

From Worker Self-Directed Enterprise Analysis to Solidarity Economy Movement

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In *Transcending Capitalism Through Cooperative Practices*, Catherine P. Mulder asserts that, “the goal of Marxian scholars should be to rid work-place exploitation and the various processes that secure its conditions of existence...[as well as] the myriad restraints put on alternatives to capitalism” (12). Towards this end, Mulder explores six

contemporary ‘alternative’ economic enterprises to help think through her challenge.

Mulder shows how exploitation, and non-exploitation, can be analytically discerned, and she describes some various contexts in which non-exploitation exists. Mulder’s analysis, analytical approach, and contextual descriptions, surface and prompt important questions around the conditions of possibility for imagining and actualizing economic difference and transformation. To help elaborate and begin to address these questions, I turn to a growing movement in Massachusetts in which communities are crafting and organizing around their own conditions of possibility in innovative and powerful ways.

The case studies offer glimpses into the radically different contexts that can produce alternative economic enterprises and begins to explore how Worker Self-Directed Enterprises (WSDE’s)—enterprises in which workers collectively produce and appropriate their own surplus—come into existence, how and by whom they are constituted, and how surrounding communities and organizations understand and interact with them: the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO), thriving for over a century as a worker-run cooperative but going largely unnoticed as such; the radicalization of sex-workers at San Francisco’s the Lusty Lady who became unionized and then organize as a worker-owned cooperative for 10 years; New Era Windows Cooperative in Chicago, a recovered factory that emerged from militant sit-down strikes and community and union support; a state-sponsored cooperative organic farm in Cuba, Organopónico Vivero Alamar, that is able to pay higher wages and sell produce more cheaply than it’s state-run counterparts; the unique public-ownership model of the NFL’s Green Bay Packers that cements community identity and mutual support with the city; and the ethical mission of the Syracuse Cooperative Federal Credit Union which centers the needs and interests of

low income community members, and actively supports alternative economic enterprises in its mission.

Class Process and NMCA Methodology

Mulder frames and theorizes the case studies in relation to Wolff and Resnick’s anti-essentialist rendering of economy and class, and in particular, their formulation of class as *class process* (Resnick and Wolff 1987)—how labor is organized by and through the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus. Through what she describes as a “methodology of New Marxian Class Analysis (NMCA)” (6), Mulder’s analytical aim of each chapter centers on describing who holds the fundamental and subsumed class positions in each enterprise, in order to reveal the animating class process. For Mulder, such an analysis has immediate pragmatic utility for researchers, “besides the obvious benefit of understanding and possibly rectifying worker exploitation, NMCA gives researchers leeway to delve deeper into issues and problems faced by workers in a particular enterprise or industry and also discerns how communities and their representatives might react/vote/plan” (17).

Mulder is particularly interested in locating and showcasing WSDE’s, and their defining class process—the workers’ collective appropriation and control of surplus. She contrasts WSDE’s with other definitions and formulations of cooperatives that might focus on the centrality of collective ownership and governance, or emphasize the importance of a strict adherence to cooperative principles, or, I might add, approaches that find linkages and commonalities between cooperative forms (e.g. Nembhard’s 2014 positioning of worker cooperatives as part of a continuum of cooperative relationships

and projects concomitant and integral to struggles for black liberation in the United States). The distinction is important for Mulder to establish as it creates clarity around a project inspired by the work of Richard Wolff, a project of ending exploitation through the development of WSDE's. Wolff (2012) argues that WSDE's would form the basis of an economic system that could end and replace capitalism; an economy rooted in the economic production of WSDE's could end the antagonisms inherent in capitalist class process that lead to inequality and crisis, and the economic democracy established by and conducted within WSDE's could allow democracy to truly flourish in the rest of society.

Diverse Economies and Economic Becoming

Mulder mobilizes the concept of class process as an analytic and accounting measure via her NMCA approach. And in places, it seems as if NMCA is deployed as part of a litmus test for whether or not an enterprise has lived up to, or failed to reach, the status of a WSDE¹. However, Wolff and Resnick's anti-essentialist formulation is perhaps most useful for a politics that isn't confined to a realist politics intent on uncovering an existent social reality. As Wolff and Resnick explain along with J.K. Gibson-Graham "the emphasis we place on a language of process rather than of social structure suggests the possibility of energetic and unconfined class identities, where the compelling question is not 'what is my class belonging?' but "what is my class becoming?" (2001: 11). This emphasis helps to expand and shift energies beyond attending to what is and towards imagining how things might yet be; beyond describing and cataloguing how things are, and towards exploring and bringing into being the conditions under which economic difference emerges, deepens and expands. It redirects

attention towards a politics that seeks to make sense of, learn with, support, and organize around movements and projects from which communities are creating their own conditions of possibility, and reshaping themselves in a process of becoming other.

