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Independence from the Corporate Global Economy

by Ethan Miller

The old story says we have to depend on big corporations. The new story tells us we can earn a livelihood, gain freedom, and build community through cooperation.

Call it "globalization," or the "free market," or "capitalism." Whatever its name, people across the United States and throughout the world are experiencing the devastating effects of an economy that places profit above all else.

None of this, of course, is news. Many of us have come to believe that the crucial economic decisions affecting our lives are made not by us, but by far-away "experts" and mysterious "market forces." A friend asked me recently, "Since when did the American people decide to send their manufacturing sector south to exploit people in El Salvador or the Dominican Republic?" We didn't, and nobody ever asked.

But what's the alternative? We're taught that there are only two possible economic choices: capitalism—a system in which rich people and corporations have the power, make the decisions, and control our lives; or communism—a system where state bureaucrats have the power, make the decisions, and control our lives. What a choice!

When it comes to real economic alternatives, our imaginations are stuck. Clearly, we need something different, but what would it look like? How do we start to imagine and create other ways of meeting our economic needs?

A Story of Dependency

We can begin by changing the stories we tell about the overwhelming power and inevitability of our economic system. These stories have hidden from us our own power, potential, and value as creative human beings.

The dominant story defines the heroes of our market system as the rational, self-interested firms and individuals who seek to satisfy their endless need for growth and accumulation in a world of scarce resources.

In this story, we the people are just worker-bees and consumers, making and spending money, hoping for the opportunity to accumulate more, and perpetually dependent on the jobs and necessities that the corporate system allocates to the worthy. Citizenship is reduced to the active pursuit of financial wealth. Feeling powerless to make real change, we come to see the economy as like the weather—beyond our control and understood by only the elite "experts." We hope for sunny days and carry umbrellas.

This story renders all activities other than business transactions invisible—segregated into the sphere of family life, social life, and leisure. A community of active, creative, and skilled people without money

or capital (or the desire to have it) is considered unproductive or backward.

This is why many economic developers talk endlessly about "bringing in new businesses" or "attracting investors" to improve the local or regional economy. Real value, for them, comes from the outside, not the inside; from those who invest capital, not those who invest time and hard work; from the power of money to make more of itself, not from the power of life and community to self-organize and to thrive. This dominant story is about how our lives and our communities are never good enough, never complete or worthwhile without the money and jobs of the capitalist market economy.

A Story of Hope

Suppose we try a different story: instead of defining the economy as a market system, let's define it as the diverse array of activities by which humans generate livelihoods in relation to each other and to the Earth. Extending far beyond the workings of the capitalist market, economic activity includes all of the ways we sustain and support ourselves, our families, and our communities. Peeling away the dominant economic story of competition and accumulation, we see that other economies are alive below the surface, nourishing us like roots. These are not the economies of the stock-brokers and the economists. They are the economies of mutual care and cooperation—community economies, local economies. Many are familiar to us, though rarely acknowledged. They include:

Household Economies—meeting our needs with our own skills and work: raising children, offering advice or comfort, teaching life skills, cooking, cleaning, building, balancing the checkbook, fixing the car, growing food and medicine, raising animals. Much of this work has been rendered invisible or devalued as "women's work."

Gift Economies—built on shared circles of generosity: volunteer fire companies, food banks, giving rides to hitch-hikers, donating to community organizations, sharing food.

Barter Economies—trading services with friends or neighbors, swapping one useful thing for another: returning a favor, exchanging plants or seeds, time-based local currencies.

Gathering Economies—living on the abundance of Earth's gift economy: hunting, fishing, and foraging. Also re-directing the wastestream—salvaging from demolition sites, gleaning from already-harvested farm fields, dumpster-diving.

Cooperative Economies—based on common ownership and/or control of resources: worker-owned and -run businesses, collective housing, intentional communities, health care cooperatives, community land trusts.

Community Market Economies—networks of exchange built from small businesses and cooperatives that are accountable to their communities through social ties, innovative ownership models, and mutual support. Such economies are not created to make large profits, but to provide healthy, modest livelihoods to their participants, and services to the larger community.

