



Commoning and the politics of solidarity: Transformational responses to poverty

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ABSTRACT

This paper stages an encounter between Relational Poverty Theory (RPT) and the solidarity economy movement. RPT understands poverty as the dynamic product of economic exploitation, political exclusion and cultural marginalization. The solidarity economy movement can be seen as a transformative political response to these dynamics aiming to replace exploitation with cooperation, exclusion with participation and marginalisation with practices of inclusion. Globally, more than sixty solidarity economy movements are coordinating efforts, developing associative relations between cooperative economic institutions, social justice movements, and one another. While these developments are encouraging, many practitioners are concerned about the movement's future. Solidarity economy practitioners we encountered in our US-based research were concerned with the movement's vulnerability to co-optation and exploitation or (un)witting perpetuation of the very dynamics of exclusion and marginalisation it seeks to transcend. We take this as evidence of the enduring power of poverty-dynamics and testament to the incisive, critical insights of RPT. However, what remains unanswered is how the solidarity economy might succeed in its own terms? We deploy Gibson-Graham's theorization of postcapitalist politics to answer this question, charting the movement's possibilities, specifically how it works by creating and sharing spaces and monetary and non-monetary resources in pursuit of its objectives. Two organizations we encountered in our research—Stone Soup, a cooperative incubator in Worcester, Massachusetts and CERO, a commercial composting cooperative in Boston, — illustrate what Gibson-Graham name “a politics of commoning.” Both of these organizations work by sharing spatial, financial, and political resources in ways that are cooperative, participatory and inclusionary.

1. Introduction

Inequality bothers me. I am troubled by the persistence and prevalence of wealth and income inequality in the United States. I join earnest social scientists and conscientious global citizens in condemning inequality. But that is not all that bothers me about inequality. The widespread use of the term inequality also bothers me.

(Roy, 2016)

Inequality seems to bother a lot of people these days. The most recent U.S. presidential election was full of talk about inequality. It was a principal focus of the Sanders campaign, but Trump, too, claimed to be the voice of hard-working but forgotten men and women of America

ruined by “horrible and unfair trade deals,” victims of what he would later describe as “American carnage” The political cycle in 2016 seemed to echo the 2011 Occupy movement's rallying cry “we are the 99%”—the stark and unambiguous representation of a divide that separates “us” from “them.” Extreme inequality and its consequences has become the focus of studies by high profile academics (e.g. Stiglitz, 2012; Saez, 2013; Piketty and Gasner, 2013; Streeck, 2016; Richard, 2016). However, Roy points out that we are not all equal in our inequality; the widespread use of the term distracts “attention from specific forms of impoverishment, exploitation, discrimination, and segregation” (Roy, 2016). For her, poverty, not (just) inequality, is the problem.

The aim of this themed-issue is to stage an encounter between Relational Poverty Theory (RPT) and the solidarity and sharing economies

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as responses to poverty, but in this paper we focus specifically on the solidarity economy. For RPT, poverty is something to be critically understood while the solidarity economy movement sees it as a problem to be solved. In our view, they share a common understanding of the economic, political, and cultural dynamics that hold poverty in place as part and parcel of a larger capitalist social order. RPT knits together insights from Marxian and feminist social theory, sociology, geography and political science, generating a critical understanding of poverty as a product of relational dynamics of economic exploitation, political exclusion and cultural marginalization (e.g. Lawson, 2012, Lawson and Ellwood, 2014). Complementing this analysis, solidarity economy (in some places referred to as the Social and Solidarity Economy) is a global social movement that aims to transform the dynamics of poverty by replacing exploitation with cooperation, exclusion with political participation, and marginalization with practices of inclusion. The movement is an example of what Myers (2013) terms an ethicopolitics that operates by identifying and linking together (or forming) organisations and initiatives that share similar commitments (e.g., cooperatives, Community Supported Agriculture, complementary currencies) and linking with allied social movements (Tygel, 2012; Loh and Shear, 2015). In the past decade, solidarity movements operating in different countries and regions have coordinated efforts and have attracted attention and support from international governing organisations such as the UN and ILO (RIPESS, 2015).

In this paper we draw on some of the findings from our US National Science Foundation supported project, developed in partnership with the US Solidarity Economy Network. The study explored the spatial distribution, economic impact, cultural and political significance of the US Solidarity Economy (grant #s 1339748, 1339846, 1339974, 1340030) focusing on three cities with active, self-identified solidarity economy movements: Philadelphia; New York; and Worcester, Massachusetts. In all three locations we saw cooperative activity, inclusive participatory organisations, and practitioners whose efforts resonate with this growing global movement. However, we heard various concerns that, for example, the movement was “too white” and insufficiently attentive to racial and other forms of discrimination, fears that it would be co-opted and exploited by the state, or conversely that it will remain a marginal cultural and political force. Viewed through the lens of RPT, the persistence of these concerns across space and time are testament to the enduring power of poverty and the correspondingly enormous challenge of a political movement that aims to undo poverty’s ontologically tenacious dynamics.

RPT offers us a way of understanding the challenge facing the solidarity economy. History is replete with examples of social movements in the US and elsewhere that have betrayed their principles, were repressed, or simply faded away. Historical awareness and present day vigilance are important for the solidarity economy but the question left unasked and unanswered is how movements like the solidarity economy might succeed. In this paper we argue that an additional theoretical intervention is required to attend to the possibilities of the movement.

From our perspective, postcapitalist theory, initially developed by Gibson-Graham (2006) and later elaborated by others in this tradition, helps us to clarify *how* solidarity works, including how the movement might respond to dynamics of poverty. What is distinct about this approach is an emphasis on shared questions rather than answers. What the theory makes explicit are the provisional, experimental, and inexorably incomplete responses solidarity economy practitioners might supply in answer to the question of how to live in common. Starting with the questions allows us to keep track of *how* they are answered through a process of what Gibson-Graham name a politics of ethical negotiation (Gibson-Graham, 2006). In our view, this repositioning of ethics is an important corrective. The movement by and large has used shared values as an a priori normative heuristic—a way of simply distinguishing allies from enemies. Like in critical theory, it is useful to distinguish friend from enemy. Both are necessary but ultimately insuf-

ficient concepts. What is also needed is an understanding of *how* the ethico-political practice of solidarity draws us continually into an open-ended politics of common-life.

