

# Cooperative Subjects: Toward a Post-Fantasmatic Enjoyment of the Economy

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*This piece explores practices within some cooperative firms as attempts to foster a subject who has a particular relationship with work and with the community economy. We call this relationship identifying or working in the gap: deriving satisfaction from engaging with the various antagonisms, conflicts, and contingencies that attend the cooperative and its relationship with the community in which it is constituted. Drawing on complementary strains of poststructuralist Marxian theory and Lacanian psychoanalytic thought, we speculate that such subjects are post-fantasmatic in relation to the economy—not in the sense that they no longer have narratives that explain their working lives, but that these narratives do not revolve around capitalocentric economic fantasy and its various symptoms and resentments. We offer a few brief examples of worker coop members working in and identifying with the gap, attempting to keep the negativity of communal production intact through the different phases of collective economic activity.*

**Key Words:** Cooperativism, Subjectivity, Capitalocentrism, Community Economy

We would like to introduce you to three individuals. You may already know them well.

Jim Hilton owns an organic food business in one of the hilltowns of western Massachusetts. For Jim, the capitalist economy is a destructive force penetrating all facets of life, “a living hell” responsible for individuals’ alienation from their true identity and inherently spiritual nature. The current economic order is not serving our need to give and receive love, and it is the economy that stands between us and a spiritual, ecological, healthy, community-oriented society. If it weren’t for the capitalist economy, the Pioneer Valley in western Massachusetts would be a flourishing, biodiverse, abundant garden, overflowing with food. It would be a Shangri-La of people working the land together, making music together, enjoying healthy lives together.

Stanley Grimm is an environmental activist, a self-employed consultant who works on various regional issues, mostly sustainable development, alternative energy, and mass transportation. He produces a monthly Web-based environmental newsletter, for which he writes most of the articles. He lives with a dog and a cat in a small off-the-grid house in the north woods. He grows vegetables and cans

them for the winter. He shops three or four times a year at Whole Foods, and all the rest of his food comes from bulk buying, organic food coops, and local Community Supported Agriculture farms. Because it is wrong to eat foods from outside one's bioregion, he has given up eating lettuce and other greens when it is no longer summer (making do with root vegetables) and he has given up bananas altogether. He discovered he needed potassium in his diet but luckily found that rhubarb makes a handy substitute, so he's been eating a lot of rhubarb, when it's in season.

All around him he sees the cooptation of the environmental ideals that he believes so strongly in. He has almost given up completely using the term "sustainable development" because it has become such a degraded and meaningless phrase. He's been searching for a new term that will capture the original meaning, but hasn't found quite the right one yet. While they accept his organic, bioregionally grown, cooperatively purchased, vegetarian pet food, neither his dog nor his cat actually like him very much.

Ellen Bellow is a businesswoman, the owner of a medium-sized, light manufacturing company specializing in optics. She also serves on the board of a regional planning commission and on a trade association's employment and training committee. She strongly believes that the Pioneer Valley will develop only when it is able to compete with others to attract investment capital. This capital, drawn to the area's highly educated young population and inexpensive, undeveloped land, will create high-paying, high-quality jobs (particularly in high technology). This will have a powerful effect on the region's employment rate and tax revenues, which in turn will lead to improved public schools, flourishing arts, safer cities, and so on. She argues (as if singularly embodying sixteenth-century theological debates between Catholics and Protestants over predestination and the effectivity of good works) that the economy works on its own—it's kind of like a ship on a predestined course—but you can do some things to affect the course of the ship on its journey, to make it dock in your port.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their different political affiliations, projects, and orientations, these three composite subjects of economy—the subject of anticapitalism, the subject of sustainable development, and the subject of neoliberalism—have a similarly structured relationship to the social which, we believe, makes them subjects of fantasy, in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms. We would like to develop this theme here, drawing on the work of Slavoj Žižek, Yannis Stavrakakis, Rey

1. Our involvement in different action research projects brought us into contact with many of the people who were the basis for these caricatures. One such project attempted to document sustainability initiatives undertaken by enterprises, municipalities, and educational institutions in our area. We made contacts by going to local functions that dealt with sustainability and business initiatives. Perhaps because we weren't wholly invested in the project, we were in a good position to study the affective dynamics in the meetings. One of the people on whom Stanley Grimm is based had an authoritative self-presentation and zeal that made his colleagues cringe visibly when he was speaking. It seemed that his every effort at pursuing his goals alienated the very people disposed to ally with him, which reinforced his fantasy that he was the only person really "walking the talk." This experience has been repeated in a number of different settings.

Chow, and others, drawing the link from the Lacanian goal of traversing the fantasy to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's notion of Radical Democracy, but extending the possibilities of Radical Democracy toward an institutionalization of "the lack" that *includes* the economy rather than making the economy a further site of fantasy. We will end with a brief discussion of some concrete, already existing examples where we think the economic lack is being institutionalized.

