

Solidarity Economics

Strategies for Building New Economies

From the Bottom-Up and the Inside-Out

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“Why produce only as a function of an unjust market that depletes and exploits, denying us the chance to manage both the production and the economy for our own service, for the service of all citizens, and of all peoples of the planet, as well as for future generations?”

Why remain subordinated to the will of transnational corporations, States, and international institutions that identify themselves with exclusionary interests, if together, with our collective force, we can create public spaces, states, and new organizations that serve society’s empowerment, so that it becomes the leading subject of its own development in an autonomous and self-reliant way?

Why not become subjects of a creative and satisfactory work, free from oppression and exploitation, and which produces what we lack in order to meet our needs—cultural, physical, spiritual, emotional, and relational?

Our proposal is a socioeconomy of solidarity as a way of life that encompasses the totality of the human being, that announces a new culture and a new form of producing to fulfill the needs of each human being and of the entire humanity”

- The Latin Meeting on a Culture and Socioeconomy of Solidarity, Porto Alegre, Brazil, August 1998

“A solidarity economy does not arise from thinkers or ideas; it is the outcome of the concrete historical struggle of the human being to live and to develop him/herself as an individual and a collective.”

- Marcos Arruda, Brazil

Tenant organizations, unemployed associations, cooperative nurseries, consumer clubs, solidarity credit associations, local currencies, and more: “All these activities share a common characteristic of willfully going against the predominant economic model: they emphasize local solutions before anything else: they bond economic construction with its environment. They are new, freely chosen and democratically arbitrated forms of redistribution that are focused on the needs of men and women”

- Inter-Reseaux de l’Economie Solidaire, France

A Short Preface

Over the past few years, my involvement as an activist and organizer in the Global Justice and Solidarity Movement (sometimes called the “anti-globalization” movement) has led me on a search for new and effective ways to imagine economic alternatives to the devastating practices of capitalist globalization.

What are our positive visions for other economies beyond capitalism? What kinds of broadly connective, yet visionary, strategies can we enact to move us towards significant, wide-spread projects of alternative creation? How can we build powerful alternative visions, practices, and strategies without resorting to top-down models of “blueprints for the revolution”? I hope that the ideas in this pamphlet can contribute to an ongoing conversation about these questions within communities of people dreaming of, or wondering about, “life after capitalism”.

*The term “solidarity economy” is the English translation of *economia solidária* (Portuguese), *economía solidaria* (Spanish), and *economie solidaire* (French). I first encountered it at the second World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil (January 2002). Broadly defined, it names a grassroots form of cooperative economics that is working throughout the world (predominately in Spanish, Portuguese, and French-speaking countries) to connect thousands of local alternatives together to create large-scale, viable, and creative networks of resistance to the profit-centered economy. I believe that the concept of “solidarity economy” offers our movements here in the U.S. a powerful, connective tool with which to link together—horizontally and autonomously—many of the alternative practices of cooperation, mutual aid, reciprocity, and generosity that already exist in our midst. Such ongoing connections can form the basis for larger, long-term movements that cultivate spaces of hope and freedom and de-link our lives and communities from the economy of Empire.*

Like all terms of political struggle, the definition of “solidarity economy” is widely contested. For some, it refers to a set of strategies aimed at the abolition of capitalism and the oppressive social relations that it supports and encourages (this is the most widespread understanding of the term, I believe); for others, it names strategies for “humanizing” the capitalist economy—seeking to supplement capitalist globalization with community-based “social safety nets.”

*My own use of the term “solidarity economy” resonates with the first stream of thought and practice—seeking to build an economy and culture of solidarity beyond capitalism. The ideas that I develop in this pamphlet are not necessarily identical with the anti-capitalist forms of *economia solidária* as they are written about in Brazil (where I am most familiar with the literature) or elsewhere. This pamphlet is less a report on *economia solidária* as it is understood internationally than it is an adaptation and synthesis of some *economia solidária* concepts with other streams of thought and practice. My aim is to help open space for useful conversations about a practice of solidarity economics that is adapted to the particular political, economic, and cultural conditions that we face here in the United States.*

These thoughts are ever-evolving, always in “rough-draft” form. They are meant, most of all, to spark conversation, ideas, and action. I’d love to hear from you!

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Introduction:

Asking Questions

It doesn't look good. Tens of thousands of U.S. jobs have been lost in the past few years, many from mills and factories closing down and moving south for cheaper labor and lower standards. Small businesses and family farms are disappearing, giving way to corporate agribusiness and big-box chain stores. The countryside is being paved over and turned into second-home condos or strip malls. Woods workers are forced by debt and corporate greed to clear-cut our forests. Drug companies are making record profits while most of us can't afford basic health care. Local cultures and traditions are disappearing in the face of hyped-up, fast-food TV fad culture. The rich are getting richer while everyone else struggles harder to make ends meet. Need I say more? This economy is *not* serving us well.