Postcapitalist theory directs our attention to “the *how*” of solidarity economy, allowing us to see what an undoing of poverty looks like when it is in process. In this paper we read two U.S.-based organisations we encountered in our research through the lens of postcapitalist theory—specifically, Stone Soup in Worcester and the CERO cooperative in Boston.¹ Both organisations are situated in majority low-income communities of colour and are attempting to develop worker cooperatives as a strategy for expanding economic autonomy by means of commoning: sharing spatial, monetary, and nonmonetary financial resources to produce a broader politics of solidarity. In turn, these commoned spaces and relationships create an opening where a politics of solidarity might be enacted—one in which historically marginalised people (of colour, women, youth) are the principal actors and beneficiaries.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. In part two, we review the key concepts of RPT that allow us to understand Solidarity Economy as a movement pursuing a politics of anti-poverty. While the U.S. practitioners we encountered were encouraged by the growing movement, they were also concerned about continued exclusionary dynamics, outside co-optation or failure. This problem speaks not only to poverty’s durability but also to a theoretical lacuna, an inability to conceive of *how* the solidarity movement might succeed. In part three we read two case studies, Stone Soup and CERO cooperative, through the lens of a postcapitalist theory of commoning to demonstrate how solidarity works. Part four concludes the analysis by reflecting on possibilities and limitations of solidarity economy.

2. Relational poverty and solidarity economy

2.1. Relational poverty theory

Relational Poverty Theory (RPT), developed especially by Vicky Lawson and Sarah Elwood, has circulated widely among scholars in what has evolved into the Relational Poverty Network (see, for example, Lawson, 2012; Lawson and Elwood, 2014; Roy and Crane, 2015). Lawson and Elwood draw from four theoretical traditions—Marxian and feminist political economy, post-structural and post-development theory—to develop an anti-essentialist, relational conception of poverty. They understand poverty as the product of three dynamics:

- Economic **exploitation**, directly through the appropriation of surplus labour and indirectly through the extraction of other forms of wealth.
- Political **exclusion**, in which the poor are dis-enfranchised from the process of governance, and
- Representational **marginalization**, a cultural process in which the poor become the object of an “authoritative knowledge” produced by the non-poor with a “laser like focus” on the measurement of poverty and enabling the management of poverty in ways that benefit the non-poor (Lawson, 2012, 7).

In this way, RPT breaks from historical and contemporary, popular and academic understandings of poverty focused on lack—both those that view the poor themselves as lacking in morality, character, or “grit” and sociological explanations, such as Sen’s (1999), that understand poverty as a lack of capability, education, opportunity, or financial or social capital. Naming poverty as relational emphasizes a dynamic connection between the poor and those whom Lawson et al. (2015) refer to as the middle class or more broadly as the non-poor:

¹ CERO is the Spanish word for zero. The cooperative capitalises their name.

what exploits the poor also enriches the non-poor, what excludes the poor strengthens the voice of the non-poor, what marginalises the poor works to elevate the concerns, beliefs, aesthetics and values of the non-poor as what is right and proper. Here we might see in RPT an echo of Bauman's (1997) assertion that the separation of poor from non-poor is fundamental to establishing the 'norm and order' that imparts imaginary-coherence to society.

Massey's (2005) concept of relational space provides a key ontological ground for the theory of relational poverty. Poverty is a spatialized expression of interacting dynamics, economic, political, and cultural, that cannot be understood in isolation from one another. Collectively they constitute a power geometry of poverty, what Roy and Crane (2015) name the territories of poverty. Territorialisation produces what it means to be poor. State efforts to manage the poverty-problem via governmentality produce the social, political, and economic and territorial realities of poverty in both aggressively repressive and sometimes subtle ways. To give an example relevant to this paper, the post 1970s rise of racialized mass incarceration in the U.S. is part of what constitutes a territory of poverty. The disruptive effects of mandatory minimum sentences connected to the war on drugs, legally sanctioned post-incarceration forms of discrimination in housing and labour markets and temporary or permanent disenfranchisement, produce the territory of poverty for ex-offenders, their families and communities (Alexander, 2012; Roy et al., 2015; Wacquant, 2015). But the territory of poverty is constituted in another way through "well-meaning" attempts at managing the poverty-problem, for example the profusion of work for welfare and conditional cash transfer programs that use cash payments as a mechanism for helping/disciplining poor people (Theodore and Peck, 2015). While mass incarceration has been disproportionately (though not exclusively) directed at men from communities of colour and various welfare reforms are associated with feminised poverty, the net effect of these processes, punitive and patronizing, is to racialize, en-gender, and naturalise the territory of poverty.

Despite the power of these territorializing forces, the terms "relational" and "dynamic" signal the possibility that poverty can be transformed, just as the complexity of these dynamics gives us an indication of what a politics of antipoverty must be. As Roy reminds us at the outset, poverty is more than just economic inequality. The redistribution of wealth or economic opportunity, through job creation or by other means, is *not* a sufficient response if what holds poverty in place are gendered, racialized and aged based forms of political exclusion and cultural marginalization. Buck (2007) describes US history as an oscillation between periods of racial or gender progress and white supremacist backlash that seeks to restore "law and order" or "greatness," creating the conditions for continued racialized (and patriarchal) capital accumulation. What this means is that a confrontation with poverty is also a confrontation with deeply held beliefs about whose civic, cultural and economic lives matter.

