

24. Women, Feminism, and the Solidarity Economy

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Capitalism started the process of women's liberation, but cannot finish it. Women's oppression, and the domination of the feminine, are built into the soul of capitalist institutions. In our struggles for liberation, women are playing a key role in the construction of a new paradigm of economic life, the solidarity economy.

Capitalism and Women's Liberation

As feminist historians have shown, capitalism, as it developed in the U.S., embodied patriarchal values. Only men – white, propertied men – were allowed to vote in the early U.S. Among whites, a woman's proper role was to be married to a male breadwinner and household head, serving her family through unpaid homemaking. Historians have called this the “cult of domesticity.” Women who didn't do so – and their husbands – were viewed as failures; and those who couldn't find husbands were viewed at the biggest failures of all. When poor families had difficulty living on a husband's income, they sent their children out to work before their homemakers. Gender polarization and hierarchy coexisted with rigid racial-ethnic segregation, including slavery, which broke up families and distorted gender roles. In other words, early U.S. capitalism was patriarchy writ large in the economy, interpenetrated with class and racial-ethnic oppression.

However, the dynamics of capitalist development have acted to break down these structures of rigid class, race, and gender ascription. U.S. capitalism's anti-aristocratic, “all men are created equal” founding values were embodied in a dynamic marketplace competition based on equal property rights and equal opportunity to pursue wealth. Its class structure, while pyramidal, was flexible. Un-propertied white men were given the right to break through class prejudice and compete their way up through the hierarchy, through hard work and enterprise. Even though most failed at this unequal competition, a few succeeded, or their children did, and were crowned

as the real winners, the “self-made men.” This meme of equal opportunity spread to other oppressed groups, and over the last century and a half, on the heels of the anti-slavery and Civil Rights movements, women fought for and won equal rights in the economy, in terms of the equal opportunity to compete with men, as well as political rights.

This shift represented a sea change for women. Widely accepted norms which divide all social and economic activities into either women’s work or men’s work have been overturned. Belief in a God-given sexual division of labor has been replaced by the condemnation of sex discrimination, and the forced imposition of rigid gender economic roles is widely unacceptable. With the support of feminist movement, individual women have fought their way into most traditionally white-male-dominated jobs, including the highest status positions. Meanwhile, the “virus” of feminism has spread to women and men throughout the world, bringing its infectious and inspirational affirmation of women’s rights and economic abilities to a wide array of progressive struggles.

The Limits of Women’s Liberation Within Capitalism

The experience of the past 40 years in the U.S. has revealed the limitations of women’s ability to liberate and empower ourselves by playing, and even winning, the racist-capitalist-and-still-patriarchal economic game as it is constructed by our dominant economic institutions:

First, to play and win at that game, women have been forced to act like the hegemonic “economic man”: narrowly self-interested, competitive, individualistic; focused on money; and motivated by greed.¹ In other words, we have had to actively reject our feminine, caring sides, or at least limit them to our family and community lives.

Second, since the good jobs were designed for bread-winners with the assistance of homemakers, it is difficult if not impossible to succeed as an “economic man” and also do women’s traditional caring work, especially the unpaid and time-consuming work of raising a family and caring for the ill and elderly. “Successful” women have to minimize or farm out (to other women) their unpaid caring labor.² This is a big sacrifice for the “successful” career woman, and also builds exploitative relationships with other women

¹Ferber, Marianne and Julie Nelson. Eds., 1993. *Beyond Economic Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²Folbre, Nancy, 2001. *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values*. New York: New Press.

right into one's family. Another way of saying this is that the game is stacked against women (or men) with active commitments to caring for children or other family members.

Third, the likelihood for a woman to win in the capitalist-organized economic competition is low, even if she gives up her caring work and acts like a traditional man, given the pyramidal structure of the job hierarchy. This is especially true in the global South, where the availability of high-paying jobs is extremely limited relative to the population of women, and where unequal access to primary education denies most citizens any chance of competing for such jobs. The converse of this point is that, if she does "succeed" in the economic competition, a woman has to accept that her success is conditioned on the fact that most women, and most people, will continue to be losers, many without their basic needs filled.