The Lacanian notion of fantasy can be understood as a subject's reasonable response to a fundamental and unavoidable gap or lack in identity, what Stavrakakis calls "the irreducible negativity of human experience" (1999, 107). It can also be seen as a by-product of the process of becoming a subject: The subject emerges when the infant acquires language, represses pleasures, develops an unconscious, accepts cultural norms, and so on. This is an irreversible break from a prelinguistic, presubject wholeness (Lacan 1977; Wright 1999). From his or her position as that subject—split between a conscious and unconscious, shot through with culture and the symbolic order, enmeshed in its sliding signifiers—he or she attempts to fill in the gap and reconstruct the unity that was disrupted by the emergence of subjecthood. In other words, the lack in identity (of the self as well as the Other) causes a deep uncertainty, an anxiety that is alleviated to some degree by fantasy (Fink 1995). Fantasy projects meaning onto the Other and offers the promise of a return to an imaginary wholeness, to a retroactively constructed unity, with mother, nature, true self, and so on.

Returning to our three familiar subjects of economy we can see that, in each case, the individual upholds a Utopian dream of harmonious unity, completion, or wholeness. Jim has a dream of a precapitalist, premodern community of unalienated, actualized individuals; Stanley has a dream of a fully efficient, ecologically minded, sustainable society; Ellen has a dream of a neoliberal society in which the market and competition inevitably lead to the harmonious allocation of resources and rewards. Clearly, the "currently existing economy" in each of these fantasies has different emotional associations and attached values. But what we can point out here is that in each case there is *an ideal economy*, an economy in which needs *would be* met, desires *would be* satisfied, proper human and social development *would be* achieved. *If only . . .*

Another key element of fantasy is that it produces, paradoxically, the object that frustrates its consummation: the symptom. This is so because fantasy cannot actually find that final meaning in the Other, eliminate the lack in the identity of the self, or provide a pure language beyond the corruption of the sliding signifier. Fantasy protects us from the anxiety of the lack, and it gives a name to—symbolizes—the thing that blocks us from getting what we desire. It gives a name to our desire *and* to why it is unattainable, without confronting or acknowledging the unavoidable lack. It allows us to domesticate the lack, but in such a way that the impossible fullness moves from being impossible to being prohibited. Thus, Žižek (1991) says that fantasy is not the commonplace notion of fantasy (the fantasy of the successful sexual relationship, for example) but is, rather, the story of why it went wrong.

With our three fantasizing subjects, we can see how the prohibition of the impossible is played out. In the anticapitalist fantasy, it is capitalism that stands

in the way of what should be the Utopian true economy. For the sustainable-development fantasy, the alien figure obstructing the reconciliation of community, environment, and economy is profligate, short-term gain. For the neoliberal, the Utopian vision is of a society composed of responsible, rational individuals each seeking to maximize their resources; the obstacle is government regulation.<sup>2</sup>

If the symptom provides the arbitrary, contingent content while filling the necessary structural role of giving consistency to the fantasy, we can project that if each of these obstacles *were* removed, these particular individuals would still be left with a sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction. Indeed, their reliance on these symptoms, on the alien figure or the scapegoat, suggests that these individuals get a certain degree of pleasure or enjoyment out of the *frustration* of their fantasies. Ellen is both horrified and secretly pleased by her explanation of how sentimental environmentalists get in the way of progress in the Valley; Stanley is visibly gleeful when he itemizes the wastefulness of those less committed to environmentalism than he is. Freud described the look on the face of the Rat Man as he recounted a recurring horrific image as a mixture of horror and pleasure. But the Rat Man was only aware of his horror, not of his pleasure. It is our experience that many of the fantasizing subjects of economy we've encountered are, indeed, Rat Men.

## The Problem with Fantasy

Those who have applied the Lacanian theory of the fantasy and symptom to social and political theory have asserted that the Left must struggle against the dangerous

2. We should point out that these caricatures are presented here as full and fully defined subjects, almost wholly without identity beyond their resentment and frustration. Our commitment to an overdeterminist understanding of subjectivity (acknowledging that subjects are complex, multiple, contradictory, and changing) and of effectivity (accepting that the political outcomes of any particular action or subjective position are also complex, multiple, contradictory, and changing) does not preclude us here from fixing these characters, for the moment, to tell a particular story, the telling of which we hope will have certain positive outcomes. If you recognize yourself in these characters' attachment to fantasy, or identify with our frustrations with them, then one such positive effect may have already occurred.

In addition, at this point it is fair to inquire about the fantasies of the authors. There are at least three responses to this inquiry that come to mind: (1) to deny that we have a fantasy about the economy, because we have overcome fantasy and replaced it with something more like true knowledge; (2) to argue that we have replaced one fantasy with another, better fantasy, one that leads us to a better place and one that if widely shared would produce a better society; and (3) to suggest that if one can never be outside fantasy, one can at least develop a different relationship to it, predicated on acknowledging the structure of fantasy and the Utopian impulse.

Taking this third approach, we acknowledge that Hilton, Grimm, and Bellow are the symptoms of our particular fantasy; we recognize our desire to believe that without subjects like them, without leftist subjectivity built around resentment, our particular vision of a future society would be realizable.

fantasies that have historically suffused its projects.<sup>3</sup> This desire to get beyond fantasy is motivated by the belief that fantasies, when politicized, attempt to enforce a closure on the social; the inevitable by-product is a scapegoat who must be eliminated. This is one of the reasons that Stavrakakis and others raise the specters of Nazism or Stalinism, as the dark clouds inevitably appearing on the horizon of Utopian thought.