How then do we respond to poverty? Roy and Crane (2015) are "militant" in defending RPT's role as primarily a critical theory of poverty. The politics of antipoverty are to take shape elsewhere. In contrast, Lawson and Ellwood go a bit further, suggesting that an antipoverty, pro-poor politics might require what they call, following Gibson-Graham (2006, xxvii), an ontological "politics of possibility" that moves beyond a critical stance (Lawson and Ellwood, 2014, 210). Most notably, appropriating Valentine's (2008) term, they imagine political spaces where poor and non-poor can encounter one another in mutually transformative ways. What might this encounter look like? For RPT, exploitation, marginalization and exclusion don't merely constitute a dividing line that separates poor from non-poor. These dynamics mark the discernible limits of what society is or can be. Encounters that attenuate this divide are also an undoing of norm and order. What would that look like? Is it possible that the solidarity economy is a context for such a transformative encounter?

2.2. Solidarity economy

The solidarity economy is one of several terms that refer to a social, economic and politically transformative movement that is working to create a more just, equitable, inclusive and sustainable society (North and Cato, 2017). The modern meaning of the term can be attributed to Jean-Louis Laville in France and Luis Razeto in Chile, who simultaneously developed the concept of solidarity economy in the 1980s to describe a decentralized approach to organising an economy (Borowiak, 2015). While Laville (2015), Bruni (2012) and others point to a much longer history going back to 19th century cooperative, religious and benevolent associations, during and after the Cold War the solidarity economy offered a way out of the stark geopolitics of state vs. market (McMurtry, 2015).

The solidarity economy and movements like it have proliferated globally in past decades, particularly after the organisation of the World Social Forums encouraged many people to believe other worlds are possible (Amin, 2009; Lechat, 2009; Roelvink, 2016). The Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS) is a global peak-body organisation that has built relationships among sixty-six national and international solidarity economy networks over the past decade, including the US Solidarity Economy Network (USSEN) (RIPESS, 2015). Concurrently, a growing body of scholarship has documented efforts at enacting more cooperative, just, sustainable and inclusive economies (e.g., Gordon and Chatterton, 2004; Chatterton, 2005; Allard et al., 2008; Kawano et al., 2009; Grasseni, 2013; Hossein, 2013; Nembhard, 2014; Utting, 2015). The goals and principles of solidarity economy readily align with other concepts and movements such as de-growth economies (Lepawsky et al., 2017), peer-to-peer economies (Bollier, 2014; Bauwens, 2009) and non-capitalist forms of the sharing economy (Bradley, 2015; Morgan and Kuch, 2015).²

Through our own research on the US solidarity economy we found a nascent but growing social movement driven forward by dedicated practitioners engaged in a political struggle against the racialized and gendered dynamics of poverty. While our research approach included a national scale geospatial analysis of select solidarity economy institutions (e.g. cooperatives, credit unions) our main effort was to explore the economic impact, cultural and political significance of the solidarity economy in our urban field sites.

We have discussed the findings of the project in Philadelphia and New York elsewhere (Borowiak et al., 2017, Safri et al., 2017). In this paper we highlight the findings from the qualitative research conducted in Massachusetts. We used a purposive sampling approach to conduct thirty-three in-depth interviews with solidarity economy participants engaged in: consumer, housing and worker cooperatives, solidarity economy support organisations (e.g., cooperative incubators), volunteer collectives, CSAs and community gardens, time trade organizers, community land trusts, artist collectives, intentional communities, and credit unions. Questions focused on the early history and foundational intentions of the organisation or initiative, challenges and obstacles, economic relationships and organisational practices, as well as aspirations.³

Interviewees expressed a deep commitment to a politics of solidarity that seems to reflect the aspirations and values of the global move-

² See Richardson (2015) for an additional discussion of the multiple and contradictory "performances" of the sharing economy.

³ The main criteria for inclusion in the study was active involvement in self-identified solidarity economy organisation. In purposive sampling approach no explicit attempt was made to ensure gender, racial, class or ethnic inclusivity. While consent was given in many cases to use the participant's actual names, no consent was given to disclose individual demographic data and so we have withheld this information in our treatment of individual interviewees. Of the thirty-three interviewees seventeen were women and one-third were persons of colour.

ment. However, like Shear (2014) we found practitioners also expressed a range of doubts about the movement—fears that the movement perpetuates processes of exclusion, that it is vulnerable to co-optation by the state or other powerful actors, or that it will fail, remaining on the cultural and political fringe. These concerns echoed similar sentiments expressed by movement practitioners and theorists elsewhere and through time. RPT theory can help us to make sense of these concerns, but what their persistence signals in the first instance is the enormous challenge facing any movement pursuing a transformational politics of anti-poverty.

2.2.1. Concerns about exclusion

Relational poverty theorists argue that poverty is territorialized through practices of political exclusion. Other scholars have noted ongoing exclusionary practices in solidarity spaces, particularly in alternative food initiatives (e.g., Slocum, 2007; Zitcer, 2015). These concerns surface in the US solidarity economy in familiar ways. Feminist scholar activist Julie Matthaei has noted on numerous occasions that while women play significant roles in movement spaces and do a lot of the work, it is often male movement members who become spokespersons (see also Hudson, this issue). The ongoing politics of racial exclusion also surfaced in the course of our own research. Borowiak et al. (2017) recounts a few instances where public presentations of our solidarity economy research were followed by audience members expressing concerns that there was little room for people of colour in the movement.

In Massachusetts, ongoing concerns about gender, race, age and sexual-orientation based exclusion surfaced during state-wide solidarity economy conferences organised by the Worcester Solidarity and Green Economy Alliance. Discussions focused on how worker cooperative start-ups pre-emptively excluded poor people and people from communities of colour who frequently lacked the time or resources to participate (Shear, 2014; Loh and Shear, 2015). One of our informants, Dania, reflecting on her experiences in her native country of Guatemala and in the US movement, describes what happens when these differences are ignored:

It's really romantic and beautiful to say we're all going to sit at the table and make decisions together. If you have been silenced for 100 years, if you have been murdered for 100 years, if you hate certain people because they're privileged—and a lot of us recognize that that privilege is not their fault, but if you don't recognize that it's not your fault and you want to work out of that, the assumption is there—if you don't have that personal connection and conversation it's not going to work.

