

**BUILDING COMMUNITY ECONOMIES:
A POSTCAPITALIST PROJECT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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For the past several years, we have been teaching an introductory human geography course at our various places of work. Toward the end of the semester we show students two videos that are structured by an opposition between economic development and nature. *Cry of the Forgotten Land* portrays the struggle of the Moi people of Irian Jaya to protect their land from logging and resettlement efforts sponsored by the Indonesian government, which were part of an explicit project to develop Irian Jaya. *The River People* focuses on the experience of two Yakima Indians in the Pacific Northwest, David Sohapp and his son, who were imprisoned by the federal government for salmon poaching. Like *Cry* it portrays indigenous people as hostages to a larger, ongoing process of capitalist development, which operates at the expense of both the environment and indigenous peoples.

Both videos represent peoples with a biocentric worldview in which humans have a reciprocal relationship with nature. Identifying passionately with this biocentric perspective, the students voice their admiration for the Moi and Yakima people's respectful interactions with nature and their disdain for the more instrumental interventions of the US and Indonesian governments. To some degree, their attitude is a confirmation of the success of environmentalism. What was a radical idea a short time ago has become a widely shared norm. But while we are heartened by this tectonic shift in thinking, we find the students' pessimism alarming. Almost universally they imagine that the Moi and Yakima people, their collective way of life, and their reciprocal relation to nature are doomed. Indeed, those who identify most with the Moi and Yakima and their biocentric worldview are also the ones mostly likely to be certain about an unhappy ending.¹

¹ In addressing the videos in class, we make the point that this pessimistic prognosis is a consequence of the familiar representational strategy adopted by the filmmakers. Both videos show a helpless but blameless indigenous people pitted against the forces of modernization, a representation designed to provoke moral outrage in the audience. Yet, of course, other stories could be told. Indeed, in the case of

It has been impossible to dislodge the belief among the students that the force variously identified as “capitalism,” “the market,” “modernization,” and “development” will inevitably destroy the Moi people and dispossess the Yakima. While this reading is clearly a reflection of the representational strategy of the two videos, we are left with some serious questions: why is a sense of environmental doom so pervasive among our students? More generally, what makes destructive development appear inevitable, even to the environmentalists who are most likely to want to resist it? More positively, how might the idea of sustainable development be transformed from an impossible dream into a realistic and attainable project for organizations and communities?

In this chapter, we address these questions and others that circle around the concept of sustainable development. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, we focus first on the forms of economic subjection/subjectivity that militate against sustainability as a possibility and a practice. Then, using examples from our action research on “rethinking economy,” we explore ways of thinking and enacting economy that render sustainable development a practical everyday project, and trace the emergence of subjects and practices of sustainability in several sites around the world. In the final sections of the chapter, we return to the “subjects of impossibility” with whom we began, addressing familiar reactions and resistances to our examples of “actually existing sustainabilities.”² A brief conclusion recalls us to what we have glimpsed in these pages—practical experiments that move beyond impasse and impossibility.

The River People, the basis for a more optimistic representation is readily found within the film. The Sohappys, for example, are not only successful in having their convictions overturned; they also gain an expanded legal description of their usufruct rights in a court of law. They have obtained the services of a powerful and persuasive lawyer, and a widely distributed video has been made to document their struggle.

² This phrase is drawn from Krueger and Agyeman (2005).

Development: Obedience to the Economy

Underlying our students' pessimism is a shared conviction that economic development is directed by an incontrovertible logic, one that is opposed to a reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. We see the emotional disposition of our students along with their pessimistic prognosis for the environmental movement as aspects of an "everyday economic discourse" that is grounded in the central terms and tenets of academic economics: scarcity, trade-off, and competition (Ruccio and Amariglio 2003). Nature is traded off against development in a process of competition for scarce resources—the assumption being that the fittest will survive. This everyday and academic narrative is invested with (thwarted) desires, in a libidinal economy whose currency is both submission and impotent resistance.

The logic of development is embodied in the (capitalist) economy, understood as a force outside community and environment that effectively determines their fates. From its external and superior position, the economy precludes or constrains environmental stewardship, rather than being a means through which stewardship is lived and enacted. Ironically, our students' vision of economy-as-an-outside-force-with-a-uniform-logic is something they share with local economic development practitioners who might—given their mandate—be expected to see an economy as a contingent set of relationships that is in part locally shaped:

The economy kind of works on its own—it always has worked on its own and what we are trying to do with economic development resources that we bring to bear is to shift the trend line a little. Move this ship, a little, off its predestined course... (Allan Blair, Economic Development Council of Western Massachusetts, focus group discussion, 1999)

This consensus view, expressed in a focus group we ran for development practitioners in Western Massachusetts, was followed by another, even more succinct "truth" of local economic

development practice: “It’s a global economy, obviously.”³ The economy appears as a global system or container that determines the fate of all localities, whether they be multilateral trading blocs, nations, regions within nations, or municipalities. As a locality, you are merely a node in the global economy, a subordinate economic identity.

This vision, in combination with our neoliberal faith in trade, has given new impetus to export-led development and its theoretical infrastructure, export base theory. Most local economic development practice in the United States involves states and localities recruiting large firms or growing industrial clusters to enhance their “export base.” The assumption is that exports generate economic growth by bringing in dollars from outside the region.⁴ Every job created in an export industry means more local employment in other sectors, including those that supply inputs or process outputs. As workers in all these industries spend their wages and pay their taxes, both private and public sector jobs are created⁵ via the famous multiplier effect. Well-paying jobs in high value-added manufacturing are seen as having the highest employment multiplier; states compete for large manufacturers to invest in their regions, offering tax abatements and huge subsidies for job training and infrastructure development, often amounting to more than \$100,000 per job (Barlett and Steele 1998, 48). It is on this basis that export-led development is frequently characterized as a “race to the bottom” in which wages are reduced,

³ Rick Brown, Pioneer Valley Central Labor Council, focus group discussion, 1999.

⁴ Exports could be something that you actually physically send into the outside world, like microchips or machine tools; or they could be services you provide, like higher education sold to students and parents or incarceration sold to the state and federal prison systems. Both of these bring in dollars from outside and are therefore seen as enabling local growth.

