

Traversing Fantasies, Activating Desires: Economic Geography, Activist Research, and Psychoanalytic

Methodology

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Abstract

In this article I recount the ways that key concepts in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory—the relationship between language and desire, fantasy and subject formation, ethics and the traversal of fantasy—have enabled a novel methodological approach to activist research. Psychoanalysis allows us to recast research as a process of encountering and traversing fantasies, which is simultaneously a process of engendering new representations, desires, subjectivities, and societies.

Keywords: *activist research, economic geography, psychoanalysis*

Introduction

My objective in this article is to recount the ways that my approach to activist research in economic geography has been informed by psychoanalytic theory, drawing primarily upon the work of the new Lacanians (e.g., Joan Copjec, Yannis Stavrakakis, Alenka Zupančič, and Slavoj Žižek) as well as others who have been influenced by their work (Jason Glynos, Yahya Madra and Ceren Özselçuk). The value of new Lacanian theory for my work is that it has allowed me to make sense of the animating desires as well as the frustrations and limits I encounter as a socially engaged researcher—my own desires and limits and those of other people.

Psychoanalysis, as a body of theory, developed in relation to the individual psyche. It may therefore seem a peculiar entry point for the study of the social space of the economy. But if we consider the history of economic thought, the psychoanalytic entry point may appear less surprising. Even mainstream economic theory accords a fundamental role to desire (called “utility”) as it animates and is directed by the larger economy. Recognizing the value of psychoanalysis for social (and not just individual-oriented) research, Pile (1993) argues that psychoanalytic theory offers an alternative to humanism, structuralism, and poststructuralism which remain mired in the impasses of agency vs. structure and individual vs. society. Psychoanalysis refuses the implied choice of privileging one term or the other in these binary oppositions (Madra 2007). Instead, as Kingsbury (2003, 2007) points out, it can help us to theorize the connections between language and desire, subject formation and social fantasy, as well as offering a specific notion of ethical agency that emerges as one becomes aware of the prevailing discourses and fantasies that shape self-conception and society. It is this new sense of ethical agency that holds promise for attempts to reshape social and economic space through activist research.

Psychoanalysis uses the mathematical concept of a mobius topology to describe the relation between society and the individual. One can create a mobius by taking a strip of paper and introducing a single twist prior to joining the two ends to form a loop. The resulting loop is actually a plane defined by one continuous line—inside becomes outside, top becomes bottom. Psychoanalysis conceptualizes the relation between

society and individual in the same way: “The social enters, constitutes and positions the individual. Similarly by showing that desire, fantasy and meaning are a (real) part of everyday life, it shows how the social is entered, constituted and positioned by individuals” (Pile 1993, 123). This conception of the relation between society and individual, structure and agency has two implications. First, desire, fantasy, and meaning are not confined to the individual. It is possible, for example, to speak of social fantasies (Thomas 2007). Second, as desire, fantasy, and meaning circulate in individuals and societies they suffuse the human experience, including knowledge production, research, teaching, etc. Inside the space of this loop it is not possible to imagine research as a process of objectively gauging the efficacy of individual agents or the power of ideology, nor is it possible to separate research from the production of desire, fantasy, and meaning.

Research, activist or otherwise, takes place within the circuit of the mobius topology. One implication of this is that we cannot easily arrive at a perspective outside our own desires or the functioning of social ideology. My attempts to make sense of or transform some aspect of myself or society may be effective but will never feel complete. The sense of incompleteness that pervades research and, indeed, all situations is central to psychoanalytic theory. New Lacanian theory argues that it is this incompleteness, framed as the fundamental failure of language to “fix” identity, that engenders and frustrates desire and gives rise to fantasy—at both the level of the subject and society (Stavarakakis 2007; Wright 1999). In other words, fantasy emerges in response to the failure of the symbolic order to fully cohere. Fantasy gives an imaginary coherence to subjects and societies in part by identifying an exterior “symptom,” a frustrating element that explains the lack of individual coherence or social harmony.¹ Paradoxically, the subject (and society) enjoy their symptom precisely because it provides a satisfactory explanation for their unhappiness (Žižek 2001).