Fourth, if they want to maximize their chances for success in the capitalist economy, women have to focus on maximizing their employer's profits, co-creating an economy focused on GDP growth and rampant competitive consumerism. This often requires doing things which seriously damage workers, consumers, suppliers, the local community, government, and the earth upon which we all depend for life. Playing the game involves contributing to the current grave crises in finance, climate, energy, food, water, employment, and soul, which not only undermine our well-being and that of our families, but also threaten the very existence of humankind.

As Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade*,³ has said, "What's the use of struggling to get the top berths of the boat if the boat is sinking?" It is time for women and feminists (and men!) to realize that we need to stop following in "economic man's" footsteps, trying to win at the economic game which they have been playing. It is clearer than ever before that there is something deeply wrong with the dominant economic system and it needs radical transformation. We are in a moment of deep systemic crisis. We can not continue with business as usual. But what can we do?

TINA, TATA, the Solidarity Economy, and Women

In the 1980s, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher coined the phrase "There is No Alternative" (TINA), to affirm that the free market capitalism, based on narrowly self-interested individualism, is the only viable economic

³Eisler, Riane. 1987. *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*. New York: Harper Collins.

system. People are naturally selfish and competitive, the argument goes, and only capitalism can harness our human nature to produce what we need. Capitalism may eventually self-destruct, like the Roman Empire did. But there is no alternative way forward, according to this view.

The very good news in this time of crisis is that the people of the world have not all been listening to Margaret Thatcher. Instead, we have been responding, individually, in groups, in movements, and in communities, to the crises all around us in new and creative ways, and constructing ways of being and doing economics which are more in sync with our needs. Without any grand plan, women and men across the planet are rediscovering or inventing transformative economic practices and institutions. Their diverse practices are being shared, cross-pollinated, and developed in the “anti-globalization” or globalization from below movement against neo-liberal economics. The 1999 Seattle demonstration against the WTO was a watershed in this development of a global civil society, because it built alliances across two great fissures: labor and environmental activists marched together, initiating a powerful Blue-Green Alliance, and Northern countries joined with the South’s protests against the injustices of the global economic order. The globalization from below movement has developed a proactive and visionary arm in the form of the World Social Forum movement, whose motto is “Another World is Possible.” The conscience and wisdom of this movement is being forged by the interactions of the world’s great movements – worker, peasant, women’s, anti-racist, lesbian-gay-trans, ecology, disability – which are teaching us new ways to be and do that do not oppress others, or the earth. Some refer to this coming together as a global civil society movement, the second superpower.

In the past ten years, activists in these movements and progressive academics are coming to realize two things. First, instead of TINA, There is No Alternative, TATA -There are Thousands of Alternatives -actually applies. The world’s peoples are producing an astonishing abundance of life-affirming solutions to the economic problems we are facing. Second, as diverse as they are, these qualitatively distinct, transformative economic practices and institutions are beginning to form the basis of an economic way forward. The people, institutions, and movements involved in them are starting to identify themselves as part of a distinct, “solidarity economy” – and beginning to connect to one another, work to support one another, and to come together to demand the political changes we need.

Solidarity economy institutions and practices vary by country, and especially between the North and the South. In the North, and among the privileged classes, they have a strong focus on social responsibility to others and to earth, including fair trade and simple living, social entrepreneurship

(entrepreneurship with a social mission), and corporate watch-dogging. In the South and among the poor, they focus on peasant resistance to proletarianization, such as Villa Campesina and the MST (Landless Workers' Movement); income-generating actions such as microcredit, the creation of cooperatives of all types, and factory take-overs; and resistance to corporate encroachment, especially among indigenous peoples. They can occur within or outside of markets.

Solidarity economy practices and institutions are identifiable by the presence of distinctly noncapitalist values. While very few of them embody all of these values, all embody one or more of them. Solidarity economy values include: an anti-oppression stance, i.e. a commitment to maximizing equality, not just providing equal opportunity, in all dimensions (race, class, gender, sexuality, disability); sustainability and regeneration of the planet; social responsibility; cooperation above competition; relocalization and community development; participatory political and economic democracy; diversity; and economic human rights, particularly the right to fulfillment of basic human needs. As the diverse solidarity economy initiatives interact, in local communities, and across the globe, these values are becoming increasingly integrated.