⁵ Workers in all these industries will presumably spend their wages on local goods and services like housing and haircuts, thus expanding the local construction and service sectors; they’ll also pay property and sales taxes, allowing for the expansion of public sector employment.

public coffers gutted, and environmental standards relaxed in an effort to anticipate and accommodate the demands of the global economy.⁶

What is striking about this process, from our perspective, is the constitutive distance between the economy and its subjects. Our efforts at development address an alien power,⁷ not a local terrain of politics, ethics and experimentation. Slavishly and somewhat hopelessly, we try to fathom its mystery, interpreting its desires and attempting to placate it. Psychoanalytic theory provides some insight into the subjectivity and subjection of economic development professionals here. The Economy is the master term and central value in the discourse of development. An austere and God-like figure, it issues demands but never accedes to those of others, and while it is frequently invoked to justify our actions, it does not itself require justification.⁸

In psychoanalytic terms, development practitioners (and the rest of us) experience “castration” in the vicinity of the Economy—the inability to achieve real satisfaction despite all our efforts (Wright 1999; Byrne and Healy 2006). Obsessively attempting to satisfy the Economy’s demands, we are dogged by a persistent sense of failure (since those demands are both inscrutable and ultimately unattainable). We tend, moreover, not to seek an outlet from this hopeless situation. Instead we accept our castration as the price of existence and embrace the

⁶ Of course, there are numerous objections to the export base model, most based on problems of implementation. Firms, for example, may promise a certain number of jobs and deliver many fewer; the jobs they create may go to commuters rather than to the unemployed in your community—this is called a leakage; the profits of non-local corporations are generally not reinvested in the local community (another leakage); the company may not buy its inputs locally (a third form of leakage). On logical grounds, critics argue that growth need not arise from exports but simply from an increase in activity or productivity: the world economy has grown, for example, even in the absence of extra-terrestrial demand.

⁷ Marx sees this view as stemming from the division of labor in capitalist industry: “The social power, i.e., the multiplied productive force, which arises through the cooperation of different individuals as it is determined by the division of labor, appears to these individuals, since their cooperation is not voluntary but has come about naturally, not as their own united power, but as an alien force existing outside them, the origin and goal of which they are ignorant, which they thus cannot control” (1978, 161).

⁸ Theologian Harvey Cox makes a similar point about “the market as god” (1999).

compromised pleasures it affords—a few jobs created, some large corporations willing to take our money. At the same time, we fail to recognize locally available sources of satisfaction.

If the global economy is the castrating father of local economic development practice, firms perform the paternal function when they play one community off against the other in an effort to get the biggest incentive package. As communities we must accede to their demands in order to be permitted some modicum of development. Obedience often requires giving up the other things our tax revenues could be used for: excellent schools, affordable housing, environmental quality—all things that contribute directly to social well-being. Ironically, we give these things up in order to create economic development (whose end, however seldom achieved, is increased social well-being).

In our 1999 focus group, a local development planner captured the logic of castration inherent in development: “Sometimes it is necessary to give up quality of life in order to get quality of life.” While his words seem almost nonsensical, he was actually making the familiar point that the quality of life derived from a relatively pristine environment must be set against the quality of life derived from economic growth and opportunity. The planner’s words simply reduce to an absurdity the underlying castrating logic: our satisfaction is structured by a force or law that demands a limit to our satisfaction. This is something we’ve been told time and again in the colloquial language of scarcity: “you can’t have it all.” It is precisely because this saying is so familiar and persuasive that we must begin to question it.⁹

⁹ The point of castration is not simply that the tyrannical father is in a coercive position, or that our father’s enjoyment comes at our expense. In addition, this vision of the economy—as a force *outside community* whose demands we must accommodate—structures our own enjoyment and offers the surrogate satisfaction of knowing why we fail. Obedience has its pleasures, the most compelling of which is the pleasure of aligning oneself with power and authority, coming under the protection and privilege of the law, enforcing the law upon others. Local leaders and development experts speak of the demands of the global economy, its trends and requirements, with almost palpable glee (Gibson-Graham 1996, Ch. 5). The certainty of their knowledge compensates them for what they have to give up; their pleasure in renunciation is that of a good servant, slave or son. Being in the vicinity of power and being on its good

Environmentalism and Economic (Dis)obedience

If the practice of conventional economic development is about accommodating the demands of the (global) economy, environmentalism in its various incarnations is about resisting or compromising with this same external force. Our position is still that of the castrated subject with limited options. We can either say “no” to economic development entirely or we can accept an unsatisfying compromise between development and environment. Economic growth is possible to the extent that we renounce nature while the stewardship of nature is possible to the extent that we resist or forestall development. All that is left to us is to decide how much of nature we can manage to preserve from harm while we pursue development or, conversely, how much development to forgo. This is the discourse of scarcity—a fundamental belief that goods must be rationed because their quantity is insufficient to satisfy unlimited demands (Ruccio and Amariglio 2003, 7-10). Contending values are figured in a zero-sum game, a trade-off between environmental stewardship and economic growth. By forcing us to make the choice, scarcity organizes our subjection and constrains our desires.

Resisting the demands of the Economy

Since 1999 we have been engaged in action research in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts, focusing on alternative economic and environmental practices. Many people we have interviewed over the years are deeply committed to an environmental politics yet share a sense that their efforts are up against larger trends and forces. Resisting these seems to involve reducing individual consumption or choosing to consume products that are locally produced or

side is a way of vicariously enjoying power, even though that power constrains us. Groveling has its satisfactions, not least of which is making others grovel. And renunciation is OK if everyone else has to renounce too. (This is the Greenspan phenomenon. Alan Greenspan was the spokesman of God, the oracle—witness our pleasure in acceding to his demands, awaiting his every word, and his evident pleasure in making his pronouncements.)

environmentally conscious. Some feel that it is imperative to set themselves apart from a larger economic system. One person refuses to buy any produce from tropical countries for fear of the harm that is done to the environments where they are produced and the negative externalities associated with their transport to this bioregion. A local business owner actively discourages customers from traveling more than half an hour to dine at his bioregionally oriented restaurant.