(Dania 2014)

In her comments, Dania identifies the significance of exclusion that goes beyond the need for representative diversity. Echoing de Sousa Santos's (2007) notion of cognitive injustice, the problem she sees is that a radically inclusionary space is, as Rancière (2006) might put it, presently insensible. What we can learn here is that more inclusionary spaces become discernible only to the extent that they challenge gendered and racialized patterns participation, leadership and deference that work to naturalise the present order.

2.2.2. Concerns about exploitation

Solidarity economy practitioners express a variety of concerns about the exploitation of movement participants. Some are concerned the movement will be coopted and re-purposed by outside actors while others identify internal dynamics as a threat. Bergeron and Healy (2015) worry that the solidarity economy could suffer the same fate as women in the era of "smart economics" where international development agencies seek to harness the power of women as principal agents in the informal sector. Brazilian activist Daniel Tygel (2012) likewise warned against the possibility of the state and other powerful actors re-

casting the solidarity economy as poverty-reduction strategy, stripping the movement's transformational potential as it becomes a capitalist-palliative. Others appear to echo the Webb's 19th century criticisms that cooperatives, a key element in the solidarity economy, are vulnerable to implosion (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Lima (2007) and Atzeni and Ghigliani (2007), writing from the Brazilian and Argentine contexts respectively, described coop-degeneracy as a process where individual enterprises or the movement lose sight of shared commitments.

These warning seem particularly prescient in the U.S. context where New York City and other municipalities have begun to support the development of worker cooperatives, allocating millions for their development, but with the expectation that the city double the number of worker cooperatives within a three-year time frame (Abello, 2016; Democracy at Work, 2015). While there are both practical and political advantages that come from municipal support, the attendant pressure to get them up and running quickly makes them less likely to succeed. Further, this pressure might generate the conditions for self-exploitation: cooperatives, like many small enterprises, rely on volunteer labour in the start-up phase. As Lauren Hudson (2016) noted in the conference session that inspired this themed issue, without care, much of the work may fall to economically vulnerable populations working to the city's timetable.

2.2.3. Concerns about marginality

Finally, others continue to express a concern that the solidarity economy is ultimately a marginal movement that cannot effect broader political change and will always remain on the cultural and political fringe (Utting, 2015). Dinerstein (2014), like Tygel, argues that it's all too easy for the solidarity economy to become a familiar charitable enterprise—something middle class people do for poor folk—in a way that deprives it of a hope, that which connects it to a form-of-life yet to come. Others worry that the sometimes punctiform nature of the solidarity economy will lead to its self-marginalization. One of our informants working with a progressive economic development fund in Boston, Aaron, argued that there was a distinct danger that came with building a grassroots movement from discreet place-bound initiatives.

There's this conception that maybe if we were all worker coops, then that would... resolve the issue of workplace exploitation and deal with... one piece of ownership, but {it} doesn't resolve the issue of having to compete in the markets to survive, and... the same pressures around environmental degradation and... your own labour exploitation persists.

(Aaron 2015)

In Aaron's view, competition between discreet isolated initiatives for resources and support leads to a situation where the movement marginalises itself.

2.2.4. Responding to these concerns

History tells us that these concerns are not unwarranted. For example, commentators from Italy's civic cooperative tradition, looking at the US's then burgeoning cooperative movement in the 19th century, were suitably impressed but warned it would amount to nothing if they became interested only in commercial success, and indeed many of these early cooperatives ended up resembling ordinary enterprises (Bruni, 2012; see also Goodwyn, 1978). The cooperative resurgence of the 1970s and '80s provides a different cautionary tale of desperate efforts to save enterprises doomed to fail, or conversely of cooperatives that succeeded only to be demutualised and dissolved by members in the absence of legal safeguards (Alperovitz, 2013; Cornforth, 1983; Jensen, 2016; Tortia, 2011).

The concerns expressed by movement practitioners in the US and elsewhere and those we've encountered in our research are legitimate, but the question is: how to respond? How do we acknowledge the legitimacy of these concerns without treating them as foregone conclu-

sions? Here RPT as a critical theory can only go so far. It helps to clarify the *problem* but does not provide a *solution*. What is needed are better answers to the questions: *how*, and under what conditions, might solidarity economy movements succeed? What relationships, resources and practices might enable the solidarity economy? In our view, answering these questions requires a shift in attention to *how* one actually practices solidarity.

We might think of this as shifting our conception of the role of ethics in politics away from values that we presume we hold in common and more towards an ethos, what Puig de la Bellacasa (2010) refers to as ‘ethical doings’. Why might this shift be important? For one thing it would appear that what the present US solidarity economy shares in common with past movements is an emphasis on the cooperative as an institution that a priori appears to embody the values of solidarity. One danger is that in fixating on cooperatives (and other formal institutions) the movement ignores the possibility of the wider orbit of solidarity. It’s as if we are looking only at the fish and not the ocean in which it swims. A more ethological approach to solidarity allows us to look at both, as earlier writers have suggested. Writing shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Baldacchino (1990) argued that the cooperative movement could only succeed if it focused on building counter-hegemonic ideas and institutions to support it. Decades later, Cornwell (2012) and McMurtry (2009, 2015) make a similar argument connecting cooperative-space to processes of subjectivation as a condition of possibility for a self-reflexive, effective social movement. In our view, what these authors are describing is how solidarity economy institutions are sustained by the larger common spaces in which they are situated.

In the next section we follow this thought-thread, drawing on two examples from our Massachusetts based research: Stone Soup in Worcester and CERO cooperative in Boston. Both of these organisations are engaged in the process of developing worker cooperatives by building the larger set of spatial and financial relationships in which such cooperatives operate, a practice that resembles what Gibson-Graham et al. (2013a,b, 2016) describe as *commoning*. In our view, *commoning* works to describe *how* one practices a politics of solidarity—how cooperation is sustained through inclusive and participatory forms of sharing space, resources and power. It is really in this context that we might come to understand solidarity economy as a transformative response that undoes the dynamics of poverty.