In clinical practice the aim of psychoanalysis is to affect a particular form of freedom in which the subject traverses their fantasy. In traversing the fantasy the subject achieves a minimum critical distance from the stories that define and constrain self-conception, arriving at a state Lacan referred to as subjective destitution (Žižek 2000). In this state the subject can come into a truly ethical relationship with their own desires and actions (Healy 2008). For psychoanalysis an act is “ethical” when it is undertaken without reference to an externalized symptom. While I do not mean to overstate the analogy between research and

analysis, I argue in this article that it is possible to see socially engaged activist research as a process of collectively encountering and traversing social fantasies. Traversing fantasy—in analysis and research—is simultaneously a process of forming new languages, desires, subjectivities, and societies, transformatively affecting both the researcher and the researched.

This article explores the connections between research and analysis by recounting how psychoanalysis has affected my approach to activist research in economic geography. The methodological contributions of psychoanalysis to activist research cannot be thought of as a set of techniques, such as a particular approach to the semi-structured interview. Rather psychoanalysis sensitizes the researcher to the desires, fantasies, identifications, and resistances that pervade the research process.

Recasting activist research as the traversal of fantasy requires us to explore the connection between language and desire, the role of fantasy in subject formation, and the psychoanalytic conception of ethical agency. Thus, the first section explores the way psychoanalytic theory helped me understand the relationship between language and desire in the context of an activist research project that aimed to enable a different politics of economic development. The second section deals with an analysis of the various forms of resistance my colleagues and I have encountered from academic, popular, and student audiences in presenting this work on alternative economic development, revealing a “passionate attachment” to capitalist economic space. Section three deals with the implications of psychoanalytic ethics for activist research. The article concludes with a consideration of the way psychoanalytic theory and practice reorients the process of research, attuning us to desire, fantasy and new possibilities of being.

Language and Desire: What To Do on Sunday Morning?

My involvement with psychoanalytic theory began when my colleagues and I designed a community-based research project in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts.² The goal of this action research project was to produce a new discourse of regional economic development in the Valley. As in most other places, economic development practice in this region is fixated on growth in the capitalist sector. In an attempt to elicit and perhaps disrupt this fixation, we held initial focus groups with local development

practitioners (experts) about the prospects for the Pioneer Valley’s economy. Not surprisingly, their responses focused on ways of aligning incentives for industrial redevelopment. For these practitioners capitalism functioned as a master-signifier—an unspoken term organizing the content of their discourse—and their job was to perform its discursive dominance on the ground (Community Economies Collective 2001).

Our aim was to envision a process of development rooted in the recognition that goods and services are produced and transacted in a variety of settings in addition to capitalist firms. We began our project with Gibson-Graham’s (1996) theoretical recognition that any given economy is intrinsically diverse, as represented formally in the diverse economy framework (Gibson-Graham 2006) (see Figure 1).

TRANSACTIONS	LABOR	ENTERPRISE
<p>MARKET</p> <p>ALTERNATIVE MARKET</p> <p><i>Sale of public goods</i></p> <p><i>Ethical “fair-trade” markets</i></p> <p><i>Local trading systems</i></p> <p><i>Alternative currencies</i></p> <p><i>Underground market</i></p> <p><i>Co-op exchange</i></p> <p><i>Barter</i></p> <p><i>Informal market</i></p>	<p>WAGE</p> <p>ALTERNATIVE PAID</p> <p><i>Self-employed</i></p> <p><i>Cooperative</i></p> <p><i>Indentured</i></p> <p><i>Reciprocal labor</i></p> <p><i>In-kind</i></p> <p><i>Work for welfare</i></p>	<p>CAPITALIST</p> <p>ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST</p> <p><i>State enterprise</i></p> <p><i>Green capitalist</i></p> <p><i>Socially responsible firm</i></p> <p><i>Nonprofit</i></p>
<p>NONMARKET</p> <p><i>Household flows</i></p> <p><i>Gift giving</i></p> <p><i>Indigenous exchange</i></p> <p><i>State allocations</i></p> <p><i>State appropriations</i></p> <p><i>Gleaning</i></p> <p><i>Hunting, fishing, gathering</i></p> <p><i>Theft, poaching</i></p>	<p>UNPAID</p> <p><i>Housework</i></p> <p><i>Family care</i></p> <p><i>Neighborhood work</i></p> <p><i>Volunteer</i></p> <p><i>Self-provisioning labor</i></p> <p><i>Slave labor</i></p>	<p>NONCAPITALIST</p> <p><i>Communal</i></p> <p><i>Independent</i></p> <p><i>Feudal</i></p> <p><i>Slave</i></p>