The personal practice of delinking from the global economy is often accompanied by an intense moralism. One interviewee told us, for example, that he limits his associations to people who are as committed to environmentalism as he is—those who “walk their talk.” In his effort to be a living example of environmental commitment, he only buys locally and in season and limits his trips into town to once a month at most. In this and other cases, saying no to the global economy takes the form of an obsessive and rigorous self-audit—“How am I transgressing? What more can I refuse to enjoy?” The environment functions as yet another authority whose demand for loving obedience can never be satisfied. If the process of economic development seems to interpret the demands of the Economy as the demand for *more*, the Environment is imagined to be making the opposite demand for *less*.¹⁰

Accommodating the Economy: environmental pragmatism and sustainable development

While one group of environmentalists seems to express their consciousness of scarcity in terms of restraining individual choice, others hope to develop alternative approaches to business that take environmental principles to heart. Yet, when environmental conservation gets mapped

¹⁰ There is another consequence to this as well. An environmentalism that focuses on personal accountability—moral purity—comes with a tendency to imagine others as the principal cause of impending ecological failure. Here one is reminded of a key psychoanalytic insight about the nature of social hatred where one imagines that the hated other’s enjoyment—their money, body odor, hypersexuality, loud music, large families, environmental transgressions, etc.—comes at one’s expense.

onto the global Economy, what we experience is the demand for growth under environmental constraints. Sustainability becomes a practice of reconciliation/compromise, in which economic development and environmental conservation share the quality of scarcity. Conventional development practitioners in our area who have (grudgingly) taken up the language of sustainability remind us that “sustainability” is about combining hard-nosed business practices with process re-engineering, waste reclamation, and savings on energy bills. From this perspective, sustainability must above all not threaten the existing economic order and the drive to accommodate its demands.

It seems that those of us interested in sustainable development are left with the choice between resisting or accommodating the demands of the global capitalist economy.¹¹ In either scenario, we find ourselves fixated on and limited by what the Economy will or will not allow. As we struggle to meet its requirements and thus ensure our survival, we give up our freedom—including the freedom to organize our economies around local values and capacities. Our economic imaginations are confined to thinking about how we can serve the Economy, or at least not transgress its imperatives too blatantly. Our economic pleasures are restricted to those of impudent resistance, resentful renunciation, slavish obedience, or pronouncing and enforcing the law.

At this point of impasse, it may be fruitful to return to psychoanalysis for insights as to how we might proceed, taking instruction from the intimate laboratory of the analyst’s couch. A goal of any analysis is to convince the analysand that there is no social or parental Other that stands at an authoritative distance, making demands that must be obeyed, resisted, or accommodated, and standing in the way of satisfaction. What if it were possible to do the same thing for ourselves as subjects of Economy and sustainable development? What if we could

produce a different representation of economy that no longer functions as a force outside community that issues demands?¹² If a different understanding of economy were to free us from obsessively trying to satisfy (or resist) an external master, what new conceptions of “sustainable development” might emerge? In our view, what is required is not a singular or comprehensive theoretical alternative to an economy defined in relation to the concepts of “scarcity,” “trade-off,” and “competition.” Rather, our project is to develop a language which displaces the consolidating power of these concepts. We can start by posing a series of questions: why do we speak of an immutable scarcity instead of provisional limits? Why is the concept of “trade-off” confined to a bureaucratic language of policy discourse instead of being situated in an ethico-political language? Why does “competition” remain our dominant concept of economic behavior instead of cooperation and generosity (Gibson-Graham 2006)?

There Is No ECONOMY: Re-presenting Economic Diversity

Conventional economic development practice confines our imagination of economy to a limited set of practices and institutions—most prominently among them, wage labor, market exchange, and capitalist firms. This limited imaginary leaves us few options in meeting the challenge of sustainability—we can say YES or NO to capitalist growth, we can accommodate or resist the demands of capitalist enterprises. One way of moving beyond this dreary and limited set of options is to recognize an expanded economic terrain that includes *all* the different

¹¹ The YES of the development practitioner is matched by the NO of the environmentalists. In practice, sustainability becomes the art of unsatisfactory compromise between the two.

¹² There are a number of efforts under way to realign the relationship between economy and environment in a way that avoids the idea of a trade-off between the two (see, for example, Hawken et al. 1999). The idea in each of these books is that following natural principles will allow us to have an enterprise or an economy that is at once more profitable *and more* sustainable. For us the trouble with such a perspective is that it runs the risk of essentialism, either economizing nature or naturalizing the economy. We are saying that between the two there can be harmonization, there can be conflict, there can be trade-offs—and all of these rest on (re)conceptualizing the economy as a space of decision/ethics.

processes and sites (capitalist and non-capitalist) involved in producing and distributing goods and services. This could help to disrupt the fantasy of a singular logic of economic development—the self-referential and self-enclosed logic of capitalist growth—and allow us to understand development as engendered by an unspecified combination of economic practices.

A principal goal of our action research in the Pioneer Valley (called the Rethinking .Economy Project or REP) was to produce a different representation of economy in order to enact a different politics of development.¹³ Although most people (on the left and right alike) identify the economy with the market, and both with capitalism, a number of traditions and disciplines call into question this reductive conception of economic identity. Feminist economic theorists, for example, have challenged the conventional assumption that households are merely sites of consumption, pointing out that the goods and services produced in households account for 30 to 50 percent of GDP in both rich and poor countries (Waring 1984; Ironmonger 1996; Folbre 2001; Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003). In a similar vein, economic anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers have emphasized the extent of informal production and non-market exchange, documenting the size and importance of the informal sector in Europe, the Soviet Union and, more recently, in post-Soviet states (Mingione 1991; Shanin 1988, 1999; Pavlovskaya 2002; Johannisova 2005). Academics and advocates have demonstrated the role that the non-capitalist activities of the self-employed, worker-owned cooperatives, community business corporations, and inter-cooperative networks play in Canada, Spain, India, and indeed throughout the world (Nadeau and Thompson 1996; Arvidson 2000; Perron 2000; Leyshon et al. 2003; Gibson-Graham 2003, 2006). These businesses and networks produce goods and services for a market, but not under capitalist relations of production.

¹³ In other words, we wanted to produce a new everyday economic imaginary, inspired by scholarship from many disciplines and traditions.