Our emphasis in applying Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to economic subjectivity is somewhat different. We are less concerned with the dark social consequences of fantasy and more concerned with what fantasy, and especially leftist fantasy, prevents us from imagining, what possible politics and what other orientations of the desiring (economic) subject are precluded—how different approaches to economic, social, and environmental justice are stymied by fantasies in which the world is already too full of meaning, where the identity of (economic) subjects is anchored in relation to a frustrating symptom of which these subjects are unwilling to let go. In our reading, psychoanalytic and Marxian theory are complementary.

Building on Gibson-Graham (1996), Graham, Healy, and Byrne (2002), and the Community Economies Collective (2001), we regard Marxian class analysis as a proliferative discourse, allowing us to see the richness of what, in class terms, is in the already socialized character of work, and motivating us to be inspired by things as they could be in the absence of the social theft that is exploitation. The power of psychoanalysis, on the other hand, is subtractive: It removes us from old ways of being, in light of the already socialized nature of the subject, altering our relationship

3. As people who identify with the Marxian tradition, we recognize that there is a vast literature from this perspective that addresses the connection between subjectivity and economy, and the role of desire, fantasy, and consciousness from a variety of perspectives. Since this discussion stretches from Marx through Lenin and Lukács to Althusser and Žižek, it would be exceedingly difficult to chart our agreements with and divergences from this tradition.

What we wish to distance ourselves from here is a certain strain within the Marxist tradition that is enmeshed in the fantasy of an unalienated individual or an economy freed from conflict and contradiction. This wish places us at odds with fantastic versions of Marxism and with those within the Marxist tradition that attempt to restore an “integral wholeness” to the economic subject. Fantasy is defined here for us by the existence of the frustrating symptom that permits desire to remain in play by constantly throwing up obstacles to its “realization.” Many have observed that Soviet orthodoxy under Stalin evoked and continually deferred socialist paradise by pointing to threats both internal and external (Žižek 2001). In a different way, the notion of “false consciousness,” the idea that there is some technique of analysis or performance that allows oneself or one’s “class” to arrive at their true self-interest, can be understood as another type of fantasy.

One particularly useful approach squarely within the Marxist tradition, which does not view the issue through the lens of psychoanalysis, is that taken by Amariglio and Callari (1989), who argue that Marx’s very formulation of the terms “commodity fetishism” and “value” contain within them Marx’s rejection of economic determinism and express his understanding of subjectivity as overdetermined. “The key to the concept of value lies not in any universal law of value,” they write “but in the historical conjunctures which reproduce that objectification of human relations which is the content of bourgeois consciousness and which Marx began to theorize with the concept of commodity fetishism. Far from being proof of the closure of Marx’s discourse at the level of the economy, the concept of commodity fetishism is Marx’s way of overturning the discursive privilege of the economy” (1989, 44).

with the real and with our selves in relation to our attachments and resentments. If Marxism is about becoming, the psychoanalysis we seek to highlight is about giving up. Put another way, as leftists interested in social transformation, we believe that unsettling people's fantasies is an unavoidable aspect of doing politics. What we don't want to do is simply replace one fantasy with another, "more correct" one. That is, the goal of analysis is not reaching some point free of or outside fantasy, but traversing it, arriving at a different relationship to fantasy.

Intriguingly, a number of authors—in particular Žižek, Stavrakakis, and Chow—have seen equivalencies between this traversing of fantasy and the "institutionalization of lack," or the political practice of nonclosure over the void, that marks the Radical Democracy project of Laclau and Mouffe. The Radical Democrats themselves have acknowledged their debt to psychoanalysis in their formulation of the politics of dislocation; just as the analysand in psychoanalysis comes to question the fantastic scene that both defines and frustrates him, social movements come to confront, challenge, and change the content of liberal democratic society, the provisionally fixed content or social fantasies of who is determined to be a legitimate rights-bearing political subject (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000).

Because the success of the Radical Democracy project depends on the empty/contingent meaning of institutional authority and the shifting language of the rights-bearing subject, the goal of democratic struggle is not to fill in the institutional authority or articulate the positive content of the law, but rather, to maintain the negativity that makes institutions and law changeable. Fantasies—both individual fantasies and social fantasies—interfere with this negativity, fill up these spaces with a positive content that forecloses the possibility of struggle and the political. As Stavrakakis says, "if we need elections every once in a while it is because we accept that the hegemonic link between a concrete content and its incarnation of fullness has to be continuously re-established and renegotiated. This is one of the ways in which democracy traverses the fantasy of a harmonious social order: by instituting lack at the place of the principle of societal organization" (1999, 136).

As Özselçuk (2002, 2005) observes, theorists operating within the Radical Democratic tradition are likely to object to efforts to extend their project into the domain of economy.<sup>4</sup> For Laclau there is an intrinsically Utopian dimension to Marxian theory and an imperiousness to class antagonism that carries with it the danger of totalitarian closure. Similarly, while Stavrakakis argues that Radical Democracy operates within a tradition that keeps institutions and identities unfixed, he essentially dismisses Marxism as a Utopian politics conceived in relation to the fantasy of a systematic transformation of the economy, leading to a social harmony. Stavrakakis (2003) directs this criticism against Žižek's (1999) declarations that the Left must move beyond democratic liberalism and return to Lenin and to Alain Badiou's (2001) critique of human rights. While agreeing with Žižek that the current practice of democracy in the West has been displaced by a consumerist, postdemocratic practice, Stavrakakis asks, "If democracy has been discredited by its post-

4. See also Diskin and Sandler (1994) for a critique of the residual economic determinism in Radical Democratic theory.

democratic use, is the situation any better with Left utopianism, with the dream of a revolutionary radical refoundation of the social? Are not the risks involved in the politics of reoccupation substantially higher than the radicalization of democracy?" (2003, 62).