The visibility and perceived viability of economic difference sets the stage for a deeper engagement with a politics of becoming. From a diverse economies perspective (Gibson-Graham 2006, Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013), *Transcending Capitalism* makes a significant contribution towards a project of re-representing economy as not determinatively capitalist. The language of class—as class process—contributes to a landscape of contingent, economic difference. And, throughout the descriptions of the enterprises contained in the case studies, capitalist and non-capitalist forms of labor are made visible alongside and intermingle with capitalist and non-capitalist forms of property, exchange, finance, and so on. As scholars working in an anti-essentialist, diverse economy tradition have explored, exposure to non-capitalocentric discourses and engagement with non-capitalist entities can lead to a relinquishing of capitalist identities and can strengthen existing, or cultivate latent or new, non-capitalist desires, dispositions, values, and rationalities (Cornwell et al 2014; Madra and Özsalcuk 2015, Shear 2014, 2017). For example, researching at the level of the subject, Cornwell (2011) shows how the collective control and decision making around surplus found in worker-owned cooperatives (WSDE's) can create mutual support and solidarity between workers, and between workers and the community members, as well as open a field of social possibilities through the world-making potential of surplus. Similarly, Byrne and Healy (2006) argue that the existent class process and cooperative practices found in worker-owned co-ops, enables a post-capitalist economic subjectivity in which worker-owners

are not beholden to the ideological and affective encumbrances of an imagined capitalist system, but are instead understand themselves as communally constituted by—and constituting—both the enterprise and the communities in which they are enmeshed.

Though not centering *consciousness* or *subjectivity* in her research, Mulder’s case studies nevertheless begin to reveal how non-capitalist identities, dispositions and desires might be cultivated and enabled in and through engagements with economic difference. For example, Mulder describes how at the Lusty Lady, workers operated largely as a WSDE for about a decade during which time they embraced a collective and democratic workspace, worked to abolish hierarchies, and collectively struggled for the continuation of worker cooperative. Imaginings and desires for the New Era Windows cooperative were strengthened after encounters with worker-owners at the World Social Forum in Venezuela convinced the local UE union leadership that “the bosses needed the workers, but that the reverse wasn’t necessarily true”(72). And, as Mulder describes, the New Era Windows workers have shown tremendous solidarity towards each other and commitment to their collective project in the early stages of their business, forgoing wages in order to keep their desire to labor in and as part of a cooperative enterprise alive.

Overdetermination and the Conditions of Possibility

Of course, exposure to and engagement with economic difference is not a guarantee that imaginings of and desires for non-exploitation will emerge, or that these desires will be able to be actualized in any durable way. For example, as Mulder suggests, workers in the London Symphony Orchestra do not appear to view their

enterprise as anything out of the ordinary, or realize that they are participating in something that might cut against capitalist ideology. As in any WSDE, workers' overriding economic identities, at anyone time, may come from any number of other class and non-class processes that they participate in (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2000; 2001). Workers may have any number of motivations to participate in WSDE's, any of which may take precedence—e.g. because the job pays well, or because they enjoy the work, or because the enterprise celebrates their entrepreneurial spirit, or because they like the people there, or because they are unable to find employment elsewhere, and so on. In sum, WSDE's do not necessarily lead to an identification with non-capitalism or cultivate desires for non-exploitation, nor do WSDE workers necessarily have any particular political orientation (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2000: 10).

Moreover, a process towards economic becoming can be stunted and left unfulfilled without the enabling conditions of possibility that allow desires to take hold. In the case of WSDE's, the broad, constitutive assemblage of the enterprise—both class and non-class processes—is essential in overdetermining the emergence and continued existence of the WSDE. As Mulder's examples relate, everything from the orientation of and relationship with organized labor, to the extent of community involvement in and support of the enterprise, to the role of the state and, to perhaps most fundamental, access to capital and financing, can all play integral roles in efforts to imagine, actualize, and maintain WSDE's.

This all might seem fairly obvious. As a matter of course, WSDE's have a better chance of lasting and succeeding when social and political-economic conditions are

amenable to their existence. But accounting for the conditions of possibility—and in particular the elements and relationships that comprise the constitutive outside of the enterprise—confronts us with lurking questions of power and agency in any efforts and projects in advancing non-exploitation (and economic possibility). Who are creating the conditions of possibility for the emergence of WSDE's? What communities are benefitting from WSDE's and why? How are WSDE's aligning with particular struggles and politics? These are questions that speak to matters of social justice—issues of access, inclusion, and privilege and oppression. But they also bring forward the multiple historical projects that any revolutionary effort involving WSDE's are necessarily caught up in and must contend with. For example, in the United States, the unequal consolidation of capital and distribution of wealth between racialized populations creates particular advantages for white communities and particular challenges for communities of color in advancing WSDE's. More fundamentally, these inequalities reveal the need to directly address the relational projects of patriarchal white supremacy and colonialism that not only structure inequalities and violence, but mobilize and constitute capital accumulation and naturalize the class process of exploitation (Buck 2001, Federici 2018, Taylor 2017, Tuck and Yang 2012).