Call it "capitalism", call it the "free market", or call it "globalization". Whatever its name, people across the United States and throughout the world are experiencing the devastating effects of an economy that places profit above all else.

None of this, of course, is news. Most of us know that we have little or no control of our economy--that most of the crucial decisions that effect our lives are made by far-away "experts" or mysterious "market forces". Most of us know, at some level, that democracy in America has been reduced to a token vote between two wealthy, pre-selected corporate candidates. As a friend asked me recently, "Since when did the American people decide to send their manufacturing sector south to exploit people in El Salvador or the Dominican Republic?" We didn't. And nobody ever asked.

But what's the alternative? We're taught in school, on the radio, in the papers, and on TV, that this is all inevitable—that there are only two choices about how an economy can work: *capitalism* or *communism*. A system where rich people and corporations have the power, make all the decisions and control our lives; or a system where State bureaucrats have the power, make all the decisions and control our lives. What a choice! If we don't want a communist dictatorship, then being against capitalism is like being against *death*—it's a bummer, but there's no way out. Right?

When it comes to the question of real economic alternatives—especially on a large scale--we're often stuck like deer in headlights. How do we start to imagine—and *create*—other ways of meeting each other's economic needs?

It is tempting to feel like we have to come up with a blueprint for *the* alternative. Not capitalism, not communism, but some other *system*, some other big plan for how the economy should work. This is the model of the "vanguard"—a small group of people who work to develop and then implement the grand theoretical model that (they claim) will solve our problems.

"We've already had two blueprint disasters... centralized socialism and corporate capitalism. We need something different" (Walden Bello)

From the state communism of Lenin to the free-market capitalism of Milton Friedman¹, this kind of "blueprint" strategy has been used by Left and Right alike to push the utopian visions of a few into the lives of the many. This form of social change requires real *violence* on a number of levels—first, the violence done to the diversity and complexity of our lives by "stuffing" it into someone's "one-size-fits-all" scheme for how the world should be; and second, the violence of the mental and physical coercion that must always come with forcing people to live in such a singular and idealized world.

But where, then, do we find ourselves? What else *is* there? How do we work toward viable and powerful widespread alternatives to capitalism without relying on big blueprints or vanguard visions?

Telling New Stories

“It’s not the story of the battle. It’s the battle of the story.” (Patrick Reinsborough)

First, we can start with changing the stories that we tell. There are many different ways to describe any given society or economy. To do this, we use theories—stories that we tell each other about how the world works and about our places in it. Every version of a story highlights certain things while hiding others—no single story can possibly tell “the whole truth.” In this way, our stories influence what we see and what we believe is possible or impossible in the world. As Arturo Escobar writes, “There is always a tight connection between social reality, the theoretical framework we use to interpret it, and the sense of politics and hope that emerges from such an understanding.”²

For years, we have been told a story about “The Economy”—the “*Capitalist Economy*,” to be precise—that has made us believe in its overwhelming power and inevitability. This story has hidden from us our *own* power, potential, and value as creative human beings.

The dominant story defines The Economy as “The Market System,” regulated by the law of supply and demand. The basic building-blocks of this economy are the rational, self-interested individuals and groups who seek to satisfy their supposedly-endless needs for growth and accumulation (profit-making) in a world of scarce resources. Competition is the name of the game. Economics is about understanding this competition and all that it entails: money, markets, prices, stocks and bonds, supplies and demands, employment, investment, profit, the world of companies, capital, and finance.

Economic space that is not occupied by the Capitalist Market, we are told, is occupied by the State. The State acts as both an accomplice to The Economy’s power and growth and as a fail-safe mechanism for when The Economy falters. It creates and upholds the legal frameworks that allow the Capitalist Economy to thrive and it also “fills in the gaps” by supplying the essential goods and services that this economy cannot (or will not). The tension plays out endlessly: how much, or how little, regulation should the State impose on the Market?

State socialism, often posed as “the” alternative to the Capitalist Economy, solves this problem by *taking over* the State and absorbing the Market into its bureaucratic clutches. Where there used to be Market and State, now there is just *State*—as far as the eye can see.

No matter how you cut it, the Market and the State define all possible “economic” space in this story. Other kinds of activities that meet human needs—gardening, hunting, potlucks, barter, gift-giving, etc.—are not seen as economic, but rather *social* activities, “recreations” or “hobbies” that are marginal at best to the *real* economy. The *real* economy is where *real* wealth—capital—is generated, distributed, and accumulated. The *real* economy (now that State Communism is “dead”) is named “Capitalism”, a giant system like the weather—beyond our control and understood by only the most elite “experts”. The rest of us just hope for sunny days and carry umbrellas.