The diverse economy diagram is an abstract representation of economic space at any scale. The top line of the diagram represents the economy as it is usually understood—capitalist firms employing wage labor in the production of goods and services for exchange in the market place. Drawing on Marxian and feminist theory as well as economic geography, anthropology, and sociology, the rest of the diagram shows that the *capitalist firm* is not the only place where economic activity takes place. Feminist theorists have for decades called attention to the *household* as a site of economic activity (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003). In addition, scholarship from a number of fields has recognized the importance of gift exchange and voluntary labor in producing social well-being (e.g., Godbout 1998, Gunn 2004). Likewise, Gibson-Graham’s reading of Marxian theory alerts us to the fact that multiple class processes—including slave, feudal, independent (self-employed), communal and capitalist—are present in any given economy (1996, 2006). Finally the diverse economy diagram not only introduces the dimension of noncapitalist and nonmarket economic space but it also seeks to represent the burgeoning of alternative market spaces (e.g., fair trade) as well as internal differentiation within the capitalist sector, for example, capitalist firms that adhere to a triple bottom line.

The goal of our research project was to populate the diverse economy diagram with real life examples from our local community in order to engender a process of economic development that was animated by a desire to support the progressive aspects of a diverse economy. To achieve this goal, we recruited and collaborated with seventeen community researchers who interviewed their friends and acquaintances about their economic lives outside of their primary occupations. A central part of the project thus involved training these community researchers in the theory of economic diversity. In principle we understood that the efficacy of our research would depend upon the community researchers’ positive identification with project goals, but the experience of the weekend –long trainings served to deepen our appreciation of the role of desire in action research.

For the weekend-long intensive training, our colleague in education, Ken Byrne, developed a series of exercises to show that “the economy” is something we (and the popular press) feel comfortable making pronouncements about (“it’s doing well” or “it’s doing poorly”) but have difficulty defining. We also showed

them clips from the video recordings of the focus groups we had conducted with development practitioners. The clips featured moments when the experts were expressing a masterful knowledge of the economy and other moments when they struggled against the limits of this constrained imaginary, revealing that even the experts had no clear or stable definition of economy. The final exercise of the first day paired off community researchers to record interviews with one another about their economic lives. Our hope with this last exercise was to confirm that the community researchers had come to understand the economy as a diverse or at least an open social space. At this point, we had not revealed the diverse economy framework and remained evasive when asked for our definition of economy.

When we played the recordings back that evening we found that our attempts to get them to question the concept of economy had failed. In the recorded conversations, the economy remained a definite and homogeneous force that the community researchers accommodated, resisted, or resigned themselves to. The two principal facilitators and I were not simply dismayed by the recordings; we also felt that our invitation to think differently had been rejected. It was at this point that our colleague Gabriella DellgadioLara intervened. Prior to enrolling as a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, Gabriella had been a practicing Lacanian psychoanalyst in Bolivia. She reminded us that we had refused to supply our own definition of the economy and that it was therefore unsurprising that the community researchers had returned to the economy in an attempt to give us what they thought we wanted. As she understood it, the task the following day would be to make productive use of the enigma of our desire to catalyze the desires of the community researchers.

On the second day of the training the project's principal investigator Julie Graham gave a brief introductory talk that brought this enigma to the foreground. The community researchers became visibly engaged at this point because the topic of discussion was the record(ing) of their own thoughts as well as the promised revelation of ours. It was at this point that Julie Graham's simple definition—"the economy involves the production and distribution of goods and services"—had so much purchase. As Julie Graham proceeded to lay out the diverse economy diagram, it became clear to the community researchers that the economy is not exclusively, or even predominantly, capitalist and that it might matter what aspects of the

economy were valued and which were relegated to invisibility. The thinness of our definition of economy, the community researchers told us later, ended up inspiring them to fill in the details—it became a ground for seeing and (re)valuing their own diverse economic activity, and the activities of the friends and neighbors they interviewed.