Recognizing these diverse forms of livelihood we can see not only that economic possibilities exist beyond the market and the state, but that these possibilities are viable and powerful. Indeed, the dominant economy would fall apart without such basic forms of cooperation and solidarity. It is not the capitalist market that germinates seeds, calls nourishing water from the sky, or transforms decay into delicious fruit. It is not the capitalist market that nourishes our souls on a daily basis with friendship

and love or cares for us when we are too young or too old to care for ourselves. Nor is it this market that keeps us alive in times of crisis when the factories close, when our houses burn down, or when the paycheck is just not enough. It is the economies of community and care—what many activists in Latin America and Europe call the "solidarity economy"—that hold the very fabric of our society together. It is these relationships that make us human and that meet our most basic needs for love, care, and mutual support.

So what's the alternative to the market system? Its seeds already exist. Though capitalist markets are constantly working to undermine, exploit, and co-opt elements of the solidarity economy, its power and potential as a space of creation and hope persists.

We already inhabit different kinds of economic relationships. We have our own forms of wealth and value that are not defined by money. Economies already exist that place human and ecological relationships at the center, rather than competition and profit-making. We do not need to start from scratch.

When faced with the question of alternatives, then, we can answer not with another Grand Economic Scheme, but with a vision for creative, diverse, and democratic economic organizing. We can build on existing cooperative economic practices, cultivating imagination and possibility.

Linking together emerging alternatives in networks of mutual support and exchange, we can take them to the next level and generate new economic dynamics of solidarity and cooperation on local, regional, and global scales.

A strategy begins to emerge: identify existing alternatives; bring them together to build shared identities and connections; and with new-found collective strength, generate powerful possibilities for social and economic change. Sounds simple, right? Perhaps, but it is the complex, deliberate, and beautiful work of community organizing that will transform vision into reality.

Efforts to identify spaces of democratic economic possibility are already under way. Groups such as the Seattle Local Economies Mapping Project (www.seattlemap.org) are building inventories of alternative economic initiatives, from cooperatives and local currencies to volunteer fire companies and community food banks. Inspired by what is sometimes called "asset-based community development," other groups are cataloging forms of wealth left out of the economic equation, such as subsistence skills, traditional arts and crafts, local stories and lore, and natural landscapes. A coalition of organizations in the U.S. and Canada called the Data Commons Project is building a directory of North American cooperative economic projects (see <http://dcp.usworker.coop>).

New Eyes, New Connections

With local economic inventories in hand, we can begin to generate conversations among solidarity initiatives and institutions. In Brazil, where the solidarity economy movement is well-established, 23 statewide forums, connected by the national Brazilian Solidarity Economy Forum, generate dialog and collaboration among solidarity-based economic projects.

Similar gatherings could be highly effective in North America. The United States Social Forum, to be held in Atlanta, Georgia, in July 2007, offers an exciting opportunity for solidarity economy practitioners and organizers to meet on a large scale.

Such gatherings can link previously isolated efforts, integrating their work into a new and emergent economic web of solidarity. These connections are about more than mutual recognition; they are about building relationships of exchange and support—connecting producers and consumers, marketers and distributors, investors and organizers. In the process, we redefine these roles and institutions.

Connections can also extend to the larger web of organizations and social movements struggling for justice, ecology, and democracy. Campaigns against big-box stores are enhanced by efforts to create community-based economic alternatives. Counter-recruitment work is more effective when youth are involved in cooperative economic projects that offer viable alternatives to the military, and the creation of community land trusts and housing cooperatives strengthens anti-gentrification struggles.

In all of these cases and more, the support is reciprocal: the dreams, aspirations, and energies of grassroots social movements ensure the integrity and health of community-based economic institutions. The practices of seeing, convening, and connecting all build toward the practice of creation. From imagination and possibility can grow new initiatives, new institutions, new forms of exchange, new economies of solidarity. Together, we can reclaim our homes and communities as spaces of safety, care, healing, and mutual aid.

Seeking economic alternatives? The seeds have been planted. They're ready for the rain.

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