All of this scholarship and related activism have had an impact on economic development as practiced in both developed and developing countries. The European Union has commissioned special research into the role of the social economy—a term that essentially combines non-market, non-profit, and governmental economic activity—in creating social well-being (Adaman and Madra 2002). Similarly, informal economic activities, particularly the activities engaged in by women, have become the focus of development practice in the so-called less developed countries (Benería and Feldman 1992). In the US, Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) have shown that individual and institutional talents and capacities can be mobilized to develop low-income communities; many of their projects have translated volunteer effort into community-controlled capital, housing, or businesses. Gunn and Gunn (1991) also explore ways that community-controlled businesses can be integrated into the development process. Lastly, drawing on the experiences of the Mondragón complex of cooperatives in Spain, scholars and activists worldwide have begun to use the formation of worker-owned coops in a variety of industries as a strategy for the revitalization of economically marginalized areas (MacLeod 1997; Franke 2003; Mutersbaugh 2002).

Taking its inspiration from all of these efforts, the Rethinking Economy Project aimed to document the existence and importance of diverse forms of labor remuneration, transactions, and economic organization in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts. By means of qualitative research undertaken through focus groups and open-ended interviews, we inventoried a wide range of individuals, networks, and institutions engaged in economic activity that lies outside conventional conceptions of economy. We found that volunteering, gift-giving, bartering, and non-market-oriented production are of vital importance to households and neighborhoods in

the Valley.¹⁴ Also identified were sole proprietorships, worker-owned collectives, and capitalist businesses in a variety of industries that were motivated by social or environmental goals as well as conventional bottom-line concerns. All of these economic activities, along with their conventional and more familiar counterparts, are represented schematically in Figure 1. This figure is both open-ended and provisional, continually under revision as we encounter different ways of performing economy in the communities where we are doing our action research.

A Diverse Economy

<i>Transactions</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Organizational Form</i>
MARKET	WAGE	CAPITALIST
ALTERNATIVE MARKET Local trading systems Underground Barter Co-op exchange Alternative credit	ALTERNATIVE PAID Cooperative Self-employed Indentured In kind	ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST Environmental ethic Social ethic State capitalist Non-profit
NON-MARKET Household flows Gifts Gleaning Indigenous exchange Theft	UNPAID Volunteer Housework Neighborhood Family care	NON-CAPITALIST Communal Independent Feudal Slave

Figure 1

The top line of Figure 1 represents what is usually thought of as “the economy,” involving market transactions, wage labor, and capitalist forms of organization.¹⁵ The shaded area—incorporating alternative trading relations and non-market transactions, differently

¹⁴ Furthermore, some of these informal economic activities take place in the context of formal employment, suggesting that informal and formal economic activities are often intertwined.

¹⁵ The rest of Figure 1 is intended to be read down the columns rather than across the rows.

remunerated and unpaid labor, and alternative capitalist as well as non-capitalist businesses¹⁶—is seldom if ever recognized as accounting for a significant portion of economic activity. Yet, as noted above, quantitative research by feminist economists and informal sector analysts has established that (a subset of) this activity constitutes approximately 50 percent of economic activity in both rich and poor countries.

Even when the quantitative prevalence of non-capitalist economic activity is acknowledged, however, the presumptive preeminence of capitalism is difficult to dislodge. Activities in the shaded area tend to be viewed through the prism of what we have called “capitalocentrism”—as either dependent on capitalism, in service to capitalism, engaged in capitalist reproduction, alternative to capitalism, or prior to full capitalist development (and therefore backward rather than progressive) (Gibson-Graham 1996). In all cases, a hierarchy is maintained in which capitalism represents the true economy or economic center and everything else is subordinate, inferior or at best peripheral.

One of the goals of the REP has been to combat this hierarchical and capitalocentric reading of economic difference. Figure 1 resituates capitalism within a diverse economic field, re-visioning it as one type of economic practice among others, and helps to displace “the capitalist economy” from its position of authority and exteriority as the global economic Other of local economic development. With our co-researchers in the Community Economies Collective, Jenny Cameron and Katherine Gibson, we have used this diagram (in various versions) to explore existing and possible relationships among the diverse activities represented and between the capitalist and non-capitalist sectors. With the exception of things like theft, slavery, feudalism, and indentured labor, virtually all of the items in the shaded portion of the diagram could be enrolled in the process of local economic development. We began to envision

¹⁶ Capitalism is defined minimally here as a site in which surplus labor is produced by free wage laborers,

a development process that involved speaking an alternative economic language (both academic and everyday) and fostering mutually sustaining relationships among activities, individuals and organizations in the shaded area (though not excluding interactions with the capitalist sector) (Gibson-Graham 2006).

Building the Community Economy: Economic Development as Sustainable

Development

Rethinking economic development in relation to the diverse economy undermines the uniform logic of development that we saw in export base theory, in which capitalist economic growth offers the one true path to social well-being. The “diverse economy” reveals a constitutive lack in the logic of capitalist growth by identifying its repressed conditions of existence (the shaded area in Figure 1), thus destabilizing its apparent singularity and self-sufficiency. This helps to re-politicize development, making it imaginable as a diversity of political and ethical projects pursued under a variety of geographic and economic circumstances. But politicizing economic development is not restricted to the strategy of identifying the role of hidden economic elements. It also involves redefining growth through rearticulating these capitalist and non-capitalist elements around a new logic, that of “building the community economy.”

If the “rethinking economy project” explodes the dominant logic of capitalist self-sustenance and self-expansion, what we have called the “community economies project” installs a different logic in its place. But how do we specify a new logic without constricting the space of freedom opened up by economic rethinking? Struggling over the years with this question (see Gibson-Graham 2006, Chs. 4, 5, 7), we have come to define the “community economy” as a

and appropriated from them in value form by a capitalist (or board of directors of the capitalist firm).

negotiated space of interdependence. Unlike capitalist economic development, which is tied to a necessary set of elements and processes, building a community economy does not prioritize particular organizations and activities; rather it prioritizes keeping open the ethical and political space of negotiation that is the community economy itself.¹⁷

To activate alternative development dynamics in building community economies, we need to shift our focus away from the current obsessive preoccupation with means (capitalist industrialization and expansion) and toward continual awareness of ends (social well-being). Two existing strategies in particular stand out as potentially productive in this re-imagining of economic development: the first involves “producing well-being directly” rather than through the generic and circuitous route of capitalist industrialization; the second involves commodity production for export with a different emphasis, in which the surplus realized through the sale of commodities is marshaled for use of the community. Each of these strategies can also be used to meet community needs for environmental conservation. Unlike the “global economy” with its demands for competitiveness and industrial growth, the community economy allows us to imagine a practice of integrating environmental concerns with development agendas without forgoing one or compromising both. In what follows, we offer examples drawn from our research.