Julie Graham described this weekend training as a calculated use of seductive power to carry forward our research agenda (Allen 2003). Yet this seduction was simply an invitation for the community researchers to become enchanted by their already existing economic lives and to view their potential and power in a different way.³ The weekend training was an attempt at making a new object, the diverse economy, worthy of desire and recognizable as a space of desire. It is here that a parallel with the analytic process emerges. Just as we occupied the space of the community researchers' desire, the Lacanian analyst is engaged in occupying the space of the patient's already existing unconscious desire (Lacan 2007). As the patient addresses the analyst it is *as if* s/he were addressing someone who knows his unconscious desire. The necessary risk that this maneuver entails is recognized by many psychoanalytic traditions as that of transference. The ethical hazard of attempting to shift the patient into a different relation with their own desire is that they will remain fixated on the analyst's desire or that the analyst becomes the love object of the patient. Luckily, this is not what happened with our community researchers, who pursued and gave voice to their own economic desires.

The community researchers supplied us with concrete evidence of economic diversity, but not in the ways we had anticipated. If the weekend trainings were exercises in transference, then receiving and interpreting the interviews produced by the community researchers were instances of counter-transference. Our unconscious expectation was that the community researchers would be interested in what held promise for us—community-based enterprises and worker cooperatives. Many of the community researchers “misinterpreted” our desire by focusing on household economies, gift giving, barter, informal exchange of services, self-employment, and alternative forms of capitalism. Ultimately this misinterpretation was productive in the sense that it deepened our appreciation of the importance of these elements of the diverse economy and how they are constitutively intertwined: for instance, the way that the success of many community-based organizations and enterprises depends upon gifts of money, goods, and time. While these

other elements were already present in the diverse economy framework, the work of the community researchers seduced us into a new consideration of their meaning for an alternative politics of development.

Ultimately all parties involved this research project were enlisted in a circuit that connected language and desire to a new politics of development. These connections developed easily because the research process provided an environment that fostered the expression of new economic desires. While our desire for an alternative economy flourished in this project, deploying these same ideas in other contexts has led me to understand why so much of psychoanalytic theory focuses on the “dark side” of the human psyche, in particular, the role of fantasy, and the way in which it directs, delimits, and resists desire (Callard 2003).

Resistances and Fantasy

In the years that followed, other elements of psychoanalytic theory have allowed me to understand and make use of the occasional hostility that is directed towards the diverse economy framework when it is presented in academic and popular settings. Those years have seen an explosion of academic and political interest in “alternative economies,” the “solidarity economy,” “community economies,” and the rejection of the neoliberal consensus in Latin America and elsewhere (Gibson-Graham 2006, 2008; Allard, Davidson and Matthaei 2008). While I am heartened by the proliferating popular and scholarly interest in the economy as a space of political and personal possibility, I have found, in equal measure, a passionate attachment to the dominant conception of economic space as a centered capitalist totality. This attachment has become a primary object of my ongoing research into economic subjectivity.

Presenting the diverse economy in scholarly, popular, and pedagogical contexts I have encountered consistent and forcefully articulated objections. The psychoanalytic concept of fantasy has allowed me to receive these criticisms in a particularly productive way. I tend to regard them as moments when people are articulating fantasies that allow the economy to cohere as a consistent and predictable, albeit difficult, force in their lives. Apparently the coherent, predictable economy admits no exception. When speaking, for example, of cooperative economies in the “Third Italy,” Mondragón, Argentina, or the Pioneer Valley, I am told that *exceptional* cultural conditions make these economic alternatives possible and that such an approach would not

work in the “real world,” that these alternative models are the dependent *complement* of the “real economy,” and that their expansion can only be read as evidence of their *vulnerability to* cooptation. Exceptionalism, complementarity, and vulnerability are offered as proof that the capitalist economy is necessarily dominant and that self-interest is the only possible economic rationality (Healy and Graham 2008).

The forcefulness and repetitiveness with which these objections are voiced suggests to me that what is speaking back is an *unconscious* identification with and defense of the self-interested economic subject (i.e., *homo economicus*). I have found that proving that such a subject is merely a cultural construct with a specific point of origin in history does little to dampen belief in it. To be sure, even mainstream economic theory has come to regard the rational utility-maximizing subject as a fiction, but its non-existence does not diminish its fantasmatic power (Madra 2007). In psychoanalytic theory, fantasies are connected with wish fulfillment but their actual function is to suture the social order by papering over its inexorable failure to harmoniously reconcile the individual and society (Wright 1999; Glynos 2008;). Fantasy provides an explanation for why the subject remains unhappy by locating an external “if only” factor—the symptom that blocks fulfillment (Healy 2008). I am, for example, regularly told by students that the U.S. economy would be fine *if only* it were not for the entitlement attitude of some “others” (welfare recipients, immigrants, meddling environmentalists, profligate unions, minorities, Democrats in power). The recalcitrance of the other is to be blamed for everything from lost U.S. competitiveness to global outsourcing.