For both Stavrakakis and Renata Salecl (2003), the effects of this singular capitalist economy on the subject are evident: the depoliticization of the subject and the substitution of consumption for identification. Given this understanding of "the economy"—as a uniformly capitalist space that is resistant to dislocation, as something that deactivates identification—it is perhaps unsurprising that Radical Democratic theorists would be reluctant to extend their project to unsettle the fantasies of our economic subjects. While we grant that there are Utopian Marxists, we also see that the Radical Democratic rejection of Marxism actually functions as a refusal to engage with the economy. As Özselçuk suggests, the Radical Democrats' uncritical acceptance of capitalism's omnipresence is itself a politics of fantasy in which "the economy," theorized as uniformly capitalist, becomes the symptom, the threatening limit of the Radical Democrats' political project.<sup>5</sup> In our view this is a fantasy that needs to be traversed. In response we propose to bring Radical Democracy's politics of the lack to the economy, to push the Radical Democrats toward a more productive engagement with the subject of economic fantasy.

### Cooperatives and Negativity

The motivation for our reflections stems in part from our involvement with a series of research projects that brought us into contact with both local development experts and self-identified members of the anticapitalist and environmental left in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts. Our experiences in these endeavors confirmed an insight articulated by Gibson-Graham (1996)—that the "traditional" anticapitalist left articulates its desires and frustrations within the same economic imaginary that structures conventional economic development discourse. Both espouse what Gibson-Graham terms "capitalocentric" thought. Hence the familiar fantasizing subjects of economy introduced at the beginning of this essay. These

5. Özselçuk argues quite forcefully that the general treatment of the term "economy" by the Radical Democrats tends toward essentialism. She argues that this economic essentialism takes on different forms in Laclau's work. One essentialism is a sort of empiricist belief that the working class is a vestige, existing as a social identity only in certain enclaves (remnant mining communities, for example). Here he seems to be saying that those who identify as "working class" are too few in number to be the locus of political antagonism or a politics of resignification. According to Özselçuk, Laclau's second form of economic essentialism is far more pervasive. The economy is represented again and again as singularly capitalist—as an undifferentiated unity that is immune to resignification. This same essentialism is present in other Radical Democratic theorists. Stavrakakis maintains that "the economy" is a depoliticizing force in which a link between consumption and identity displaces the power of the identities that are the sites of constitutive antagonisms and democracy. As Gibson-Graham (1996) argues, the economy becomes for the Radical Democrats a force that shapes the social without itself being in any way shaped. The critical point for Özselçuk is that "the economy" remains singular, undifferentiated, and presumed capitalist precisely because it is, a priori, theorized as such.

composite characters, based on individuals we met in the course of these research projects, were created as a way to vent the frustrations that seemed to surface in us when working with them, while also serving to illustrate how capitalocentrism structures the desires and fantasies of regional development authorities and the anticapitalist left alike.

The thwarted, fantasizing subjects we caricature at the beginning of this paper seemed in stark contrast to the people we met at a worker cooperative conference we attended in 2002 and cooperators we have continued to meet in the years since. These people were ethically committed to a wide range of social and economic issues, but did not seem to have their enjoyment bound up in fantasy/resentment and the figure of the symptom. Indeed, when someone at the conference tried to enlist them in a more explicitly anticapitalist politics—a politics of resentment—it felt like a lead balloon. And those worker coop members also generally agreed that new recruits coming into their coops with too much idealism, too much faith in coops as a space free from the contradictions engendered by capitalism, never end up working out as worker-owners.

This led us to speculate on the nature of the different relationship that members of communal enterprises might have with work.<sup>6</sup> The coop practitioners' attitude toward work and the airing of conflict seems (to us anyway) to share much in common with the insights of the work of the Radical Democratic theorists. If, as Laclau and Mouffe argue, democratic politics is enabled by the nonfixity of identity and that democracy itself *is* then the continuous articulation of antagonism, is it possible that the decidedly nondogmatic attitude of coop members is an instance of radical economic democracy?