¹⁷ We are indebted to Ceren Özçelçuk for this formulation. Though many such relationships would be enacted at the local or regional scale, it is possible to imagine a process of constructing economic community at a national or international scale. One example of the latter would be an alter-trade network connecting consumers in wealthy countries with producers in poorer areas of the world (Gibson-Graham 2006).

Nuestras Raices (“Our Roots”) and Holyoke Health Center: increasing well-being through environmental improvement

The first example focuses on creating well-being directly. In 1992, Nuestras Raices, a community-based NGO in Holyoke, Massachusetts, began taking over vacant lots in the city and turning them into community gardens. Over the years, the garden program has expanded to include 8 sites and more than 100 families, a homeless shelter, and 5 children’s groups. The gardens are divided into plots which can provide member cultivators with up to a \$1000 worth of fresh produce, including crops that have cultural significance in the Puerto Rican community and are not readily available elsewhere. Executive director Daniel Ross recently explained to visitors from the Planners’ Network (2002) that the gardens are about transforming Holyoke from a landscape of despair and abandonment to one of hope and possibility. He asked us to imagine a young child walking to school past abandoned lots and rat-infested garbage dumps and the same child walking past spaces that are active sites of community, biological growth, and physical beauty.

As the Nuestras Raices garden project has grown, it has begun to interact with the market sector of the local economy. Some of the plots have been turned into market gardens selling directly to restaurants; many gardeners sell surplus vegetables through a booth at the Holyoke farmers market staffed by the Nuestras Raices youth program.¹⁸ And while the organization still considers the gardens to be central to their mission and to the community they have fostered, they have recently expanded their sites and activities. With donations of money and materials from over a hundred different organizations (including local businesses), many hours of volunteer labor, and gifts of services from local architects and builders, they renovated

¹⁸ Of course, produce transactions are not limited to market exchange—many involve gifts to friends, neighbors and other gardeners. As Jaime, the garden coordinator, says “The tradition of giving is inside gardening itself” (Community Economies Collective 2001b).

an abandoned property sold to them by the city of Holyoke. The recently completed Centro Agrícola houses a greenhouse for starting seedlings, meeting rooms and class rooms, a business incubator, and a commercial kitchen that can be used for catering and food processing as well as being the base of operation for an adjoining restaurant and the El Jardin Bakery.

Nuestras Raices may be seen as a relatively small venture in terms of the number of people it serves or the value that it produces. Nevertheless, it is an example of the way volunteer labor and other forms of generosity can generate the possibility for a number of market-oriented businesses to form. This labor and other gifts have a multiplier effect in the sense that they lead to the creation of local enterprises and employment. Nuestras Raices understands what they are doing as an alternative practice of development that

- actively involves the community,
- builds on what people already know (agriculture, in this case), and
- attempts to deliver what they specifically need.

Rather than pursuing the generic path of capitalist industrialization, they create social well-being directly by contributing to the health, freedom from hunger, youth education, neighborhood revitalization, and sense of community of Holyoke residents.

Nuestras Raices is not only engaged in building a community economy within its own organization but also in collaboration with other organizations in Holyoke. It is here that we find an example of their impact on environmental sustainability in the city. During the mid-1990s, together with several other organizations, they became involved in community mapping, helping to produce a map that correlates toxic releases with ethnicity and income levels in Holyoke, where there is an alarming incidence of childhood asthma. Through the community mapping project, they were able to identify a number of local pollutant sources and asthma triggers,

including open air auto-body shops. As members of the community, the community mappers were able to appeal to people engaging in these illegal practices to relocate their businesses. This not only improved the local environment but also freed up the resources of another organization, Holyoke Health Center (HHC), a community health facility oriented to low-income Holyoke residents. Executive director Jay Breines points out that every hospital run for a child with an acute asthma attack costs \$1000, and every time the state can be spared this expense it means money that's available for something else (2002, personal communication). Could we be witnessing here another type of multiplier effect that links community economic practices and institutions to increased well-being (including improved environmental quality)? In this example, there's no trade-off between economy and environment, and improving environmental well-being doesn't require developing an export sector to satisfy an external master. Instead it involves people recognizing their interdependence (e.g., the connection among youth asthma, local business practices, and HHC resource allocation) and negotiating with each other to produce a healthier environment. Sustainable development is about nurturing relationships and constructing community rather than activating and accommodating the logic of growth.

Mondragón and Mararikulam: marshaling surplus for environmental sustainability

The second set of examples involves marshaling surplus to develop and sustain the community economy, including the environmental and social commons. We begin with the famous Mondragón Cooperative Corporation, a complex of more than a hundred worker cooperatives located in the Basque region of Spain (Gibson-Graham 2003). Like Nuestras Raices, Mondragón started small. In the mid-1950s, five men founded a business making and

marketing paraffin cook stoves. Under the tutelage of their local priest, Don José María Arizmendiarieta, they decided to organize the business as a worker cooperative. This meant not only democratic decision-making but the involvement of all workers in appropriating the wealth that is realized as a surplus, over and above the costs of production. After a number of other coops had been formed on the same model, the group of cooperators decided to start a bank in the late 1950s, again at the urging of Don José María. The primary purpose of the bank was to foster the development of other cooperatives in the region. Each coop agreed to manage their surplus in a way that would support the bank and its goals—10% went to charity by Spanish law, 20% was retained by the cooperative, and 70% was distributed to the individual cooperators, to be deposited in the bank until retirement. With the pooling of funds through the bank—actually the creation of a financial commons—the number of cooperatives has grown rapidly. Today the Mondragón community economy involves more than 100 industrial coops making and selling everything from household appliances to robotics to automotive parts; they operate a huge chain of retail stores, and provide housing, a hospital, and the full range of social services and educational institutions, with everything organized along cooperative lines.

