations beyond my control to become *vulnerable* except in ways that do not threaten my zones of comfort.

Rick and Theresa, on the other hand, have no such luxury: theirs is an assemblage in immediate and palpable crisis. What does it mean to ask them to step into a space of even more vulnerability, to become further exposed to the ecologies which make (or unmake) them? Should it be surprising if they were to retreat into the seeming-certainties of fundamentalist Christianity, or to vote for a governor who is dedicated to spreading the politics of resentment and dismantling social redistribution systems in the name of “opportunity”?<sup>13</sup> Perhaps more importantly for the ethico-

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13 Having just re-elected a far-Right “Tea Party” Governor (Paul LePage) many Mainers appear resigned to affirming a culture of climate change denial (whether explicit or implied by inaction), anti-immigrant resentment, public austerity, elite accumulation, “individual responsibility” for collectively-produced problems, and free-market “solutions” to all social challenges.

political task that confronts us, what kinds of ethical ecologies might compose enough safety and support to enable Rick, Theresa, and others to step into spaces of radical experimentation and becoming-otherwise without fear of losing the precious bit of stability they might yet hold? Nothing I have written in this paper will be truly relevant without the active engagement of this question.

But supposing this engagement, what might a politics of ecological livelihood entail in Rick and Theresa's lives and larger context? First, the obligation toward employment in a capitalist firm might be opened for contestation when livelihood is seen as a matter of diverse practices, any of which might be further expanded through direct action, policy changes, or other means. "The economy," along with the accompanying disciplines of the "social," is only one mode of capture by which certain livelihood relations are enforced and others marginalized or eclipsed. The political question becomes one of *which* forms of livelihood-making we wish to cultivate, and what work is needed to make these more possible and viable for Maine people. Rick and Theresa, no longer just potential employees, are some of the key people who must participate in answering this question.

Secondly, the nature of "social welfare" might change when ecological interdependence becomes a condition of all livelihood rather than a moment of failure. Perhaps some of Rick's resentment towards other so-called "parasites" might change, too, if we are all, in fact, in such a position by virtue of being alive. What kinds of ethical-political possibilities might be opened if those concerned about Rick and his community were to begin with the assumption of ecological interdependence rather than with a normative demand for an (always-false) individual autonomy? What might Maine's policy professionals become if such an approach was actively explored and enacted? What might *Rick and Theresa* become if enrolled into assemblages that took such interdependence seriously and cultivated its acknowledgment?

Finally, if there is no longer an "environment" outside of the specific enactments of "environmentalists," what might conflicts over the shape of Maine's landscapes, ecosystems, and multi-species communities become? What kinds of skills, practices of listening, and forms of care would those seeking to enact solidarity with other species need to cultivate if they were no longer cut off from conversation with Rick and Theresa by an economy/environment divide? What would happen if "environmentalists" were to meet Rick and Theresa, in fact, on a terrain of shared vulnerability, recognizing that all are caught—in sometimes very different ways—in modes of livelihood that undermine possibilities for others to flourish?

Perhaps we can take a clue from Nora, an interviewee whose work has included a significant stint working as a state government-employed mediator between parties involved in classic “economy vs. environment” conflicts. “You know,” she proposed,

... we don't all have to agree on our values to get along on this earth, but we should be able to find creative solutions to the problems that are vexing us. ... It isn't about changing each other, *it's about finding new ways of surviving*. I don't have to convince everyone I meet that I'm right about my values, but I would like to be able to have the chance to explore unique and creative strategies. And feel like they'd be open to that. And I want to retain openness in myself for that.

This “openness” is creativity enmeshed with acknowledged vulnerability, and thus the ability to engage experimentally with reality, to explore the composition of new assemblages in which old problems and conflicts are radically transformed. It is about refusing to accept the configurations of choices that emerge from the hegemonic assemblage and working, instead, to construct a new “ecology of practices” (Stengers 2005; 2011) in which other ethico-political possibilities might emerge. Might an elaborated politics of livelihood help to organize such an ecology? This paper is only a preliminary sketch for concepts and practices which must be brought to life through concrete, experimental engagement with on-the-ground efforts to compose new modes of collective life in Maine and beyond. That is the next step.

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