To put this simply, we are not only overdetermined and constituted by multiple class and non-class processes, any of which might fix (temporarily) our identities in a particular way, but we—and other entities, like WSDE's—are always and already entangled with multiple world-making projects that are assembling together various elements and vying for coherence (Tsing 2015, Biehl and Locke 2017, Miller 2019.). A politics of economic becoming might then treat the growth and proliferation of WSDE's

not as a ‘matter of fact’ to be counted and catalogued, but, following Gibson-Graham et al (2019)—who are building on Latour (2004) and de la Bellacasa (2017)—as needing to proceed as a ‘matter of concern’ and care in which social relationships, and the forces from which those relationships are shaped and distilled, are actively acknowledged, navigated, and worked on.

To pose this as a question: what if WSDE’s weren’t thought of as an end in and of themselves, but instead are positioned as part of a politics of economic becoming in which communities endeavor to create the conditions in which—echoing a phrase from Paulo Freire—they might “make and remake themselves” (Freire 2004:15)? How do we build a politics in which communities are emboldened and enabled to do precisely that? Below I will briefly discuss an emerging movement and project in Massachusetts, *solidarity economy*, that offers a conceptual framework for a revolutionary politics of economic becoming.

Solidarity Economy

Solidarity Economy (SE) as a movement and framework is relatively new to the United States, but has deep roots in Latin America and Europe. There are various incarnations and instantiations of SE across time and space with different sets of conceptual understandings and political objectives; solidarity economy describes formal and informal political projects, registers reform or revolution, refers to movements and organizations that describe themselves in terms of solidarity economy and those that do not, and can include local, regional, and global projects (Akuno 2017, Allard et al 2008, Amin 2019, Healy et al 2018, Kawano 2018, Laville 2010, Loh and Shear 2015, Loh and

Jimenez 2017, Matthaei 2018, Miller 2006, Safri 2015, Utting 2015). Common to all efforts is a politics that engages with economic difference in order to foment ethical and just economies that put ‘people and planet, over profit.’ This means supporting, advancing, and connecting institutions and relations that embody non-capitalist rationalities and values—things like cooperatives (including WSDE’s), community land trusts, alternative currencies, time banks, and so on—that privilege cooperative rather than competitive behaviors, that are democratic rather than hierarchical, that seek to bring together rather than individualize, and that reveal rather than conceal sociality and interdependence.

In Massachusetts, visions of solidarity economy began to gain traction in the late 2000’s as deepening inequalities, the urgencies of climate change, and responses to the 2009 economic crisis brought both a class analysis and alternative political and economical imaginings more fully into view. Innovative experiments and organizing efforts involving economic alternatives across the state began to grow, inform each other, network together and broaden the social imaginary (Loh and Shear 2015) beyond the ideological constraints of “capitalocentric” (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006) discourse and understandings of economy that positions capitalism as the only game in town.

Unlike some iterations of solidarity economy that tend to elide social justice politics (for example, see discussions in Borowiak et al 2018), the advancing solidarity economy politics in Massachusetts emerges from, alongside, and in dialogue with base-building community organizations, is reclaiming and advancing long-held strategies in communities of color and social movements, and is bringing issues of power and justice directly into the solidarity economy frame. As Loh and Jimenez (2017) discuss in

Solidarity Rising: How Solidarity Economy Movement is Emerging in Lower Income Communities of Color, alternative, ethical economies comprise one dimension of a tripartite model that is being theorized and brought into being in Massachusetts to meet the needs of oppressed communities and create transformational change:

“Solidarity Economy is more than just cooperatives and other alternative economic institutions. We view solidarity economy holistically as a social justice movement. Like other movements, it is **shifting our consciousness** not only to uncover the root causes and what is wrong, but also to inspire dreams of the world as it should be. It is **building power**, not just to resist and reform the injustices and unsustainabilities produced by current systems, but ultimately to democratically control and govern political and economic resources to sustain people and planet. And it is creating **economic alternatives** and prototypes for producing, exchanging, consuming, and investing in ways that are more just, sustainable, and democratic”

---Loh and Jimenez (2016: 6, bold in the original)

These three dimensions work to gather resources and carve out ideological space for community control and determination: *shifting consciousness* in order to imagine and desire beyond the ideological constraints of capitalism; *economic alternatives* to house, embody, and cultivate those imaginings and desires; and *building power* to defend this architecture of possibility and advance a revolutionary project that enables communities

to take control of the material and symbolic conditions in which they can collectively remake themselves.