If you talk to Mondragón cooperators, as we were able to a few years ago, they will tell you that they succeed because of, rather than in spite of, their ethical principles. Because capital is subordinated to community, for example, economic instability does not result in massive layoffs. Instead cooperators are sent back to school for retraining or shifted to other cooperatives. It is easy to imagine that this experience would positively affect their commitment to cooperative work.

Like other industrial communities, the Mondragón complex in the 1950s was not particularly oriented to environmental values. As the environment became a matter of world concern, Mondragón was able to act collectively both to retool their processes to be more

environmentally friendly and to invest in product technologies that are in line with the values of conservation. The 2002 annual report points out that a large number of Mondragón's cooperatives have gone through the ISO 14000 environmental certification process (MCC 2003, 4).¹⁹

The point here is that a Mondragón coop is more than an industrial enterprise organized along cooperative lines—it is a business whose economic self-interest coincides with the interests of larger community in which it is located, including the interest in a healthy environment. This “coincidence” of interests is not an accident but an outcome of political and ethical struggles to live up to the original Mondragón principles of people before profits and capital as an instrument. Through the same types of struggles, the cooperatives have transformed the global economy from a governing logic and external power to a terrain of local efficacy and empowerment. As issues arise, including market downturns, international competition, worker discontent, and environmental degradation, the cooperators address them through a democratic process. Rather than viewing environmental conservation as inimical to the laws of the global economy, Mondragón simply recognizes and deals with environmental challenges as it deals with social and economic challenges. There is no Global Economy issuing immutable laws and non-negotiable demands—just problems and opportunities and business as usual. What helps in this case is that the cooperators, through the bank where their produced wealth is pooled, are in charge of deciding how to allocate that wealth, including to the environment.

¹⁹ ISO 14000 is one of a series of voluntary international business standards issued by the International Organization for Standardization, a network of national standards institutes involving 148 countries. With the publication of ISO 14000 in 1997, the environment took its place alongside standardized part sizes, total quality management, health and safety practices, and other standards that had been established in the earlier incarnations.

Mondragón is also a powerful idea that has migrated to other parts of the world, including the state of Kerala in southwestern India. Kerala has a history of democratic communist government and rates of literacy, infant mortality, and life expectancy approaching those in developed countries (Franke 2003). These statistics become even more intriguing when one considers that Kerala is one of the poorest regions in India, with a GDP per capita of about \$200. Kerala is also the site of the Mararikulam experiment, which draws its inspiration directly from Mondragón. Like Mondragón the idea is to create cooperative businesses that will in turn capitalize other ventures while meeting community needs.²⁰

The Mararikulam experiment began in the late 1990s with neighborhood savings groups among women. Even the savings of very poor people, if they are pooled on a large enough scale, can create a strong basis of capitalization. In this case, savings from 17,000 women were used to start up a number of soap-producing enterprises organized along cooperative lines. In 2002, the cooperators secured a pledge from 30,000 women to buy Maari soap rather than imported brands. In addition to tapping into this large local market, the Maari soap producers make use of abundant local supplies of coconut oil as the principal ingredient in their soap.

By 2003, the Mararikulam experiment had started several more cooperatives producing school supplies for local children. This second phase combines Kerala's regional commitment to education with Mararikulam's egalitarian industriousness. Phase three will involve the formation of cooperatives engaged in fishing, aqua-culture, and fish processing that will satisfy both local and extra-regional demand. Like the Mondragón cooperators, the Mararikulam cooperators are beginning to marshal surplus that can be used to capitalize other businesses and to enhance Mararikulam's ability to meet community needs. Unlike Mondragón, they have incorporated environmental concerns from the beginning, recognizing that "protecting and/or enhancing the

²⁰ One striking difference is that the participants are all women.

resource base is essential to long-term sustainability and that...environmental issues should not appear as tag-ons to projects emphasizing other goals” (www.mararidevelopment.org/project.htm) They are reviving ocean fish populations by constructing artificial reefs (employing a technology developed for earlier Kerala experiments), using locally produced compost and manure for agricultural projects (including pesticide production from coir pith manure), harvesting rainwater with the hope of improving local water tables and water quality, and in general constructing the human/environment relation according to an ethic of wise use. Environment and development are integrally connected; indeed, the goal of development—increased social well-being—incorporates environmental renewal as an inherent aspect.

In conventional economic development the surplus wealth that a firm generates can hemorrhage out of the region. In the case of both Mararikulam and Mondragón, the surplus wealth is retained in the community and can be directed in accordance with the community’s values. No incontrovertible logic of profit maximization stands in the way of ethical and political decision-making about the production and utilization of wealth for sustainable ends.

Resistance to the Community Economy: Return of the ECONOMY

Nuestras Raices, Mondragón, and Mararikulam are all (wholly or in part) producing for a market as a means of meeting community needs in accordance with a particular ethic. In each instance, the “environment” is understood not as a limit to growth but as an integral aspect of community well-being. Taken together, these examples allow us to make the case that sustainability need not be seen as the “enemy” of economic development. Yet every time we argue this case, we confront the same objections from members of our audience. These fall into three broad categories that we call “exceptionalism,” “reproducibility,” and “complementarity.” Each of these objections subsumes our examples to a capitalocentric imaginary and, in its

moment of enunciation, betrays a certain disciplinary pleasure; it is here that concepts of scarcity, trade-off and competition reassert themselves as the unalterable conditions of the Economy.

Our encounters with these objections remind us that the obstacle to sustainable development is not only development as usual; it is also our perversely enjoyable investment in dominant forms of subjection and the attendant lack of desire for things to be otherwise. Recompense for the dissatisfactions of economic subjection comes in part through denying the possibility of escape (to oneself and others) and identifying with the power of the master/enforcer.²¹

Exceptionalism

Perhaps the most common response is that there is something unique (and thus not replicable) about the geographic location, the people or the historical circumstances that generated these alternatives. When we recently presented a version of this paper, one person insisted that these things only emerge in extreme situations. People resort to solidaristic behavior only when circumstances compel them to. Thus, Mondragón would never have happened without the repression of the Basques by the Franco dictatorship, and Mararikulam only works because extreme poverty offers no alternatives. A few minutes later, during the same question and answer session, another person argued that it is really the social and economic privilege of the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts (where Nuestras Raices is located) that allows these sorts of experiments to thrive in our region. What's obvious, yet remarkable, about these two versions of exceptionalism is the extent to which they cancel each other. One insists that community-

²¹ This could also be seen as a refusal of hope. Hope brings with it the possibility of *actual* failure and disappointment as well as a profoundly different sense of the way that we are implicated in the process of sustainable development.

economy experiments emerge under pressure and privation while the other asserts that alternative approaches to development are only possible in communities that are wealthy, progressive, and rich in the spaciousness of leisure.