3. Commoning and the politics of solidarity

For more than twenty years Gibson-Graham and others writing in the tradition of postcapitalist theory have been drawing on insights from Marxian and feminist theory, economic anthropology and sociology, and anti-essentialist, queer, postcolonial, and vital materialism to produce a new language of economy—the diverse economy. In turn, the diverse economy gives voice to new desires, subjectivities, and forms of collective action beyond capitalism (e.g., CEC, 2001; Byrne and Healy, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013a,b; Roelvink et al., 2015). Postcapitalist theory is congruous with RPT theory and solidarity economy but also contributes a distinct approach to the ethicopolitics of solidarity. It shares with solidarity economy a commitment to enlivening non-exploitative and non-capitalist relations, spaces and practices where it becomes possible to recognize our shared economic interdependence—what Gibson-Graham (2006) refer to as the formation of community economies (Miller, 2013). Like RPT, community and economy are defined in the context of a relational ontology: neither have final form or fixed essence. However, it is in the context of this relational ontology that postcapitalist theory offers a different vision of ethicopolitics, one that starts with questions rather than presumed normative answers. These fundamental questions include: What’s necessary for survival? How can we organise economies and allocate surplus wealth? How do communities share things in common or invest in a common future? From this perspective,

the practices that constitute a community economy are provisional, uncertain, and incomplete experimental answers to these shared concerns. Yet, they constitute the foundation of many people’s lives and help to expand imaginaries of economic solidarity.

With this in mind we now turn our attention to two solidarity economy organisations we encountered in Massachusetts: Stone Soup and CERO cooperative. Reading their efforts through the lens of post-capitalist theory helps us to illustrate *how* solidarity works and indeed how participatory and inclusive processes of cooperation constitute a transformative politics of anti-poverty. Both organisations pursue the development of worker cooperatives as part of an economic empowerment strategy. But the organisations set this strategy within the development of a larger set of spaces and relationships that we call, following Gibson-Graham et al. (2013a,b, 2016), *commoning* (see also Huron, 2015; Williams, 2017). The concept of *commoning* provides us with a way of making sense of how solidarity works. Taking their cue from key commons theorists, Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) argue that *commoned* resources—biophysical, financial, knowledge—exist only in relation to communities that *common* them, principally by establishing the rules that govern them (Gudeman and Rivera, 1990; Hardt, 2010; Linebaugh, 2008; Bollier, 2014; Ostrom, 2015).

Ostrom’s (2015) pioneering work shows how the rules that govern common pool resources can endure for centuries, allowing for their use precisely because they also enforce rules around care and responsibility. Commons systems are not opposed to commercial activity but establish rules that govern the sale of common resources. Refining Ostrom’s earlier formation and generalising it beyond common-pool resources, Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) identify five dimensions of commons-sociality:

- **who can access** a common resource,
- **how and how much to use** it,
- **how commons** are to be **cared for** and where **responsibility** lies and
- **for whose benefit** is a commons constituted, used and cared for.

These rules help us to understand how commons spaces express a politics of solidarity. Stone Soup and CERO illustrate complementary dimensions of the *commoning* process. Stone Soup illustrates a deliberate effort to create common spaces, ones that can contribute to the flourishing of worker cooperatives and broader politics of solidarity. CERO provides us with an example of how a cooperative enterprise can act as a *commoner*, as one among many working to sustain a larger network of organisations that Loh and Ageyman (2017) describe as a food-based solidarity economy.

3.1. Politics of commoning: stone soup

Worcester is a racially and ethnically diverse medium sized city of a little more than 180,000 residents. Like many other post-industrial cities in the Northeast, it has higher than average unemployment and poverty rates. Worcester Roots is a non-profit social and environmental justice advocacy organisation started in the early 2000s by three graduates from Clark University, including our informant Matt F. A central strategy for Worcester Roots was to create a volunteer run shared-community space. In 2006 Worcester Roots purchased a 19th century colonial former funeral home at 4 King St. They named the property Stone Soup, in reference to the folk story where a hungry traveller “tricks” villagers into putting what little food they have into the soup that makes a meal for the whole village to enjoy. Counting the members of all affiliated organisations Stone Soup is a predominantly community of colour organisation with significant participation from marginalised groups: youth, women, immigrants, and ex-offenders. Almost all of the Worcester based informants had some connection with Stone Soup, but the ones we discuss here are part of organisations that share space:

Cedric from Future Focus Media, Shane C. from Youth in Charge, Judy from Diggers Cooperative, and Matt W. from Earn a Bike.

In 2009, Stone Soup was nearly destroyed by a fire and subsequently its member organisations were dispersed throughout the city while Stone Soup was rebuilt (see Fig. 1).

Five long years later, Stone Soup was rededicated. The ecologically retrofitted structure was a vast improvement over the original drafty building that had stood there before. In the process of rebuilding, Worcester Roots redefined its mission. As Matt F explains,

Worcester Roots had an intentional shift over the last 4 years... the main objective of Worcester Roots is to incubate worker cooperatives and to build the solidarity economy and to support the SAGE Alliance (Solidarity and Green Economy Alliance), and to really bring youth leadership into that movement.

(Matt F 2014)

To date Worcester Roots has started (or is the fiscal sponsor for) nine worker owned and run cooperatives, three of which are housed in the Stone Soup building. All are situated in what they call a larger ecology that supports and sustains them—that ecology includes other cooperative enterprises, cooperative housing, and a maker space as well as civic organisations that have social or environmental justice missions.

Stone Soup, the physical shared space, plays a central role in helping to realise this vision. Following Gibson-Graham et al. (2013a,b), theorizing Stone Soup as a commons allows us to see how ethicopolitical negotiations over the terms of *access and use*, and the delegation of *responsibility for care* works to define a *community of benefit* in ways that constitute their ability to act in solidarity with one another.