One of the eight different instantiations of solidarity economy movement in Massachusetts profiled in the Solidarity Economy Rising report, the Boston Ujima Project, exemplifies how this movement can work in practice. Ujima was launched in 2017 in affiliation with the Center for Economic Democracy and in collaboration with organizing and social movement leaders. Ujima, a Kwanzaa principle meaning collective work and responsibility, is a multifaceted community organization led by and for working class communities of color. In a city with some of the highest rates of inequality, gentrification, and displacement in the United States, Ujima is creating a democratic, community-controlled economy that builds political and economic power.

Ujima seeks to gain political and economic control by developing and bringing together an array of alternative economic and political institutions. Scholar, policy analyst, and an initial organizer for Ujima, Sarah Jimenez explains some of the initial thinking and intentionality behind the Ujima ecosystem,

“Anti-capitalist models have been developed and deployed with moderate success in isolation but have mostly remained limited in impact—for example, participatory budgeting, unaccredited community investment in local business, local currencies, time banking, consumer cooperatives, worker cooperatives, and so forth. Perhaps...deliberately bringing them together will help them generate synergies, mutually reinforce one another, and enable them to collectively stand

more firmly against the hostile and co-optive forces of the dominant institutions” (Jimenez 2018).

Perhaps most central to the Ujima ecosystem is the innovative capital fund that operates through popular assemblies. Grants, donations, and investment dollars from both inside and outside of the organization are pooled together in a fund democratically controlled by Ujima members. Assemblies meet together to discuss and determine community needs and wants and democratically decide how to invest their shared capital in development proposals. Member assemblies are joined with a host of other relationship building, consciousness raising/changing efforts “in which members learn, connect, and cooperate together” (Jimenez 2018: 2). Assemblies also create community standards to determine the types of enterprises that they want to grow and support; enterprises that meet those standards comprise a good business directory that will then be further supported by a digital local currency and a time bank, and are eligible for support from the capital fund and Ujima support services.

Within this ecosystem framework and collective process of collaboratively thinking and talking, reflecting and theorizing, and learning and doing; decisions open onto a field of economic diversity and possibility. As part of this process, WSDE’s appear as viable, potentially transformative enterprises to be considered as possibilities that might be developed and shaped to help meet the needs of the community, advance the organization, and further a process of economic becoming. Indeed, it should be noted that, out of the 26 enterprises and initiatives comprising the Ujima Business Alliance and

Good Business Directory, 7 are worker-owned cooperatives or are in the process of becoming.

The cultural work involved in reshaping economic ideas, relationships, and practices is further advanced through a power building strategy. In fact, building power “within Boston’s low income communities of color is both strategy and outcome for Ujima” (Loh and Jimenez 2017). This includes the power to hold businesses accountable to ethical practices, the power to make demands on the state, the power to defend existing communities and efforts from capitalist incursions, white supremacy and other systems of oppression, and the power to advance the scope and influence Ujima’s efforts. In sum, Ujima assembles people, entities, policies and practices in order to gain control of and create the material and ideological conditions of possibility for collective self-determination, for community members to “make and remake themselves” (Freire 2004: 15).

Conclusion

In the final chapter of *Transcending Capitalism*, Mulder briefly describes some benefits of and proposals that might result in the further proliferation of WSDE’s, the latter includes access to capital and financing, educational alignment, nationalized health care, and rent control. These are no doubt helpful proposals. What I am suggesting is that WSDE’s—like any entity—and the people working in and around them, are overdetermined by and entangled in multiple cultural projects, including those that might undermine efforts towards economic becoming. Solidarity economy—as it is emerging in

Massachusetts—offers one possibility for communities to intentionally organize around and assemble their own conditions of possibility.

Indeed, Solidarity Economy might be understood in terms of what Escobar (2018) describes as a Transition Discourse, emerging along with projects like degrowth, commoning, and Buen Vivir , as part of a politics aimed at shifting and contending with what is understood and believed to possible. “Shared by most TDS [Transition Discourses] is the contention that we need to step outside existing institutional and epistemic boundaries if we truly want to strive for worlds and practices capable of bringing about the significant transformations seen as needed”(139). In this sense, Solidarity Economy is a project aimed at creating the conditions in which communities can build, organize around, defend, and advance particular selves and particular worlds that are in a process of becoming other.

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