In this story, we the people are just worker-bees and consumers, making money and then spending it, always hoping for the opportunity to accumulate more. A community of creative and skilled people without money or capital (or the desire to *have* money or capital) is considered “unproductive,” “backward” or “underdeveloped.”

This is why the economic developers are always talking about “bringing in new businesses”, or “attracting investors” to improve the local or regional economy—because real value, for them, comes from the *outside*, not the inside. From the *capitalist investors*, not those who sweat on the shop floor. From the power of money to

make more of itself, not from the power of life to self-organize and to thrive. This dominant story is about how our lives and our communities are never good enough, never complete or worthwhile without *their* money and *their* jobs.

But why should we tell a story that makes us feel small and helpless when we could tell one that makes us feel powerful and hopeful instead?

Try this story: Let's assume that "economy" is not just about supply-and-demand markets. In its largest sense, economics is about how we as human beings collectively generate livelihoods in relation to each other and to the Earth. The human economy includes all of the varied social relationships that we create in the course of meeting our needs and pursuing our dreams.

'If we viewed the economic landscape as imperfectly colonized, homogenized, systematized, might we not find openings for projects of noncapitalist invention? Might we not find ways to construct different communities and societies, building upon what already exists?' (Community Economies Collective)

Capitalism, with its "free market economy," its "jobs" and its "wages," is only *one part* of how we actually create and maintain livelihoods in our families and communities. When we peel away the misleading idea of one giant "Economic System," we can begin to see the workings of many different kinds of economies that are alive and well, supporting us below the surface. These are not the economies of the stock-brokers and the "expert" economists. These are *our* economies, *people's economies*, the economies that we build with our everyday lives and relationships.

While they are incredibly diverse in their manifestations, many of these life-sustaining "microeconomies" share a common orientation towards subsistence—towards the ongoing reproduction of healthy and mutually-supportive human communities. Maintaining social life, in all of its ugliness and beauty, is the primary goal of these "people's economies."³ This aim is, at its core, is fundamentally opposed to the dominant capitalist logic that places accumulation, growth-for-growth's sake (a key characteristic, by the way, of cancer), at the center of economic life.⁴

Many of these non-capitalist microeconomies are familiar to us, though rarely acknowledged as legitimate *economies*. While it is crucial to note that not all of these non-capitalist economies are necessarily liberatory, I will highlight here some of the most positive and inspiring forms⁵:

Householding economies—meeting basic needs with our own skills and work at home and on/with the land: raising children, offering advice or comfort, resolving relational conflicts, teaching basic life skills (like language!), cooking, sewing, cleaning the house, building the house, balancing the checkbook, fixing the car, gardening, farming, raising animals. Many types of work that have often been rendered invisible or devalued by patriarchy as "women's work."

Barter economies—trading services with our friends or neighbors, swapping one useful thing for another: "Returning a favor", exchanging plants or seeds, time-based local currencies.

Collective economies—in their simple form these economies are about pooling our resources together (sharing): bringing food to a potluck supper, carpooling, lending and borrowing, consumer co-ops; in their most "radical" form, collective economies are based on common ownership and/or control of resources: collective communities, health care collectives, community land trusts, and more.

Scavenging Economies—living on the abundance of Earth’s own gift economy: hunting, fishing, and foraging. Also living on the abundance of human wastefulness— “one person’s trash is another one’s treasure”: salvaging from demolition sites, using old car parts, dumpster-diving, the “swap-shop” at the local dump.

Gift economies—giving some of our resources to other people and to our communities: volunteer fire companies, community food banks, giving rides to hitch-hikers, having neighbors over for dinner.

Worker-controlled economies—workers deciding the terms and conditions of their own work: self-employment, family farms, worker-owned companies and cooperatives.

“Pirate” economies—various activities that might be labeled “theft” by those in power, but would be called “rightful re-appropriation” by those who have been robbed of power: re-incarnations of Robin Hood or Pretty Boy Floyd, squatters.

Subsistence market economies—thousands of very small businesses survive (and sometimes thrive) with little or no imperative to grow and accumulate wealth. These are subsistence-based businesses, created and run for the purpose of providing healthy livelihood to the owners (who are often the workers) and providing a basic service to the larger community (sometimes in the indirect form of creating a *community gathering space*).

These categories name only some of the many diverse, non-capitalist economic relationships that are interwoven throughout our lives. The project of identifying these relationships is a project of hope, one that allows us to begin de-colonizing ourselves from the devaluing and degrading ways-of-seeing that have been imposed on us by the economics of Empire. We can begin to see, instead, the powerful spaces of freedom that already exist in our midst.