3.1.1. Access and use

Stone Soup is accessible to all member organisations and the local community. Each organisational member, or cook, pays rent by the square foot to occupy space within Stone Soup. From a commons perspective, the access and use of physical space falls into the category of a rival good—space is limited and must be negotiated—to permit some use and exclude others without being exclusionary. Worcester Roots, as a member organisation, pays to access and use the space like any other member but also shares with other groups who might be excluded from other spaces. Worcester Roots shares space with the youth-led cooperative Toxic Soil Busters that offers soil remediation services. Downstairs, Ex-prisoners and Prisoners Organising for Community Advancement

(EPOCA) rents space from Stone Soup to run a series of campaigns to improve the lives of ex-prisoners.

In the process of negotiation, the nine organisations that rent space work out what suits their needs. For example, Earn-a-Bike (EaB) has been Stone Soup's basement tenant both before and after the fire. Matt W, the organisation's principal, explains that space is important for them as they process hundreds of bicycles and bike parts donated by individuals and organisations throughout the city. Some bicycles are repaired and resold to raise funds and pay rent, but the main focus is giving low-income people and youth from immigrant communities in particular access to bicycles for both transportation and recreation. Matt W also connects this to a larger vision:

What we're doing through bicycles, and I think it's best just shown through Stone Soup and most of the organisations within Stone Soup... are trying to make what we have a better place by getting the community invested in themselves.

(Matt W 2014)

Youth, women, former prisoners, and migrant communities are populations all too frequently caught up in the dynamics of poverty—excluded, marginalised and exploited. Yet, these are the very people sharing access and use of the space, practicing solidarity with one another. This in turn requires a commitment to shared practices of care and co-governance.

3.1.2. Care and responsibility

All Stone Soup member organisations participate in the governance of the space. Soup member organisations send delegates to meetings where decisions are made by consensus. Even though Worcester Roots is the leaseholder, rent collector, and party responsible for maintaining general liability insurance, when it comes to governing the space, it is merely one voice among many. Matt F. pointed out that they established Stone Soup as a collectively governed community land-trust in 2013, separating it from Worcester Roots. One important implication here is that Worcester Roots' agenda is not identical with Stone Soup's—the space is open to take on other matters of shared concern, and even to consider concerns of at-large Stone Soup members in the broader community.

3.1.3. For whose benefit?

As Gudeman and Rivera (1990) observed, there is a mutually constitutive relationship between commons and the communities that use



Fig. 1. Stone Soup 2014 rebuild complete.

and care for them. For Worcester Roots, Stone Soup is a space to grow the solidarity economy. As Judy from Diggers points out, individual cooperatives use the space to work through the thorny process of democratic enterprise governance, in their case navigating the transition from male to younger, female crew-leadership. This underscores the importance of spaces like Stone Soup where people can *practice* leading, following, cooperating and joint-accountability.

Despite facing many challenges Judy, Matt F. and others envision Stone Soup's potential contribution to the city of Worcester. They would like to see the city transfer other abandoned property and unused public buildings to community based organisations like Stone Soup, echoing what David Schlosberg (2016) describes as a global trend among social movements to build autonomous spaces. In Matt F's view, the pursuit of this larger vision rests upon getting Worcester's City government to

recognize there's some economic potential out of all this in addition to what they see as social benefits of these groups. What that'll actually look like I'm not sure... Councillors have been supportive... but I think it has to be more of a, like the manager's office, economic development like really believing that we're that these initiatives could generate real living wage jobs in Worcester and to believe that and to invest in it and not try to control it, as the city does some time.

(Matt F. 2014)

Matt's long term vision is to further expand commons beyond Stone Soup. Cedric, a worker-owner at another youth-involved worker cooperative, Future-Focus Media (FFM), expressed a similar vision. Cedric draws on his years of experience in Brooklyn's music scene to teach youth all aspects of professional video production. The cooperative pays close to industry average rates to young people on projects while providing a pathway into the industry. Like Matt F, Cedric defines a larger community that benefits from Stone Soup by making common cause with other local creatives to build relations with out of region film crews that have come to Worcester in recent years.

3.1.4. *Stone soup, commoning space, transforming the dynamics of poverty*

Worcester Roots' stated objective is one of promoting cooperative development to build the solidarity economy and it puts this objective into practice by sharing Stone Soup as a space with others—youth, women, immigrants, ex-offenders—marginalised and excluded from larger society. Stone Soup is open to other concerns; its members are willing to see their own cause in the cause of others. For example, since 2014 both Stone Soup and Worcester Roots members have become involved with Black Lives Matter's (BLM) protests against police violence—including one action in 2015 where BLM activist and Roots board member Julius Jones publicly queried Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton about the consequences of the 1994 Crime Bill which led to mass incarceration and criminalization of youth from communities of colour.

Just as Stone Soup works by commoning space to extend the bounds of solidarity across social movements, it is also organising itself to persist through time. Matt observes that of the many young men and women who have worked in Stone Soup and in youth-led cooperatives,

some of them have blossomed as leaders and spokespeople and are really active in cooperative and solidarity economy movements. I can think of a few examples of people who came into these projects with not a lot of knowledge, pretty shy about speaking in public and then became major spokespeople like keynote speakers at youth federation of workers coop conference.

(Matt F 2014)

The involvement of youth in the enterprise, their development as civic leaders in the context of a common space is in sharp contrast to

many organisations that exclude youth. Stone Soup started the Cooperative Academy in 2013 to further institutionalise their intergenerational approach. According to Youth in Charge manager Shane C. (2014), the purpose of these biannual academies is to encourage intergenerational cooperative literacy. Seeing Stone Soup as a commons clarifies how its member organisations practice solidarity across space and through time. The commoning of this space clarifies how solidarity economy is a transformative response to poverty, a cooperative approach to undoing dynamics of exploitation, exclusion and marginalization.