At the conference, in contrast to expressions of resentment or calls to arms to smash the vise of global capitalism, technical questions about how to run a coop (accounting techniques, or different approaches to patronage dispersal, for instance) produced enthusiastic exchanges and revealed the range of practices within worker cooperatives. Intriguingly, the existence of a diversity of approaches to these issues met with no hostility from the coop members in the audience but, rather, tended to

6. We follow Resnick and Wolff (1987) in defining a communal enterprise as one in which the workers who produce the wealth also collectively appropriate and distribute the surplus associated with their productive economic activity. Thus, in the worker-owned copy shop we talk about below, each productive member of the enterprise makes decisions that determine the wage levels, how much to spend on new equipment, whether to sub-out accounting or do it in house, how much to spend on advertising, and so on. There is a considerable range of decision-making processes governing the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus. For instance, in the Mondragon cooperatives a longstanding convention places 70 percent of the surplus (the portion of value of the total product that remains after the expense of wages, inputs, and nonproductive labor has been met) into individual worker accounts. The rationale behind this large allocation of surplus is to ensure that the cooperator remains identified with and committed to the success of the communal enterprise. The worker-owned copy shop whose members we have spent some time with have adopted this convention. However, other elements of what to do with the surplus—including establishing the value of labor power (wage levels)—are continually open to renegotiation. In still other communal firms there may be considerably more flexibility in terms of what is up for negotiation.



inspire people to relate how wage scale, hiring, and so on worked in their own cooperative.

It was at this point that we began to realize that the lack of an overwhelming institutional authority was already functioning in this particular worker coop discourse—that the tyranny of the desire for a pure language, the love/hate relationship with an external enemy, and the insistence on purity of practice were not dominant here. Instead, there seemed to be a genuine airing of differences in how coops were conceived, how their spaces of production were organized, how accounting was done, how expansion was managed or conflict mitigated. For these reasons we want to explore the practices within cooperative firms as attempts at creating or fostering a subject who identifies with the gap—who derives satisfaction from engaging with all the various antagonisms, conflicts, and contingencies that attend the cooperative. Further, we want to suggest that such subjects are post-fantasmatic in relation to the economy—not in the sense that they no longer have narratives that explain their working lives, but that these narratives do not revolve around capitalocentric economic fantasy and its various symptoms and resentments. What follows are a few brief examples of worker coop members working in and identifying with the gap.

## Recruiting

During a session on hiring practices, two approaches were articulated. Randolph, from a coop copy shop, said that “anyone could learn the skills but you couldn’t learn the attitude”—that you had to look for member candidates who already had a cooperative orientation. In contrast, Edward, from a two-hundred-person, worker-owned, cooperative grocery store, was hesitant to say they would seek out “coop people”—idealistic people looking for the coop “experience”—because they tended not to stay very long. He concluded that the ideal candidate was someone with retail experience who wasn’t necessarily interested in being in a cooperative.

What both Randolph and Edward didn’t want was someone who reduced being a worker-owner to either having “just a job” or an “alternative experience.” These, it strikes us, are two fantasies they try to avoid in their recruiting practices. The former is the fantasy of the waged worker in which his/her responsibility to work is nothing more than the task for which he or she is paid; this is related to the fundamental fantasy of the self-contained subject. The fantasy of an “alternative experience” is the imagination of the coop as a space in which all contradiction, hierarchy, and power are replaced by a harmony—an expectation that is bound to lead to disillusionment and flight.

The cooperators who stay on tend to be people who, in the words of another coop copy shop member, Patrick, are willing to think as both a worker and an owner. One *could* understand such a person as a subject of two contradictory demands: (a) a worker-subject concerned with his or her individual reproduction; and (b) an owner-subject occupied with the continued viability of the firm. Instead we choose to theorize this subject as a communal subject who is located in, and identifies with, the gap between his/her individual self and the social space of the firm and its

reproduction. We understand the enthusiasm generated at this conference as an enthusiasm for the development of this communal subject. The challenge is not in constructing this subject in relation to a particular symbolic order (the law governing coops), but in keeping the space of decision open, keeping the negativity of communal production intact at every phase—including, but not limited to, the phases of production, appropriation, and distribution—of collective economic activity.

## The Boundaries of the Firm

In a session on how to replicate and spread the worker coop model, another representative from the worker-owned copy shop described the group's vision of expanding their model through what she called "friendly franchising." Deb described how the coop copy shop would offer advice and organizational assistance to people looking to take over existing copy shops without introducing the difficulties and risks associated with the addition of a new shop, thus forming a network of worker coops. This creative solution was possible because the very boundaries of the firm were not fixed in the imagination of the collective members. Related to this is the fact that, by collective decision, worker-members are paid for the hours they work on the coop's expansion committee. In other words, the possibility of replicating the coop model through friendly franchising is considered part of the essential labor performed by the cooperators. It is this conception of the firm—as operating in a transformable social context—that allows for the resignification of the term "franchise," a discursive move that was met with hostility by one audience member, but was enthusiastically embraced by members of other coops as a creative way around the problem of how to expand without overextending the worker-owners. What is also apparent from this example is that the boundaries of the firm—and, by extension, the Marxian distinction between necessary and surplus labor—cannot be seen to have a preexisting, necessary, or transhistorical shape.<sup>7</sup>

## Openness to Contingency

Two difficult decisions illustrate how some worker cooperatives may not only develop practices to foster post-fantasmatic economic relationships, but also sustain an

7. Many people within the Association for Economic and Social Analysis (AESAs) have used class analysis to describe the various and variable forms of the enterprise (or other productive sites like households). For example, Norton (2001) and Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff (2001) talk about how the distinction between necessary and surplus labor is one that can shift over time and in response to political struggle or ethical commitments within the enterprise. In relation to the collective copy shop, accounting was originally an "administrative duty" performed on a rotating basis by each collective member. Eventually, as the business became more successful, the task fell increasingly to the most competent individual within the group. When he eventually complained at a weekly meeting, it was decided that it would be more equitable simply to farm out this task to an accounting firm in town (to a self-employed accountant) rather than keep this activity internal to the cooperative firm.

openness to contingency. A few years ago the cooperative copy shop decided to expand and open a second shop in a nearby town when a building came up for sale there. They all agreed to forgo their patronage dividends (the individual allotment of “profits” that remains after all the business expenses, including wages, have been met) to be able to buy and set up shop in this new building. They were faced with a number of questions, one of which was: If a member left the cooperative, would her portion of the investment in the new building be returned to her? When and how?