Žižek (1997a) argues that the symptom is what allows for the conservative function of fantasy: keeping the desire that defines the subject alive through its frustration. The complex of promised pleasure and a frustrating symptom (pain) is at the heart of Lacan’s central concept of *jouissance* (Stavrakakis 2007, 77). In the fantasy above, the confounding symptom is easy to identify—the other is responsible for capital flight—but where is the promised pleasure? Lacan’s concept of interpassivity offers a partial answer to this question (Lacan 1986; Žižek 1997b; 2006). Lacan theorized interpassivity in relation to the chorus in Greek tragedy. The chorus emotes for the audience, while the audience remains safely and pleasurably inert. Psychoanalysis allows us see that the voluble skepticism and/or cynical despair voiced in relation to the cooperative economy is not directed by disbelief but by a desire to maintain a certain modality of

pleasure/pain. The invocation of capitalism and self-interest functions as the chorus for those who seem most invested in the dominant representation of economic space. Capitalism enjoys mobility and possesses self-interested agency on their behalf. They may even recognize that its mobility happens at their expense as skilled jobs are off-shored along with low-skilled blue and pink collar work. But the threat posed by capital mobility is less than that posed by asking questions and thinking differently. Questioning capitalism's connection to the essentialized self-interested subject even momentarily, introducing any heterogeneity into economic space, threatens the stability of interpassivity and causes disquiet.

One can see in the pleasure this interpassivity affords traces of Norman Geras's (1998) contract of mutual indifference or Žižek's (2001) "right to be left alone." The continual reassertion of essential and universal self-interest is an attempt at preserving a right to enjoy capitalism free from the interference of the other's suffering or demands for justice or change. After screening *Maquilapolis*, for example, I was told by my students that activist demands for justice in the maquiladoras portrayed in the documentary will only encourage capital flight. The demand for fair wages and working conditions is the threatening demand of the other.⁴ While ethical, sustainable, or non-exploitative economies may have a moral appeal, the cynics contend that they are dangerously naïve because they fail to recognize the essential link between self-interest and the logic that directs capital mobility, a logic that compels us to be still in the hopes of being wanted and needed by capital.

Psychoanalysis allows us to conceive of research and teaching as an intervention into a field of contending, partially formed fantasies that can be challenged. It offers us a specific protocol for intervening into fantasies, including interpassive fantasies about the economy. In analysis proper, the analyst listens to the patient's fantasy narrative, waiting for slips, jokes, and hesitations that might allow for the emergence of an extra-discursive space that leads the analysand beyond their fantasy. Psychoanalytic theory insists that this extra-discursive space within discourse itself is a sort of blind spot, which Lacan names the Real (Fink 1995, 27; Zupančič 2000). The Real is the term in psychoanalysis that identifies that which cannot be named within a given symbolic order.⁵ Gibson-Graham's (1996, 2006) critique of capitalocentric thinking alerts us to the confines of the dominant conception of economic space by naming all that such a perspective cannot account

for—the elements of the diverse economy. The psychoanalytic concept of fantasy allows us to see that the diverse economy, in clashing with conventional representations of economic space, produces an eruption of the Real within the dominant discourse. The methodological implication, as J.K. Gibson-Graham argues in *Postcapitalist Politics* (2006), is that the diverse economy is not simply a counter-spatialization but can also be a means for traversing fantasy and effecting new relations and desires with respect to economic space. The economy, which interpassivity invests with power, is revealed to be a fiction. Agency, however limited and imperfect, is seen as residing in individuals and communities. With this restoration comes the possibility of behaving in what psychoanalysis refers to as an ethical manner—acting without regard for externalized symptoms or the demands of an illusory economy.

The Ethics of Analysis and Research

The psychoanalytic conception of ethics does not (simply) pertain to the comportment of the analyst. The analyst's ethical commitment is to provoke the analysand into a new relationship with their own desire such that it is no longer constrained by fantasy. This point is reached when the analysand traverses the fantasy and arrives at a state of subjective destitution, where the subject renounces their relationship with a fantasy that prevents “passing to the act” (*passage à l'acte*) in relation to desire (Copjec 1994; Žižek 2000). Such subjects are post-fantasmatic not in the sense that fantasy no longer defines their identity but rather in that they have a different, less invested, relation to both fantasy and identity. These subjects—destitute of fantasy and minimally invested in identity—are capable of acting without reference to an externalized symptom.