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In the context of uncovering the diversity of our economic relationships, we can begin to re-frame our understanding of capitalism itself. Instead of viewing capitalism as The Economy, we can view it instead as *an ongoing project to colonize economic space*. Capitalism, with its drive for accumulation and its need for endless expansion into “new markets,” would *like to become* The Economy. Fortunately for us, the capitalists they have not succeeded in turning every relationship into an opportunity to make profit. Capitalism is an ongoing, *but never fully successful*, project of colonization.⁶

In fact, the dominant economy would *fall apart* if the people’s economy—these basic forms of cooperation and solidarity—did not exist “below the surface.” *These* are the things that keep us alive when the factories close down, when the ice storm comes, when our houses burn down, or when the paycheck is just not enough. These are, indeed, the relationships that hold the very fabric of our society together, the relationships that make us human and that meet our most basic needs of love, care, and mutual support. It sure isn’t *capitalism* that’s providing these things for us!

Solidarity Economics begins here, with the realization that alternative economies *already exist*; that we as creative and skilled people have already created different kinds of economic relationships in the very belly of the capitalist system. We have our own forms of wealth and value that are not defined by money. Instead of prioritizing competition and profit-making, these economies place human needs and relationships at the center. They are the *already-planted seeds* of a new economy, an economy of cooperation, equality, diversity, and self-determination: a “solidarity economy”.

Though the capitalist economy has devalued or hidden these seeds from us, we can use them as starting points for our alternative economic organizing. The project of solidarity economics is to water these seeds—to identify and expand the spaces of solidarity that already exist and, in the process, create new and larger ones.⁷

The Seeds of Solidarity

This is a story-telling project with very concrete consequences. It changes the isolating stories that often shape our realities and allows us to experience new stories of connection. Once we open up the realm of “economics” and are able to see some of the many economies that exist in our midst, we can begin to identify those spaces and initiatives that are embodying liberating, life-affirming, non-capitalist values. It is here, at the convergence of diverse practices of economy, that “solidarity” becomes a crucial part of the story.

Solidarity is a powerful word that names the dynamic, collective process of taking active responsibility for our inter-relationships on both a local and global level. When we practice solidarity, we recognize that our fates are bound up with the fates of others, both human and non-human; that our interconnections—sometimes profoundly unequal and oppressive—demand conscious action and transformation.⁸ Through solidarity, we recognize the diversity, autonomy, power, and dignity of others. We come to understand that our struggles to be free and joyful are not as separate or distant from one another as we may have thought. We begin to develop *an ethical practice of shared struggle*.

Solidarity, then, is a practice of fostering these and other related values with our fellow humans (social and economic solidarity) and with the rest of the Earth (ecological solidarity):

- ***Unity-in-diversity***
- ***Shared power*** (as opposed to power-over)
- ***Autonomy*** (always both individual and collective)
- ***Communication*** (horizontal, not top-down)
- ***Cooperation and mutual-aid*** (shared struggle)
- ***Local rootedness, global inter-connection***

Our first task as “solidarity economists” is to identify those economic spaces and initiatives that foster (even imperfectly) ethical practices of solidarity.

Solidarity economics is an organizing tool that can be used to re-value and make connections between the practices of cooperation, mutual aid, reciprocity, and generosity that already exist in our midst. Such a tool can work to encourage collective processes of building diverse, locally-rooted and globally-connected, ecologically-sound, and directly democratic economies outside the control of either the capitalist Market or the State.

A SOLIDARITY ECONOMY is a quilt, a woven patchwork of many diverse economies that are centered on life-values instead of profit-values.

SOLIDARITY ECONOMICS is the practice of identifying, connecting, strengthening and creating grassroots, life-centered economic alternatives to capitalist globalization, or the economics of Empire.

Organizing Towards a Solidarity Economy

Solidarity economics is fundamentally different than both capitalist and state socialist economics. Instead of starting with a grand theory, it starts with our practices. Instead of demanding a single plan or vision for the economy, it seeks to connect many diverse initiatives together in ways that respect their differences and independence. Instead of putting forward a single vision of economic *organization* (how the economy should be structured); solidarity economics provides us with a model for economic *organizing*—a process by which we can democratically strengthen and create new kinds of economic relations in our communities.

When someone asks the big question, “so what’s the alternative?”, solidarity economics answers not with a Big Scheme (a “third way” beyond the Market or the State), but with another question: *By what means, on whose terms, and with what guiding ethical principles will we collectively work towards new economic structures and relationships?* This is an economic *process*, not a plan; it is a strategy for economic organizing that starts with our already-present practices and, from there, “builds the road by walking.”

“A free society cannot be the substitution of a ‘new order’ for the old order; it is the extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of social life” (Paul Goodman).

This process begins not with “experts,” but with concrete grassroots organizing efforts. This will not be a revolution in which the “vanguard” with the Truth takes power and then imposes a new utopia on everyone else. This is a revolution of *secession* from the world of both capitalists and bureaucrats—an *economic independence movement*. We begin with the places in which we have *already* achieved independence and solidarity, and we build our movements from there—revolution from the bottom-up and the inside-out.