Women have been key players in the construction of transformative, solidarity economy solutions to capitalist crises, for three main reasons. First, women are severely disadvantaged with capitalist labor markets due to their lesser access to family income and education, because of their caring labor obligations, and because of the persistence of sex discrimination and sexual harassment.⁴ Second, these same caring labor obligations can motivate women to extreme resourcefulness when their families,' especially their children's, basic needs are not being met. Thirdly, women's gender training to prioritize caring for others and the concrete provisioning of their needs often leads us to craft economic solutions which are distinct from capitalist ones; solutions which place the provisioning of needs above other values.

⁴Cote, Ethel. 2009. "Women and the Social Solidarity Economy: Reasons for Women's Participation," Paper Presented at the Forum on the Solidarity Economy, Amherst, Mass., March.

The Solidarity Economy and Women's Entrepreneurship: Micro-Credit, Cooperatives, and Social Enterprises

The amazing entrepreneurial response of poor women (and not poor men) to microcredit and lending circles around the world attests to the bottled up creative energies of women. While most of these ventures are proto-capitalist and limited in their impact, they do redistribute capital towards the bottom, and can have a transformative effect in terms of women's and community empowerment.⁵

Women have also been very involved in the setting up of producer and worker cooperatives across the world, many with explicit community-serving goals. Women are well-suited for cooperatives because they are less drilled in competitive self-interest, and more used to thinking in terms of group well-being. Conversely, because cooperatives are democratically run by producers, workers, and/or consumers, women can incorporate their need to perform caring labor more easily. Some inspiring examples:

Representing a coming together of women's, labor, environment, immigrant, and First Nation movements, the Chantier de l'Economie Sociale created a program of day care and elder care cooperatives, based on the right of all families to caring support, and subsidized by the government.⁶

In Brazil, the National Secretariat of the Solidarity Economy (SENAES) implements a program to incubate cooperatives as an employment-generation strategy among the poor. The program is staffed by university professors and social workers, and women constitute the majority of its participants. (<http://www.mte.gov.br/ecosolidaria/sies.asp>)

India's Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) organizes very low-income self-employed women producing in the informal sector in a type of producers' cooperative/union, complete with a cooperative bank, training, advocacy, and support circles (<http://www.sewa.org>)

In 1965, Japanese women started the Seikatsu consumer cooperative, when their local milk supply became contaminated by toxins. Determined to find an alternative to the toxic milk they had been buying in their stores, they created direct links with farmers producing organically, innovating

⁵Kabeer, Naila. 2009. Keynote Speech, International Association for Feminist Economics, Boston, June.

⁶Neamtam, Nancy. 2008. "Chantier d'Economie Sociale: Building the Solidarity Economy in Quebec," in Allard, Jenna, Carl Davidson, and Julie Matthaei, eds., *Solidarity Economy: Building Alternatives for People and Planet*. 2008. Chicago: ChangeMaker (<http://www.lulu.com/changemaker>).

the direct consumer-farmer linkages that are now spreading in the U.S. in the form of community-supported agriculture. The SC now has 600 consumer coops, with 22 million members, and has also spawned worker coops, boycotts of detergents, GMO's, and hormones, and many other projects (<http://www.seikatsuclub.coop/english/>).

One amazing aspect of the women's cooperative as a tool for solidarity economy transformation is that they have become a powerful vehicle for women's feminist and anti-classist/caste consciousness raising. In stark contrast to superexploitative low wage jobs in capitalism's burgeoning informal sector, which force women into a supersubordinate, disempowered position, worker-owned cooperatives work to train and empower their members. Research indicates that women's cooperatives actually create a feminist consciousness-raising process among their members, by providing them with a safe and supportive space in which to learn how to resist and transform the male domination they are experiencing in their homes.⁷

Another new solidarity economy form of enterprise which women across the world are heavily involved in is "social enterprise." Social enterprises are private businesses, traditionally or collectively run and owned, which transcend the nonprofit/for-profit divide: while they pay a return to capital invested, they are started with, and organized around, the explicit goal of filling social needs.⁸ Such enterprises are feminist in that they uplift the subordinated feminine quality of caring, which has been excluded from the core of capitalist firms, directly integrate feminine caring values into the mission of the firm.