According to Zupančič (2000), what defines the post-fantasmatic subject is the capacity for ethical, as opposed to pathological, agency. The subject no longer lives to be frustrated by others nor constrained by her symptom and is therefore able to assume responsibility for her own desires and her relation to others. While Stavrakakis (2007) and Glynos (2008) emphasize the openness of the destitute subject to contingency, others, like Žižek (2000, 2006) and Zupančič (2000), see in the ethical subject a steadfast fidelity to Lacan's injunction not to cede one's desire. Thus, the ethical figure presents us with something of a paradox—a subject that is at once open yet faithful to their intentions.

The diverse economy is an alternative representation of the economic space that exists as a positivity only in the most minimal sense. What Gibson-Graham (2006) hopes will come out of this representation is an open-ended politics of constructing community economies. Graham and Cornwell (2009), for example, document the way that volunteering and gift-giving constitute ongoing capital and energetic inputs into community-based organizations and enterprises in the Pioneer Valley. What's crucial about the diverse economy/community economy framing is that it allows for a politics of economic development that avoids totalizing (utopian) fantasy whose failure gives rise to resentment and recrimination.

Our stance here involves both resisting the attractions of any positive blueprint and proposing the community economy as a new and different kind of universal that might guide the process of building different economies... Unlike the structurally configured 'economy' with its regularities and lawful relationships, the community economy is an acknowledged space of social interdependency and self-formation. Anything but a blueprint, it is an unmapped and uncertain terrain that calls forth exploratory conversation and political/ethical acts of decision. The 'emptiness' of the community economy, which awaits filling up by collective actions in place, is what distinguishes the project of building community economies from the related and more familiar project of economic development. (J.K. Gibson-Graham 2006, 160)

Gibson-Graham and the members of the Community Economies Collective insist on imagining the economy as a space of experimentation grounded in an ethics of openness. This ethics of openness is already at work in the diverse economy. In a study of worker cooperative management culture, Ken Byrne and I explored different approaches to self-governance among worker cooperatives (Byrne and Healy 2006). From the perspective of class analysis (Resnick and Wolff 1987) what distinguishes a worker cooperative from conventional capitalist enterprises is that the people involved in the production of wealth are also its first receivers/appropriators. They are in a position to allocate surplus wealth to reproduce the business as well as to decide how to distribute the residual "profit." The cooperators we studied were resolutely anti-utopian: they are not, in their words, "starry-eyed" about cooperatives; rather they are pragmatic about cooperation

without losing sight of its potential. While there was no consensus as to how to govern a cooperative enterprise effectively, whether to in-source or outsource accounting, how to do hiring or firing, there was a clear commitment to a form of radical democracy in which differences can be aired completely without laying the groundwork for future resentments. In other words, cooperators understood that their success depended upon creating a work culture that minimized “if only” thinking.⁶

Psychoanalytic theory suggests that a subject destitute of fantastic attachment (or at least minimally invested in it) is capable of “passing to the act” (Glynos 2008). This means that such a subject is capable of acting ethically because their identity is no longer secured by the externalized symptom that bears their resentment. Our fieldwork in the cooperative sector has allowed us to identify economic subjects that are open to democratic struggle and conflict, resolutely committed to producing a cooperative economy and decidedly anti-utopian in their ethicopolitical commitments. If these post-fantasmatic economic subjects already exist in economic space, what might it mean to engage with them in collaborative action research?

Most recently I have become involved with an activist group in Worcester Massachusetts named EPOCA—Ex-prisoners and Prisoners Organizing for Community Advancement. EPOCA’s primary purpose is the reform of the laws that govern Criminal Offender Record Information (CORIs) produced by the Massachusetts Department of Corrections. CORIs currently serve as a basis for “legal” exclusion of ex-felons from the labor market because employers can obtain these records and use them in hiring decisions for as long as fifteen years after release and probation. While EPOCA has been steadfast in their commitment to statewide CORI reform in Massachusetts, some members of the organization have also decided to start their own enterprise making biodiesel on an industrial scale—an enterprise they have named EPOWER. Members explicitly stated that they opted for a cooperative organizational structure because they did not want to be released from prison in order to be subject to another form of economic incarceration. Since committing to forming this enterprise five EPOCA members have worked tirelessly on securing supplies and capital, writing bylaws, speaking with lawyers and accountants, finding space, refurbishing a delivery truck, and designing a commercial-scale plant all while working other jobs full time and continuing to be active members in the larger nonprofit organization.