What does a solidarity economy strategy look like in concrete terms? We can think about it in five parts: **seeing** with new eyes, **naming** our practices, **connecting** our practices, **strengthening** these practices and **creating** new possibilities.

Seeing with New Eyes

We must first learn to see and to value our alternative economic practices before we can begin imagining ways to expand their scope and power. Looking around us with the new economic story in mind, we can start to ask questions: What kinds of alternative economic practices or relationships can we find in our own lives? In the communities that we’re a part of? In our regions? In the US as a whole? Where are the spaces in which people are already meeting their needs with practices that value cooperation, equality, diversity, and self-determination?

This phase of solidarity economy organizing is about community-based research. In Brazil, organizers have sought out and identified thousands of small, local solidarity-based initiatives and groups in each state and listed them in a public database (see www.milenio.com.br).

On one level, these lists act as a resource for organizers to connect many different kinds of initiatives together. On another level, the information allows producers and consumers to seek out other solidarity-based groups in

their areas with whom to build real exchanges and economic relationships—what some Brazilian organizers call the creation of “solidarity markets.”

In our communities, states and regions, we can do similar projects—creating, for example, “solidarity research collectives” that build inventories of alternative economic initiatives and practices, from cooperatives and local currencies to volunteer fire companies and community food banks. Some of this work has already been done in the realm of cooperative enterprises by Grassroots Economic Organizing (GEO) and is published in their directory, “A Geography of Hope” (see <http://www.geonewsletter.org/>). The Earth & Sky Exchange Collective (Amherst, Massachusetts) is a great example of local, multi-sector “inventory” work. Their website <http://www.earthskyexchange.org/> provides links to a wide variety of solidarity-based projects and practices in their region. Other local initiatives throughout the U.S., inspired by what is sometimes called “asset-based community development,” have surveyed and catalogued non-monetary forms of wealth (neighborliness, subsistence skills, traditional arts and crafts, local stories and lore, natural landscapes, and more). Many other examples of such local and regional “seeing” work abound.

Gathering this kind of information lays critical groundwork for any future attempts to bring people together and organize. It provides us with a map of our strengths and with a powerful and positive place from which to start our creative work.

Some examples of solidarity economy, large and small:

- Worker cooperatives
- Community currencies
- Libraries (book, seed, tool)
- Parks, gazebos, lean-tos
- Water fountains
- Hitching/ride-giving
- Shared meals
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)
- Free exchange of ideas/dialogue
- Potlucks
- Carpooling/rideshare
- Community Land Trusts
- No-interest loans between friends and family
- Spontaneous gifts
- Consumer cooperatives (buying clubs)
- Lost-and-found
- Work barter
- Volunteer fire companies
- Volunteer ambulance squads
- Gardening (and sharing the extra zucchini)
- Seed-saving and exchange
- Self-employment (under certain conditions)
- Hunting, trapping, fishing
- Gathering berries, mushrooms, and nuts
- Logging for use-value on the woodlot
- Earth, Sun, life itself (gifts!)
- Open source programming
- Community Development Credit Unions
- Doing favors
- Food banks
- Lending/borrowing from neighbors and friends

Naming our Practices

Once we identify elements of a solidarity economy, we can begin the process of raising collective awareness and making connections. “Naming” is an important part of any such organizing. It has the power to connect isolated groups and people, to bring us together by identifying our common ground, our shared visions and values. In Brazil, the term “solidarity economy” has been a powerful organizing tool because of its ability, with just a few words, to name and connect a set of economic practices that had been previously disconnected. Through this process of naming, diverse solidarity-based initiatives that were once isolated have become conscious of themselves as parts of a larger movement *against* capitalist globalization and *for* a new economy of solidarity. This has allowed groups such as RBSES, the *Rede Brasileira de Socioeconomia Solidária* (Brazilian Solidarity Socio-economy Network) to do significant big-picture organizing, linking together producers, solidarity-based investors, consumers, and grassroots social movements in networks of mutual support and exchange (<http://www.redesolidaria.com.br/>).

Similar work can be done here in North America. Though our language might be different (perhaps a name other than “solidarity economy” would emerge from our dialogues), it is just as important that we create names that can connect our many alternative practices and allow us to begin imagining strong, organized networks of support. Unless we work toward these common connections and economic visions, and begin to speak about them with a strong, compelling common language, we will remain isolated in the face of a dominant economy that seems to fill every space of conversation and imagination with its ideas and visions.