3.2. *Politics of financial commoning: CERO cooperative*

Boston, like many cities in the US, is characterised by the uneven consequences of urban renewal as once working-class neighbourhoods like Dorchester become a microcosm for all the forces that transform US urban landscapes into territories of poverty—capital flight in the 1960s; followed by white flight, systematic abandonment, redlining, and arson in the 1970s; and later the pressures of gentrification (Medoff and Sklar, 1994). Dorchester is home to CERO cooperative, a commercial composting cooperative incorporated 2013, but connected to a longer history of antipoverty politics.

Like Stone Soup, CERO is a multi-racial and multi-class organisation. It is connected to the development of what Loh and Ageyman (2017) refer to as a food solidarity economy operating throughout the city of Boston. Five interviewees had various connections with CERO: Lor is the current managing director; Aaron works with an organisation that provides finance capital to CERO; Penn is an academic that has played a central role in developing its institutional connections; Alex an activist who situates CEROS efforts in a larger political and economic context. We can use the concept of commoning to see how CERO acts as one commoner among many working in solidarity to sustain a larger commonwealth.

3.2.1. *Access and use*

CERO's capitalization strategy tapped both monetary and nonmonetary resources. Developing these resources in turn consolidated its position in an emergent food solidarity economy. In the process, CERO needed to reinvent the relationship between marginalised communities, the city and financial institutions to access financial capital.

Aaron, from the Center for Economic Democracy, was able to explain CERO's origins in a failed worker cooperative started by the Boston Worker's Alliance (BWA), which had attempted to make biofuels from waste vegetable oil (Healy, 2015). With help from Aaron, BWA began to reach out to other like-minded organisations and hired Lor as a coop developer. CERO focused on developing a commercial composting business for two reasons. First, the presence of market gardens throughout the city meant a ready-outlet for the finished compost. Second, there is a need for composting services at the other end of the chain. Changes in Massachusetts state law from 2014 required all supermarkets, restaurants, colleges and universities to compost the food waste generated in the course of operations.

Both Penn and Lor situation CERO cooperative's emergence inside an already existing network of food wholesalers, growers and restaurants operating within the Boston area and in relationships with Boston's many universities. Penn also emphasized a connection with two larger enterprises now in their second decade: City Fresh Catering and City Growers both started by Glenn Boyd (Penn, 2015).

Penn described City Fresh's founder as an "entrepreneur" and "poster-boy" for inner city redevelopment. The firm he currently runs has around 100 employees and is based in the Roxbury/Dorchester area. City Fresh received capital support from the Boston Impact Initiative Fund, a progressive private equity fund, but with the stipulation that "they can help provide an anchor for them to eventually convert to employee ownership" (Penn, 2015). Penn pointed out that while

Glenn has considerable stature in Boston's (capitalist) business community, his enterprise is directed by a deep commitment to address the dynamics of poverty: "At the end of the day, this was his attempt to help create institutions that would be owned by the community of colour."

CERO members and their allies had thought carefully both about the enterprise they choose to develop and the broader set of relationships that would make it viable. Lor said the most significant barrier proved to be raising capital. With help from Aaron, CERO was able to access start-up funds from Boston Impact. Lor and the new worker-owners at CERO followed this up by issuing a Direct Public Offering (DPO) that allowed local investors to purchase a non-voting stake in the company.

There's a need to connect folks with that idea as a potential vehicle with real serious commitment by people of wealth to divest away from the extractive economy and to put serious money... to have local people in the community invest, most of our investors are not the wealthy folks, they're folks who are you know giving us, investing in us a couple thousand dollars. I think our biggest investor in the DPO was twenty-five thousand dollars.

(Lor 2015)

With two years of effort, CERO was able to raise two hundred thousand dollars to purchase capital equipment for their operations. By law CERO had to confine its public offering to inside the state in order to avoid Federal Security and Exchange Commission oversight. In Lor's view, they were able to raise this money precisely because they were appealing to a local community of producers and consumers that would in turn benefit from a more functional food solidarity economy. These ongoing financial and non-financial support relationships had important consequences for CERO's work-place culture.

3.2.2. Care and responsibility

Building what solidarity economy activist Daniel Tygel (2012) calls a culture of confidence within the solidarity movement involved confronting and transforming the internalised negative self-sense among CERO co-operators themselves and the larger community. This step is necessary for the development and use of human potential (as distinct from human capital) as well as for the confidence of co-operators and the larger community's faith in them.

Lor describes the interrelated challenges of getting cooperators to invest in the process of starting a cooperative venture of this sort and, concomitant with this, the cultural barriers to attracting additional capital.

I really feel like we've become a family. It's so much personal equity involved in this, and I'm not talking about the financial part. I'm talking about the emotional and time investment that just you know is required if you're doing this in an authentic way, if you're doing this in a participatory democratic way. It's a lot of work. It's very much worth it, but that's a big deal.

(Lor 2015)

Expressed in terms of RPT, Lor is describing here how CERO attempts to address both the exclusion from financial capital in communities of colour but also access to cultural credibility. Attracting investment, in Lor's view, requires the development of confidence amongst cooperators by challenging the widely held prejudices about what is worthy of support.

If we're trying to be intentional about, you know, being ready to undermine white supremacy culture and capitalism. In the mean-time... let's stop acting as though... the good ideas don't exist. There are plenty of low-income people with really good ideas. They know their communities very well... they could be

just as successful as these, you know, Silicon Valley folks... it's not a level playing field, and until we have economic justice, a coop economy is not gonna make it.

(Lor 2015)

Aaron expressed similar ideas and placed them in a larger context for the movement as a whole. In his view, CERO's ultimately successful direct public offering brought with it other possibilities for what he calls the "democratization of finance capital." One forum for exploring this idea was the City of Boston's experiments in 2015 with a participatory budgeting process.