A recent conversation on a worker coop discussion list focused on the following dilemma. A group of software writers want to start a cooperative. Currently they are still doing R&D. Their question to the list was how to fairly compensate the people who started the coop at some later date when they have begun making money but, perhaps, after they have hired on other members? We hear all the time that capitalism is a system that rewards risk-takers and innovators. How could a cooperative or nonexploitative class structure handle the dilemma of valuing work that had yet to bear fruit?

In the case of the copy shop, it is important that the firm decided to go ahead in the face of risk and uncertainty. Jacques Derrida (1996) argues that the basis of ethics is uncertainty rather than knowledge. And here we can suggest that a certain kind of subject is needed in order to deal with the sort of uncertainty faced by the copy shop without the decision-making process degenerating into mistrust, paralysis, or paranoia. In the same way, what was impressive in the software writers’ example was the diversity of solutions offered in short order by members of other worker coops on the discussion list. All these answers shared a common commitment to a notion of “fairness,” but each involved different approaches to the same dilemma. No one argued that there was one correct solution. There was a commitment to equity in the absence of any guarantee that things would “work out.”

To be clear, it is not enough to say that “fairness” is a harmonization of divergent interests and opinions, even if this is the eventual outcome on occasion. Rather, the sense we got from the cooperators was precisely the opposite: “fairness” describes a commitment to a politics of antagonism within the cooperative firm. For one twenty-five-year-old, carpentry-and-construction worker coop at the conference, this translated into a consensus decision-making process. The representative from this coop explained that this process focuses on people’s resistances and antagonisms that need to find expression lest they become material for resentment, fantasies of exclusions, or entitlement. To avoid this outcome, the coop’s entire consensus-based decision-making process involved identifying and airing unexpressed resistances to a pay increase, taking on new projects, and so forth.

Perhaps the most honest thing that can be said about these examples is that running a cooperative firm puts worker-owners in a position to make decisions that wouldn’t be entertained by ordinary workers—or even board members of ordinary firms. The more difficult point that we are hoping to make with these examples is that they are all evidence that coop members understand, in their own way, the Lacanian insistence that “the Big Other does not exist.” And, in this sense, the coop members identify with the gap or the lack. While the three subjects of fantasy that we began with orient their desire in relation to the economic big Other, either through obedience to or transgression of the Law, the coop members with whom we met

generally agreed that there was no necessary arrangement to the coops. There are of course legal, regulatory, and competitive pressures placed on the cooperative firm, as well as other business and social norms and conventions. But we are arguing here that the cooperative subject does not experience these circumstances as a Law to be obeyed or transgressed, nor are there any guarantees that come with a particular course of action.

The cooperators' struggles were in part made possible by the recognition that the practices and parameters of the cooperative firm are not only determined by the dictates of circumstance, but are, up to a point, changeable. The recognition of the arbitrary nature of the distinction between necessary and surplus labor performed in a coop, the struggle over the firm's wage, production, accounting practices, and even over the boundaries of the firm itself, are instances of what Radical Democracy theorists refer to as constitutive antagonism. While it is entirely possible to theorize a communal class process in which there is no awareness of this difference, the ability of the coop to respond to market opportunities, chance circumstances, and internal conflict, and to imaginatively reconfigure their labors, is enabled by recognition of the fundamental negativity of identity—the recognition that the productive, appropriative, or distributive processes of the firm are not given and may be transformed through struggle.

The attitude of the cooperators reminds us of George DeMartino's recent work that links class processes to a particular conception of justice. DeMartino connects the project of theorizing class justice to the process of coming to desire nonexploitative class relations over exploitative ones: "Cultivating a desire for class justice might require arguing persuasively that it is indeed achievable—not just in some deferred future Utopia, but achievable (incrementally) right here, right now. And one vital step in this argument might entail a demonstration that alternative class arrangements, which entail varying degrees of class justice, are already instantiated among us" (2003, 27).

DeMartino's reflections on the possibilities of class justice have inspired us to consider how the cooperator's political identification with the lack may allow us to reimagine class transition, specifically the movement from exploitative capitalist class relations toward nonexploitative communal ones. The subjects of economic fantasy we described at the outset of this essay labor under the assumption that economic Utopias—anticapitalist, ecological, or neoliberal—require a uniform application of principles and the Law. In contrast, DeMartino rejects universal formulations of justice, insisting that the different moments identified by class analysis—the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus—can be governed by different ethical principles. In other words, it is not necessary to be consistent to be just. For instance, fairness in the division of tasks may be the principle of justice that governs the space of production. However, the ethical desire to meet the social needs of others, including nonproducers, may take precedence over equality in the distribution of surplus to meet different needs both inside and outside the community of producers. Finally, a spirit of inclusion may prevail over other principles in deciding who will participate in the moment of surplus appropriation.