Perhaps we could take inspiration from the numerous groups and networks in Brazil, Spain, Argentina, and elsewhere who have created regular gatherings and “congresses” for solidarity-based initiatives to come together, share experiences, build common identities, and make connections (see, for example, www.socioeco.org/eng/carta.html). Imagine local and regional “Solidarity Economy Congresses”: gatherings that would bring together diverse groups of people who are creating and participating in alternative economic endeavors to meet each other, teach and inspire each other, and begin to envision concrete connections and long-term strategies.

Connecting our Practices

This process of coming together to make creative, concrete connections between initiatives is at the core of a solidarity economy strategy. By linking together previously-isolated and disconnected efforts, we can begin to construct the skeleton of a new economy within the body of the old. These connections are not just about “getting to know each other.” On one hand, they are about *building real economic relationships* of exchange and support—connecting producers and consumers, marketers and distributors, investors and organizers (and re-defining what each of these roles are). In this sense, solidarity economics can be seen as a *community economic development strategy* to create local employment, support local producers, and build towards more democratic and sustainable economies in our places.

On the other hand, the connections made by solidarity economy organizing can also work to link local development strategies with larger social movements struggling against the power of the Corporate World Order. It is never enough to be “*against*.” As long as our movements remain stuck in the world of a simple “no,” we will not be compelling. Solidarity economy is a strategy that allows us to build our alternatives alongside of our opposition—both feeding and strengthening each other as they grow. This is also a chance to

link together different realms of people—local community development organizers and “oppositional movement” organizers—who are often separate and unknown to each other.

What might these concrete connections look like? What might be created and imagined at gatherings and strategy sessions with a diverse array of solidarity-based economic organizers? The actual details can only emerge from the real, face-to-face conversations that we will have.

Here are some examples of possible connections and structures that could grow from such a process:

- Solidarity economy support organizations that could work to provide popular economic education to organizers and community groups, catalogue grassroots initiatives, connect solidarity-based groups together, facilitate long-term vision and strategy building, and make links with other social movements at regional, national and international levels.
- Concrete connections of support and interrelation between different sectors of the solidarity economy—perhaps via “Solidarity Economy Networks”—organized consumers connecting with organized producers; currency networks connecting with goods-manufacturing sectors; growth and creation of cross-sector loan funds and granting institutions to support further creation of solidarity initiatives; and more.
- Collective power and organization with which to implement strategies of “non-reformist” reform that reduce the power of the Market and State in our lives. One example might be state-level “Cooperative Economic Development Acts” that would mandate state funding (re-directed from current corporate subsidies, perhaps?) for locally-controlled “community cooperative development groups” that could focus on building co-ops and other solidarity-based initiatives to meet local needs locally and democratically.
- Networks of “Community Trade Organizations”, alternatives to the World Trade Organization (WTO) that could build direct, solidarity-based “fair trade” relationships between communities in different towns, cities, regions and countries.

Creating New Possibilities

Solidarity Economics throughout Latin America began as an attempt to connect and radicalize an already-powerful “third sector” of cooperative and community-based initiatives. Many of these alternative economic practices had emerged during the 1980’s and 1990’s as survival-based responses to the effects of corporate globalization. As they grew in strength and made connections, the idea of a “solidarity economy” began to emerge as a sensible strategy to pursue in the name of cooperative, anti-capitalist development.

It is important for us to recognize that our situation in North America is very different. While our communities and livelihoods are being threatened by the same global corporate forces, we have struggled to make the popular analytical connections and develop strong social movements to create wide-spread economic alternatives. Here, inside the “belly of global capitalism,” our attempts to create formal and informal systems of community and cooperation have been undermined again and again. In the face of the capitalist economy’s colonizing power, we have all-too-often come to believe that viable alternatives are not possible.

The biggest obstacle to social change in the United States may be our imaginations. Most people have concrete experiences of the dysfunctional and violent nature of the dominant economy; the trouble is that many do not believe that it is possible to make significant changes. This is why solidarity economy, in a North American context, must focus a great deal of energy on opening up the landscape of the possible. We must begin with

where we are, telling new stories about old practices, hoping to awaken a sense of already-present hope and possibility. Through new ways of seeing, naming, and connecting, a solidarity economy strategy can move us forward towards imagining other ways of being together and meeting each other's needs.

Our sense of possibility cannot be expanded by ideas or “visions” alone; we must create real experiences for each other that allow us to *feel* new ways of thinking, relations, and living. Our movements will not succeed until they begin to include within their scope the construction of *lived alternatives* that meet our basic needs and allow us to experience new possibilities.

“If the status quo survives relatively unscathed, it is not because of apathy, as is sometimes asserted, but because of dependency, which is an essential part of its project” (Jeremy Seabrook).⁹

The practices of seeing, naming, and connecting all build towards this practice of creation. From the creation of *imagination* and *possibility* can grow the creation of new initiatives, new institutions, new forms of exchange, new economies of solidarity.