I was one of the lead technical assistance providers to the City of Boston last year on their first participatory budgeting project. We had a million dollars for youth to allocate to come up with how to spend, so our question has been how do you apply participatory budgeting, consumer side planning, to investment decisions. Traditional capitalism says, you know, you invest in what's profitable, so that's how we end up with lots of liquor stores in our neighborhoods. If the question was 'what do we actually need?' and there's a space created for that dialogue, then our thought is that's how you end up getting investments in things communities need.

(Aaron 2015)

Based on this initial experience Aaron went on to suggest that perhaps larger changes could work to redirect financial capital, asking what if it were possible to redirect financial resources tied to pensions, 401K retirement and other benefit schemes into local development funds like Boston Impact. This may seem far-fetched to many, but is it? Wealthy investors currently buy municipal bonds, in part as a strategy for parking their money and limiting tax liabilities. Lor and Aaron are asking why would it be inconceivable for working people to have at least part of their investments be in communities where they reside?

3.2.3. Benefit: commoning Boston's food economy

CERO, too, has consistently tried to practice a social-justice aware approach to solidarity economy in ways that have strategic significance. For example, another informant, Alex, who works with Clean Water Action, pointed out that the Massachusetts Renewable Energy Trust, which started in 1998 by collecting small fees from every utility bill, has now accumulated two and a half billion dollars in funds. Most of these funds inordinately benefit home owners seeking to improve energy efficiency. The political project for CERO and other organisations is to redirect some of these funds in ways that benefit low-income communities dominated by renters.

Through CERO we see how building a successful cooperative enterprise also means building a set of financial and non-financial support relationships that enable it to succeed, a practice of solidarity that takes the form of commoning relationships. Most pointedly, in Lor's reflections we learn how this task is inextricably bound to addressing historical and ongoing forms of racialized financial exclusion and cultural marginalization in communities like Dorchester. Addressing these dynamics involves a confrontation not only with the structural racism in the finance sector but also with deeply internalized beliefs about where innovation comes from and what a desirable future might be. The possibility of a food solidarity economy depends upon the commoning of ideas, flows of food and compost, and financial and non-financial resources, just as its success through time depends upon widening the circle of institutions and people that can participate in it.

4. Conclusion

The initial impetus for this paper was to stage an encounter between relational poverty theory and the solidarity economy to assess whether or not this movement offers a transformational response to the dynamics of economic exploitation, political exclusion and social mar-

ginalization that hold poverty in place. Lawson and Ellwood use Valentine's concept of encounter and Gibson-Graham's evocation of a politics of possibility to describe the circumstances in which a transformational politics of antipoverty might take root. The difficulty here is that neither of these terms say much about what such a politics might look like, or how it might take place.

In their more recent work Lawson et al. (2015) have explored the beliefs of pro and anti-poor middle class activists in communities with homeless camps in both Argentina and the United States. In the US, in particular, they found that the thinking of even pro-poor middle class activists remained bound in the intellectual straight jacket of lack based on individualist explanations of poverty. They had,

no discursive repertoire for naming structural processes that make it impossible for their poor neighbors to get ahead. They resist blame narrative and have a gut sense of structural barriers, but are unable to name and act upon them. We argue this is a limit of poverty politics in the US context, which makes structural change unimaginable.

(Lawson et al., 2015, 1886)

This clearly demonstrates the importance of RPT's critical project, but perhaps we can go further. Perhaps something similar is happening with solidarity economy practitioners' concerns about the possibility of betrayal, cooptation, continued exploitation, and continued race, gender and age-based forms of exclusion and marginalization. These are, of course, real possibilities and legitimate concerns but it might also be equally true that these concerns persist at least in part because we have the capacity to name them, thanks in no small part of the long tradition of critical theory. What this implies to us is a need to continue to develop a vocabulary for describing how the solidarity economy movement might succeed and what success might look like. In the process we might begin to understand how the practices of solidarity might constitute spaces and relationships outside the territories of poverty, spaces where we encounter one another across the lines of race, gender, class, sexuality and ability and how organisations like Stone Soup and CERO aim deliberately to generate the conditions for encounter.

In this paper we have argued that the theorization of commoning, developed in the context of postcapitalist theory inspired by Gibson-Graham and others, offers a language for conceptualizing how solidarity economy institutions and initiatives might succeed. In the example of Stone Soup, we saw an explicitly solidarity economy identified initiative attempting to common spaces. Stone Soup became a space for its parent organisation Worcester Roots to pursue cooperative development. But Roots also shared this space with other organisations that had their own agendas, acting as one voice among many in governing the space. Its practice of solidarity involved ceding control, opening the space to other concerns, and deliberately working to ensure that youth (future generations) made important decisions. This created space for practices of solidarity, as exemplified by the linking with other movements like BLM and the aligning of cooperative development with struggles against white supremacy and mass incarceration, while also creating room for young people, immigrants and others.

Just as Stone Soup constitutes itself as a spatial commons, we argued that CERO cooperative acts as an organisational commoner—actively looking for opportunities to participate with others in the construction of what Loh and Agyeman refer to as a food solidarity economy. Both Stone Soup and CERO interact with other solidarity economy institutions—from social enterprises to credit unions that we might also understand as commons and commoner. We understand building these connections with likeminded organisations as building a solidarity-based supply chains. The work involves experimenting with new forms of financing to counteract historical forms of financial exclusion. It involves as well the creation of Tygel's culture of confidence—a recognition that innovative ideas and practices can arise in Dorchester and not just at MIT. Innovation is not the province of special peo-

ple from special places. And in pursuing these innovations they point to a different way forward for everybody.

It is in this sense that we might think of commoning as another name for solidarity, one that describes *how* it is practiced—the rules through which we enable cooperation in ways that are fundamentally inclusive, that elicit and are sustained by participation. Seeing these efforts as a practice of commoning highlights cooperation between participants across the dividing lines of class, race, gender and sexuality but also across generations, extending solidarity to those who come after. Beyond economy, across concerns, and through time—this is perhaps that standard by which we might measure a transformative politics of anti-poverty.

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