## Cooperatives in the Context of Community

We anticipate (because we take pleasure in anxiety) certain objections to our argument.

First, at this point, we would like to emphasize that we are not arguing that post-fantasmatic economic subjects only emerge or necessarily emerge in worker coops. We are suggesting, more modestly, that there are interesting relationships—concerning the subject, work, conflict, the economy, and the larger social context—that may be found, already existing, in worker cooperatives.

Second, some may think we are celebrating worker coops to an inappropriate degree and assert that these businesses are essentially and already coopted—capitalist in nature, embedded in the capitalist global market, profit oriented, and so on. To this objection we argue (as others have done) the need for a different language of economy. In other words, without a class language that allows one to conceptualize the various ways worker coops are (or can be) sites of noncapitalist economic activity, it is difficult to see them as other than capitalist or as something more than doomed, self-interested, or Utopian experiments.

The different language of economy we find useful is the Marxian language in which class is understood not as a description of social property or power, but as a means of differentiating how surplus wealth is produced, who appropriates it, and how it is subsequently distributed. This surplus-based notion of class sees Marx's categories—slave, ancient, feudalism, capitalism, communism—not as a historic chronology but as a formal typology of difference that could be present in any combination, in any society, in any time in history (Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff 2001b). Exploitative capitalist class processes, such as capitalism, are those in which nonproducers (a corporate board of directors, for example) are the first receivers of the wealth appropriated from productive workers, while in nonexploitative class processes, such as communism, it is the productive workers themselves who are the principal appropriators. This surplus-based notion of class allows us to formally distinguish worker cooperative firms—engaged in the communal production of goods and services—from capitalist firms. Building on this concept of class is the notion of the community economy—composed of both market and nonmarket exchange (gifts, barter), paid and unpaid labor, capitalist as well as noncapitalist organizations (Community Economies Collective 2001).

As J. K. Gibson-Graham (2003b) reminds us, one of the persistent criticisms of the worker cooperative, since the writings of the Webbs, is its tendency to become insular, politically apathetic, or disinterested in the affairs and struggles of those around it. We would like to suggest that the way many coops are embedded in the community economies in which they operate indicates an acknowledgment of the overdetermined nature of the communal economic site. In the course of circling around the lack at the heart of the social and the economic, and engaging in the contingent processes of producing, appropriating, and distributing surplus, workers in cooperatives become ethical subjects, confronting their own relationship to the lack. But in addition to addressing the lack within the firm's boundaries, worker

cooperatives also, in their relationships with the exterior of the firm, acknowledge the social constitution of the subject and the firm within the larger community.

We are not saying worker coops are necessarily embedded in the economy in a particularly progressive way. The seed we would like to plant is that the same orientation toward negativity that allows for a non-Utopian functioning of the worker cooperative—with its permeable internal boundaries between the necessary and the surplus, and between productive and unproductive labor, and the permeability of the individual in relation to the communal or to social constitutivity—suggests as well a permeable border between the worker cooperative firm in relation to the community. A few brief examples may help to illustrate this relationship.

Currently, about two hundred firms in Argentina, with ten thousand workers by some estimates, have been seized by their employees and transformed into worker cooperatives (Schoijet 2005). Some municipal governments have issued injunctions that have legalized the workers' possession of the factories, but the return of the capitalists is a real concern. Here's one strategy for dealing with the situation at the IMPA, an aluminum manufacturing plant.

The IMPA workers have even voted to turn space that was not being used into a neighborhood cultural and arts center. Dance, drama and music classes and performances now take place regularly there, movies are shown in a small theater on an upper floor and artists have been allowed to set up studios where they paint, draw and sculpture. "Being a factory and a cultural center simultaneously is something unique," said Eduardo Murúa, a leader of the co-operative. The positive response to the cultural activities, he said, "provides an umbrella that prevents the banks from acting against us." (Rohter 2003)

By creating the opportunities for other activities to take place in the factory, the meaning of the factory space has been transformed from a "capitalist" to a community economic space.<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that the firm is no longer engaged in the production of aluminum for international markets; it is still turning out fifty

8. Of course, there is an enormous amount of unpaid labor producing goods and services outside firms (in households, for example), and these goods are not subject to market exchange (see the range of essays in Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff 2000; and Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff 1994). Household economic activity can be compelled and exploitative (as is the case with traditional feudal households) or households can be the sites of continual generosity (gift-giving that can extend well beyond the immediate family). Likewise, community sites like churches and social organizations can also engage in all kinds of productive activity or exchange that might potentially increase the well-being of communities, so that the economy becomes understood as a heterogeneous terrain. One person featured in Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis's documentary *The Take* (2004) explains the success of the tile-making cooperative Zanon Ceramics factory (the "granddaddy" of the movement in Argentina) by saying that they have given back to community schools, hospitals, and other sites of community. This in turn has endeared Zanon to the community and that community has provided a wide degree of support as the cooperative has faced eviction notice after eviction notice. The success of Zanon as a communal enterprise in a sense depends on how they conjugate with nonmarket economic activities, mechanisms of exchange (gifts) and so forth. It is the process of conjugating these various elements of the diverse economy that we refer to as the constitution of a community economic space.

tons of aluminum a month. In fact, the difficult decision it faces is the following: currently the IMPA has enough demand that it may need to ramp up the pace of production. Can the IMPA continue with their present, humane pace of production or should the members collectively decide to incur the “dis-utility” of a faster pace?