Conclusion:

Beginning the Conversations

I often hear people commenting that “it is easy to be *against* things; much harder to be *for* positive alternatives.” If we believe the dominant story about “the economy” or fall for the trap of having to name “the” alternative or describe “the” new economic system in technical detail, then this observation may be true. With another story in hand, however, we can see that the seeds of alternative worlds are already planted—even growing—below the surface of the capitalist economy. Our burden is not to develop a new abstract blueprint or scheme that we must then convince (or force) everyone to follow (though well-crafted visions are always crucial as tools to challenge us and move us forward); Rather, we can identify the spaces of hope and creation that surround us, name them, celebrate them, organize to strengthen and connect them, and in so doing create new possibilities and relationships.

The creative projects that can emerge from this way of seeing must be, of course, connected to many other kinds of transformative work. Just as it is not enough to be “against”, it is also not enough to create. We must build social movements that encompass and connect many forms of action: **defensive action** to protect ourselves and our communities from immediate harm; **offensive action** to challenge the current structures of oppression and exploitation in all of their racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, and otherwise exclusionary forms; **healing action** to work through and recover from the pain and brokenness that has been imposed upon us in so many ways; and **creative action** to build alternative structures that meet our daily needs and help us secede from the oppressions of the dominant society and economy.

The ideas presented here about solidarity economics are meant to be a set of tools to add to our collective toolbox of social change—a set of stories and organizing ideas that can (and must) grow alongside of many other strategies, many other kinds of action. This is another crucial element to add to our diversity of tactics.

To conclude, then: We are all “solidarity economists”. Together, we can take back our economies from those who have stolen them. The word “economics” comes from the Greek “*oikos*” (home) “*nomos*” (rules/management). The management of the home. Whose home? Our home! Whose management? Collective self-management! Together, we can reclaim our homes as spaces of safety, care, love, healing, growth, and solidarity.

“Utopia is on the horizon: when I walk two steps, it takes two steps back. I walk ten steps and it is ten steps further away. What is utopia for? It is for this, for walking”

- Eduardo Galeano

Further Resources on Solidarity Economy

Please note: very few materials are available on solidarity economy in English. If you are a translator of Spanish, Portuguese, or French, please help!

Materials in English:

www.socioeco.org/en/ Alliance for a United, Plural, and responsible World, “Workgroup on Socio-Economy of Solidarity”. The most extensive collection of solidarity economy materials in English. Includes links to SE materials from the World Social Forums. Spanish, Portuguese, and French documents are also available (many are as-of-yet un-translated)

www.zmag.org/carolase.htm A talk on SE by Carola Reintjas of Brazil at the “Life After Capitalism” event, WSF III, Porto Alegre.

www.globalexchange.org/countries/mexico/ppp/desmi.html A translated document from the book, "Si Uno Come, Que Coman Todos, Economia Solidaria," by Alma Cecilia Omana Reyes and Jorge Santiago Santiago (Mexico).

www.geonewsletter.org/archive Issue 56 of GEO (Grassroots Economic Organizing) has a number of short features on solidarity economy, including contact information for a number of European initiatives.

www.zmag.org/content/VisionStrategy/colacot-solidarityecon.cfm “Solidarity Economics: An Alternative for Development, Equity, Social Justice, and Peace in Colombia.” By the Confederacion Latinoamericana de Cooperativas y Mutuales de Trabajadores (COLACOT), 2002. Translated by Justin Podur.

www.uqah.quebec.ca/ries2001/en/ Resources and documents from the Second International Meeting on the Globalization of Solidarity, 2001, Quebec.

<http://www.solidarityeconomy.org/> Over the next year, I will be collecting translations and new materials on SE to post to this site. The site will also be an information point for efforts to create dialogue and organizing around solidarity economy in the U.S. Keep checking back, as it will be under construction for a while.

www.communityeconomies.org The website of the Community Economies Collective. Not explicitly connected to solidarity economics, but developing non-capitalist economic theory and practice that is in a very similar vein. Highly recommended.

Materials in Spanish

www.trueque-marysierras.org.ar/biblioteca2.htm A website of one of the many Argentinian Barter Clubs. A large, excellent library of articles in Spanish. Includes my favorite title: “De la economía solitaria a la economía solidaria” (“From the solitary economy to the solidarity economy”).

Materials in Portuguese

<http://www.ecosol.org.br/> A cooperative website maintained by a number of supporters of solidarity economy. Perhaps the best library of Brazilian SE material available on-line.

Notes and Sources

Credits for boxed-quotes (in order of appearance):

Bello, Walden. <http://www.focusweb.org/>

Reinsborough, Patrick. “It’s not the battle of the story; it’s the story of the battle.” Smart Meme Project. <http://www.smartmeme.com/>

Community Economies Collective. “Imagining and Enacting Non-Capitalist Futures.” <http://www.communityeconomies.org/>

Goodman, Paul. Quoted in Colin Ward, *Anarchy In Action*. London: Freedom Press, 1982.