While being single-minded in their goal the members of EMPOWER, like EPOCA as a whole, have graciously received help from the larger community—they welcomed my contributions, for example, along with the efforts of area college students and others interested in advancing their cause. EMPOWER worker cooperators are well aware of the many financial and technical challenges they continue to face but they have accomplished an incredible amount in less than a year's time. EMPOWER's success has been a function of their willingness to situate the formation of their cooperative enterprise in relation to the diverse economy—to draw on voluntary support and gifts of goods, money, and labor to bring their cooperative into being. From my perspective, understanding and documenting their drive to pursue this experiment in becoming cooperative economic subjects will challenge the notion that economic space is exclusively capitalist and that self-interest is the singular dimension of economic subjectivity. There is, however, a more fundamental point to be made here. EMPOWER members have every reason to see their economic marginality as a permanent condition, to be resentful or alienated, yet they refuse this positioning. They are not deterred by obstacles in their path. When a new challenge arises—most recently, their discovery of the cost of general liability insurance—they greet it as a resolvable issue rather than a confirmation of their marginality. The psychoanalytic conceptions of ethics and of “passing to the act” allow me to clearly distinguish these economic subjects from the interpassive subjects I have encountered in other spaces.

Conclusion

What psychoanalytic theory adds to the process of activist research in geography and cognate disciplines is a profoundly different sense of the meaning and objectives of research. The Rethinking Economy Project, as it evolved, became a project about creating a shared identification with and desire for the diverse economy and for the possibility of a different relationship with our economic lives. As we shared the project with others, our novel conception of economy was met with consistent resistance in a variety of contexts. The psychoanalytic concept of fantasy allowed us to understand the expression of a passionate attachment to capitalocentric conceptions of economic space, even when this attachment is painful or paralyzing. It is this recognition, both of the power of representations to engender different desires and of the

power of fantasy to secure desire-as-usual, that has allowed us to understand activist research as a process of traversing fantasies, creating the conditions for the emergence of the ethical subject. In other words, it is simply not enough to show that capitalocentric visions of economic space are social constructions. We must attend to the pleasures of this fiction as well as emphasizing the capacity of people to create new social relations, desires and senses of self by traversing their fantasies and inhabiting economic space in a different (ethical) way. Working with and documenting organizations like EPOCA and cooperative enterprises like EMPOWER plays a critical role in engendering alternative economic desires and enactments. Recounting their story catalyzes desire, including my own, not because they are guaranteed success but because they are committed to continue trying in the face of the real possibility of failure. As Özselçuk and Madra (2005) argue, the aim of representing a diverse economy is to produce a post-fantasmatic politics where universal subjection to capitalism gives way to a vision of economic difference and a politics of development conducted under conditions of partial constraint and definite possibility.

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Notes

¹ Psychoanalytic theory frequently offers anti-Semitism and racism as archetypal examples of the role of the symptom, where the imagined harmony of the community or nation is interrupted by the illicit enjoyment of the “other” —for example, the money-hoarding enjoyment attributed to the Jewish banker or the hyper-sexuality and pleasure in slovenliness attributed to African Americans.

² NSF Grant No. BCS-9819138.

³ For a full discussion see, for example, CEC (2001).

⁴ The interpassivity that is widely present among student populations is not without scholarly foundation. Immordino (2008), for example, following other champions of globalization, argues that labor activism in both the developed and developing world ultimately leads to a decrease in the welfare of the laboring population because it increases the likelihood of capital flight.

⁵ Fink argues that there are two Reals in Lacanian thought. The first is that which exists prior to symbolization (the world encountered by the infant prior to language). The second is “a real after the letter which is characterized by impasses and impossibilities due to the relations among the elements of the symbolic order itself (R_2), that is, which is generated by the symbolic” (1995, 27).

⁶ Özselçuk (2006) makes a similar point in relation to workers in the state capitalist sector in industries throughout Turkey. She argues that what is required for a class politics in state enterprises is a move from melancholic attachment (to the Kemalist state) toward a process of

mourning—an acceptance of loss that allows for the possibility of engaging in a politics of privatization incorporating the formation of worker-owned cooperatives.