This decision could be considered in a different context if the language of class and community economy were widely spoken. For instance, if the redistribution of work isn’t an option, perhaps the increase in workload would be made more bearable if the extra surplus it generated went into supporting local community-economic institutions. Stavrakakis argues that capitalist commodity fetishism depoliticizes the subject by substituting consumption for political desire. This is indeed one link between the subject and the economy. However, we argue alternatively—by means of class analysis—that the economy could become a force for the repoliticization of the subject. What if the coop were seen as an important social location for the production of subjects invested in the democratic process, through identification with fundamental lack, through working in the gap?

We know of an organization from our area that links class justice to the community economy and cooperative firms. The Anti-Displacement Project (ADP) is an organization mobilized to retain affordable housing in the Pioneer Valley through local politicking and direct confrontation. It also has begun to form coops. Since last year its landscaping cooperative (United Landscaping) has formed, and this cooperative has used its attachment to the ADP, an organization with \$30 million in housing assets, to secure a sizeable loan.

Recently it has also begun to forge relationships with area labor unions in a struggle against a common enemy: a contingent labor force supplier. The ADP salted the labor supplier with its own members in order to document a variety of labor abuses at area work sites and illegal fee charges that were the norm. It used this evidence to get the attention of the attorney general, who made a public commitment at the Springfield Teamsters Hall to begin prosecutions. But the ADP didn’t stop there. With the political support of a mayoral candidate and area AFL-CIO unions, and the financial support of a local credit union, it has begun construction of its own contingent labor force center. The center will act as a hiring hall to compete with the other temp agencies. ADP members and other low-income people will not only be paid a living wage, but will also have access to union-run job training and on-site legal aid. The labor center will be a point of contact between the market and the community economy—or perhaps it will become a site that blurs the distinction between the two.

It would be fairly easy to overlook the potential here. The ADP could simply be read as a nonprofit, social service provider, the landscaping business as a microenterprise, and the hiring hall as another job-training program that pacifies a redundant work force. In our view, the ADP is an organization that is constantly looking for and finding unusual opportunities to expand its political and economic power—beyond the fantasy of inevitable failure through the cooptation by capitalism, or beyond the motivation of a future Utopic resolution of contradictions.

## Unresolved Questions

We would like to conclude with some unresolved questions. The first has to do with the role of “consciousness,” or “subjectivity,” in antiessentialist Marxian theory and political practices informed by that theory. As we mentioned earlier, Lacanian psychoanalytical thought has been helpful for us in teasing out the ways that individuals construct the economy and their economic identity in the form of fantasies, in which individuals’ enjoyment of their own suffering plays a central role.

What is the political task before us? In our view, it is to create a subject who desires nonexploitation. A political “pedagogy of class,” though, cannot simply provide more truthful, more accurate, or fuller knowledge to such a fantasizing subject; “truth” is very easily repressed. Rather, we must in some way engage in the subject’s psychic economy to create a different relationship to desire on the economic stage.

Pushing these thoughts further, we draw on the work of people like Stavrakakis, who want to expand radical democracy to incorporate a “politics of disharmony” which he believes is called for by Lacanian theory. Democracy, for Stavrakakis, requires an acknowledgment of the fundamental lack that is, by definition, at the heart of politics itself. What if we were to follow Stavrakakis in this direction and ask: Is it possible that communism also requires, by definition, the notion of acknowledging lack and negativity? Perhaps this acknowledgement of communism’s constitutive lack and negativity is similar to the idea that exploitative class processes depend upon their disavowal through the way “equality of exchange” sutures over class exploitation (Madra 2002). In other words, should we view the “consciousness” of a communal subject as one of awareness of the surplus; both the lack (the too little) and the surfeit (the too much) of the negativity, the fundamental condition of unfixed identity (social and individual)? Or should we instead see communism as having, under certain conditions, only an entailment of “consciousness”?

Returning to the example of the Argentinean worker cooperatives for an additional question, how might one intervene at this historical juncture? We envision two powerful threats to the survival of the Argentinean worker cooperatives. One is the return of the owners of the capitalist factories, schools, and other firms. Here we might respond with a language of the community economy, using the examples of the ADP. That is, we offer a different symbolic representation of the economy in which firms are embedded and aligned with community interests and other practices. Such an alternative language might give worker cooperators the hegemonic high ground, for example, in reconstituting the government at the municipal level.

The second threat we envision is the emergence of the fantasizing (leftist) economic subject. This is the individual who falls back into a paranoid isolationism, or a fantasy of the inevitability of his or her own demise in the face of omnipotent global capitalism. Let us be clear here that there is a very real threat of the original capitalists returning and reclaiming their property. However, we must also be clear that a certain subjective orientation—one that enjoys suffering the certainty of failure—is also a significant threat. We suggest that a political pedagogy that confronts this enjoyment and this paranoid certainty by orienting individuals—and communities—toward fundamental negativity is the proper response.



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