Notes:

Lenin wrote about this strategy in his 1902 text, “What Is to Be Done?” and went on to employ many of the oppressive practices that his vanguardist approach implied. Milton Friedman is a contemporary economist at the University of Chicago and a well-known founder of the “Chicago School” of economics, advancing the abstract, utopian capitalist theories of neo-liberalism that have been violently imposed by institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

² Escobar, Arturo. “Other Worlds are (Already) Possible: Self-Organization, Complexity, and Post-Capitalist Cultures.” From *The World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*. 2003. www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html

³ See Mies, Maria and Veronica Benholdt-Tomsen. *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalized Economy*. London: Zed Books, 1999.

⁴ For an excellent discussion on the parallels between the current “growth economy” and cancer, see Patrick Reinsborough’s booklet, “Decolonizing the Revolutionary Imagination.” <http://www.smartmeme.com/>

⁵ It is important to be clear that not all of these non-capitalist relationships are liberatory. In addition to the economies listed below, our society also fosters slave economies (forced labor in prisons, for example), feudal economies (certain kinds of debt relationships, patriarchal household arrangements), and speculative economies (gambling, stock market, currency speculation). Of those that are listed above, we must acknowledge that householding economies can work to sustain male-centered power relationships and fix women in subordinate roles; barter economies can easily slip into a logic of accumulation when one party becomes greedy or dishonest; gift economies can be manifest as cleverly-disguised power-trips, as in certain forms of charity that reinforce the power of the giver over the receiver; subsistence market economies can involve incredible relationships of discrimination and exploitation at a local and personal level—and the list goes on.

The crucial point here, however, is that we all participate in non-capitalist economies in our every-day lives. While these relationships are complex and sometimes ethically ambiguous, they can also indicate and embody the existence of

authentic and successful solidarity-centered economic practices in our midst. The key is for us to carefully identify those forms of economy that *are*, in fact, liberatory, and to acknowledge them as spaces of hope and resistance. This is precisely the starting point of solidarity economics.

⁶ Capitalism as an always-incomplete colonial project: “We might envision capital as a power grid overlaid on a vast nebula, with the working class as the nebula. Workers are captured by and in some ways defined by the grid, the multifold structures and processes of accumulation. This is the sphere of exploitation. However, the nebula is life: capital must draw on it and cannot survive without it, but the workers have life and can survive without the grid...No matter how controlling, capital cannot be everyday life, which thus remains a great reservoir of energy against capital.” (from Neill, Monty. “Rethinking Class Composition Analysis in Light of the Zapatistas.” In *Midnight Notes. Auroras of the Zapatistas: Local and Global Struggles of the Fourth World War*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2001).

⁷ This kind of storytelling and re-telling work is being done in powerful ways by J.K. Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies Collective. For a powerful and detailed theoretical exploration, see J.K. Gibson-Graham *The End of Capitalism (As We Know It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. For further articles and more recent documentation on concrete “rethinking economy” projects, see <http://www.communityeconomies.org/>

⁸ The dominant economics peddles the illusion of “independence” and “freedom” while actually deepening hierarchical dependencies that reinforce the power of some over others. Solidarity economics recognizes, instead, that 1) the dream of total independence and freedom is an illusion and that interrelationships exist. Thus we must take responsibility for these relationships and build them consciously as ones of mutual support and care; and 2) a very real limited freedom and collective autonomy can be born from this conscious, collective, and democratic creation of *the terms of our interrelations*.

We must begin our analyses not with the assumption of separation, of clearly defined “insides” and “outsides,” but rather with the assumption that we are interrelated. Particularly in this globalizing world, our identities and positions are *bound up together*. Classes, genders, sexualities, races, “first world” and “third world,” are not so much categories of separation that “clash” or “support” each other from afar—they are, rather, parts of the same social processes: class processes, gender processes, race processes. They create each other in relationships of unequal power.

Take the “first” and “third” worlds as an example. The bloody dictatorships supported with US money, weapons and intelligence; the sweatshops; the long, horrific legacies of colonialism throughout the global south—these relationships form the very conditions of possibility for the life conditions and positions of privileged people like myself.

Interrelationship is not a choice. We are bound together. The choice is *how* we will be in interrelationship. “Solidarity” names one form, “parasitism” names another. We feed on the broken bodies of those who suffer to make our comfort possible. And this is not said for dramatic effect: it is a *literal* relationship.

⁹ Seabrook, Jeremy. “Needs and Commodities.” In *The Living Economy: A New Economics in the Making*. Edited by Paul Ekins. New York: Routledge, 1996.

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