Another sort of exceptionalism argues that Mondragón and Mararikulam are ethnically and culturally homogeneous and this type of communal experiment would never work under more “usual” circumstances. In each instance, a distance is created between sites of economic experimentation and the economy as usual. It is symptomatic, furthermore, that every time we deal with one form of exceptionalism another arises to take its place. This tells us that we are hitting a nerve in capitalocentric discourse. Our interlocutors know, and are being forced to reassert, where the true locus of power and agency resides, which is outside the community in the Global Economy. The implication of exceptionalism—whether we are talking about unique pressures, privilege, or homogeneity—is that sites of experimentation are irrelevant to the world at large because they will not emerge under “normal” conditions. Nuestras Raices, Mondragón, and Mararikulam will never contaminate business as usual²² and become more widespread.

Reproducibility

We meet another sort of objection when we talk about the activities of groups like Nuestras Raices and their connections with their economic and social environment. Over the course of its existence, Nuestras Raices has been the recipient of numerous gifts. The land for the original garden was given by the Catholic Church, the building materials for the Centro Agrícola were donated by local businesses, and construction labor was largely obtained on a

²² This conception effectively confines each moment of community-economy experimentation to the social and imaginative interstices. Community economies are afloat on the sea of capitalism. What if capitalism were the interstitial activity, floating on the currents of a huge community economy—billions of household economies, hundreds of millions of neighborhood economies—a sea awash with difference, experimentation and becoming?

voluntary basis. Moreover, the organization is partially funded by grants. The question inevitably arises: if Nuestras Raices is so dependent upon charity, how will it reproduce itself? How will it become “sustainable”?

Implicit in this question is the belief that the hallmark of viability is economic self-sufficiency. From this perspective Nuestras Raices would be a “model” only if the businesses it fostered returned enough rent or other forms of support to free it from relying on grants, personal generosity, and state support. Even when we point out to people that conventional capitalist enterprises are not truly independent—they depend upon the state, for example, to provide infrastructure and other requisites such as employee training, tax abatements, and various forms of “corporate welfare”—capitalist businesses are held up as the standard of reproducibility because they (sometimes) amass large surpluses and are imagined to be self-sustaining.

In relation to organizations like Mondragón that have proven themselves on the battlefield of commerce, the issue of reproducibility manifests in terms of exceptionality: Mondragón is imagined to be the beneficiary of special market conditions without which it would have never survived. Schweikart, for example, predicted that Spain’s entrance into the common market would kill off Mondragón by forcing the cooperatives to compete under new conditions (MacLeod 1997, 17).²³ The point once again is that capitalocentric discourse endows the capitalist firm with a protean resiliency while imagining everything else to be fragile. Individual capitalist enterprises may die but those that remain are stronger, in a “survival of the fittest” narrative that doesn’t extend to the community economy. Like the exceptionalism objection, the reproducibility issue persists, no matter how often we point out that it could be addressed to everything and anything, that every enterprise is dependent on its conditions of

existence for its reproducibility, that every human endeavor is subject to change if the conditions that surround it change.

Complementarity

The third objection imagines that all non-capitalist activity—including household activity, volunteer labor, NGOs like Nuestras Raices—exists to reproduce capitalism and is also dependent upon capitalism for its reproduction. Nuestras Raices couldn't exist without at least some people in the community having access to wage employment; it is dependent on gifts from capitalist businesses and grants from foundations established by capitalists. Householders can only perform their unpaid labor because wages from the capitalist sector purchase the inputs for the household production process. Mondragón wouldn't exist without international markets, and Mararikulam will come to depend on these as well.²⁴ Through such representations, the community economy becomes the complement to the capitalist market economy. In its complementary position, moreover, it tends to be seen as deliberately or unintentionally supplanting the state, which is the *appropriate* complement to the market, rightfully charged with capitalist reproduction: “It's encouraging to see organizations like Nuestras Raices working with the community, but isn't your celebration of its achievements giving permission for the further withdrawal of the welfare state?” Underlying this specific challenge is a general suspicion that fostering the community economy is actually just helping to advance the neoliberal agenda.²⁵

During one Q&A, an individual argued passionately that “these organizations and alternatives are fine, so long as they don't challenge business as usual.” In other words, when

²³ Of course, Mondragón has thrived in the European market, which may now be seen as another “special condition.”

²⁴ Note that markets are often conflated with capitalism, though of course goods and services produced in a variety of production relations are transacted in markets.

they reach sufficient size to be threatening to the established order, they will incur capitalist wrath or state repression or both.²⁶ It is through this inversion—community economy as threat—that we see most clearly that the complementarity of the community economy is actually a relation of subordination. On numerous occasions we have responded that this same logic of subordinate complementarity could be applied in reverse (CEC 2001a; Graham, Healy and Byrne 2002), making the case that the success of capitalist firms depends on a solid and vital community economy. Like our other rejoinders, of course, this one fails to surmount the resistance embodied in the objection.

Even, and perhaps especially, those who are critical of economics (and politics) as usual are reluctant to let go of capitalism as the dominant or determinant force in the economy. All of this has left us wondering how to portray the activities on the top line and those in the shaded portion of the diverse economies diagram (see Figure 1) interacting with one another without imagining that one is necessarily subordinate to or less viable than the other. Just what sort of adjustment is required to see a community economy as not the subordinate *complement* but simply in *relation* to capitalist activity?

Simple Relationality: A Postcapitalist Practice

There is apparently little that separates a complementary understanding of the relationship between a community economy and the capitalist economy from a relational understanding. Both imply interaction between the top line and the shaded portion of Figure 1. One insists on the subordination and dependency of the shaded elements while the other endows them with a degree of autonomy without foreclosing on possible interactions with

²⁵ A suspicion characteristic of what has been called “left paranoia” (Sedgwick 2003; Gibson-Graham 2006).

²⁶ This, of course, is an indirect way of saying they are small and inconsequential.

capitalist/wage/market activity. Indeed, from the latter perspective, we remember that capitalist activity exists in the shaded area as well and is potentially enrolled in a community economy (Gibson-Graham 2006; Adaman and Madra 2002).

The point, then, is that the difference between complementarity and simple relationality is *a matter of perspective*. A relational vision that insists on the importance, possibilities, and relative autonomy of a community economy does not require us to deny the existence, importance, or power of capitalism. To move beyond the capitalocentric imaginary simply requires that we *let go* of capitalism as the reference point against which we gauge our successes and failures and understand our possibilities of action and becoming. When capitalist firms become simply one site of economy rather than embodying the law of economy, we know we have made the “leap of faith” that is required to see things differently. When we recognize relationships, including ones with capitalist firms and the natural environment, as ethical projects rather than foreordained structures of dominance and subordination, we are free to take on the ethical and political project of constructing an environmentally sustainable community economy.

While a vision of relationality does not suggest any particular way that capitalist institutions and practices will interact with non-capitalist ones, it opens the possibility of a variety of interactions. Once capitalism is no longer in the position of constraining every goal and action, the logic of relationality (which does not foreclose) allows that capitalism may even enable the building of a community economy and performing environmental stewardship. An innovative project in the Pioneer Valley provides an example of this seemingly unlikely convergence, one that brings into play our two development strategies of marshaling surplus and creating well-being directly.

E2M, Nuestras Raices and a Relational Economic Ethic

Along with an energetic group of supporters Michael Garjian, a social entrepreneur in the Pioneer Valley, is currently instituting a new business model that embodies what he terms “community conscious capitalism.” Garjian calls his model E2M, which stands for “the second economic model” or “economics for millennium 2000” (see www.e2m.org). E2M offers business certification and a range of services and benefits to certified businesses, including low-interest loans, low-key venture capital, and loyal base of local consumers. Local businesses can become E2M-certified by gifting 5 to 20 percent of their equity to the community and another 5 to 20 percent to their workers. The former will create a revenue stream to a community fund, administered by representatives of the local community, to be invested in capitalizing more E2M businesses (and thus enlarging the flow of community revenue) or to be allocated to social or environmental needs.

An elected regional council will control the community fund, devoting a substantial portion to capitalize (or even buy out) other businesses that will also become members of the E2M community. The council’s operation is similar to that of the Caja Laboral Popular, the cooperators’ bank of Mondragón. It receives distributions of surplus from E2M businesses and invests these in ways that reflect the goals of the community and increase the size and power of the community economy. How any particular round of investment is to be directed is left intentionally unspecified. If the regional council is concerned with addressing environmental problems or rectifying social inequality, it will have the power to make decisions on the basis of those concerns. As with Mondragón, capital is subordinated to community, and its purpose is to serve community well-being, as defined by the regional council.

It is here that we can imagine a potential interaction between a capitalist-based institution (E2M) with organizations that are rooted in the non-market sector, such as Nuestras Raices. Currently Nuestras Raices needs to apply to organizations like the Ford Foundation in order to support its efforts. How might the process of seeking and receiving support be different if their appeal was directed to a fund controlled by the local community? It is likely, for example, that businesses being started by the organization would join and support E2M, creating a relation of mutual reinforcement across the capitalist/non-capitalist divide. Rather than reproducing an ordained subordination, this interaction would be a contingent locus of mutual transformation.²⁷ One recent Nuestras Raices initiative offers a concrete (if speculative) example of just such an interaction.

In the spring of 2004 with the help of outside grants, Nuestras Raices was able to purchase a five-acre plot of land that it is converting to a market garden for larger scale agricultural production. Prior to cultivation, the land was cleared of secondary growth—mostly sumac and silver maples that line the shores of the Connecticut River. This was accomplished through a series of work parties organized by Nuestras Raices that drew both their own members and students from Holyoke Community College and the Five College consortium in the region (including the University of Massachusetts).

Nuestras Raices did not undertake this expansion under the rubric of “growth is good” but from an explicit ethical position of refusing to separate economic development from social and environmental well-being. In their view, the purchase and development of this property advances both the economic and environmental goals of the organization. Moreover it is easy to see how this project could have been facilitated (probably at a larger scale) through a relationship with E2M, implicating E2M in sustainable development practice in the Valley and creating the

²⁷ Of course, relationality does not specify the nature of relationships, which might be antagonistic as well

likelihood that new E2M businesses will emerge from a Nuestras Raices commercial venture. In this imagined interaction, care is taken not to subsume Nuestras Raices to capitalism (in its E2M guise) nor to subordinate environment to development. Sustainable development becomes visible as an ethical and political practice of creating a community economy, rather than a trade-off between the established antagonists and competing masters of economy and environment.

Conclusion

Our local research has revealed that most business people, planners and environmental activists in our area still imagine sustainability as a point of compromise between environmental conservation and economic development. In our view, this goes a long way towards explaining the reluctance and ambivalence that surround the concept of sustainability. Environment functions as a limit on growth rather than being articulated in relation to a new understanding of economy and development.

For us, the examples of community economies in Mondragón, Mararikulam, and the Pioneer Valley (Nuestras Raices and E2M) embody an actually existing practice of sustainable development, one in which development is not opposed to environment, where people are not forced to say NO to environment if they say YES to development (and vice versa). They offer a new approach to thinking the process of development where scarcity becomes a provisional limit on time and resources that can be shifted via processes of cooperation, experimentation, and generosity. Through the ethical and political practice of building their community economies, the people involved in these sites and organizations have established their freedom from the law of the capitalist Economy, refusing to subordinate the environment and other concerns to its demands and requirements. In the process, they have also refused to treat

as cooperative or supportive.

sustainability as either a technical outcome or a vision of unattainable purity and associated renunciation, two of its familiar incarnations. Rather they have engaged in the practice of sustainable development just as they have engaged in the other practices involved in building their community economies—by incorporating the environment into their values and principles, devoting attention to it, and negotiating with each other over its use and stewardship.

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