Women, The State, and Solidarity Economy Initiatives

Women's determination to provision their families' needs has also led them to spearhead solidarity economy movements to confront state power. For example, when women in Peru were unable to feed their families during an economic crisis, they formed community kitchens and demanded that the state furnish them with funds to purchase supplies and pay the workers. Their demands that their children receive milk resulted in a successful "glass

⁷Bisno, Amy. 2010. "Voices from the International Cooperative Movement: The Case for the Empowerment of Marginalized Women through Cooperative Enterprises." Wellesley College. Unpublished paper.

⁸Bornstein, David. 2007. *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*. New York: Oxford.

of milk” program, also funded by the state.⁹ Another example of women acting directly, is Nobel-Prize-winning Wangari Maathai’s Greenbelt movement of reforestation and women’s consciousness-raising in Africa, a women-generated, grass-roots led response to the failure of capitalist-organized economic institutions and the Kenyan state to maintain the environmental integrity necessary for their survival. Still another well-known example is the Cochabamba rebellion in 2000, in which women and men in Bolivia, unable to afford water after a neoliberal water privatization program, protested in the streets until the pro-people, anti-neoliberal government of Evo Morales was installed, and the program reversed.

Solidarity Economy Values: Money, Women, and Feminism

A key aspect of emergent solidarity economy practices and institutions which expresses women’s traditional sensibilities, and resonates with feminist values, is their break with capitalism’s privileging of monetized activities. It is fair to say that, over the past two centuries, the capitalist economic system has systematically worked to insert the desire for money (and the power over others and over resources that it affords) as the core value, supplanting all else. Greed is good; a person’s value is measured by their income and wealth; and a woman (or man) who performed unpaid care work in the home is not working, unproductive, and excluded from GDP calculations.

Solidarity economy initiatives reverse this trend. First, they reject money as the key means to fulfillment, even the fulfillment of material needs, realizing the value of the nonmonetary activities and transactions. Knowledge that access to income through capitalist economy sources is unstable at best and precarious at worst, especially in these times of crises, has helped fuel this recognition. Indeed, constructed as responses to economic crises, unemployment, and lack of income, many solidarity economy practices involve the minimizing of spending, or the filling of needs without the use of money. Reversing the valuation of income-generating work above all else, the solidarity economy values doing things yourself (DIY) or ourselves (DIO), like planting vegetable gardens; sharing, open source, freecycling, gleaning; or finding ways to swap or barter. This valuation of the nonmonetized extends to a valuation of unpaid caring work in the family, or community work, both

⁹Villareal, Altigracia. 2009. “Women and Food Sovereignty in Mexico,” Presentation at the Forum on the Solidarity Economy, Amherst, Massachusetts, March.

the traditional province of women. It also means that women are strongly represented in these aspects of the solidarity economy.

Solidarity economy initiatives also transcend the obsession with money – the “all values can be reduced to money” approach – by redirecting attention to the primacy of supportive, healthy relationships to human well-being. Workplaces are not just places to produce output – they are places where workers spent time together, and are in relationship. The creation of more egalitarian, cooperative, and mutually beneficial relationships in workplaces is a focus of the solidarity economy, not just because it results in a better product, but also because of the positive effect of such work relationships on the workers themselves. Similarly, the practice of fair trade – through which consumers are willing to pay more for a good because they know the producer and the planet are being treated fairly – reflects the valuing of healthy, mutually beneficial economic relationships above money. There is also a recognition of the value of healthy communities – as a source of mutual support, information, innovation, and as a source of mutually fulfilling relationships. The connection of this focus to women and feminism is clear. Women’s work has, historically, been the work of creating and maintaining relationships, in families and extended families. And a core focus of feminism has been the transformation of these relationships, particularly the intimate husband/wife relationship, from a relationship of domination and disempowerment to a mutually supporting, loving one.

Solidarity Economy and the Provisioning of Needs

Solidarity economy initiatives correct the capitalist focus on greed and money in another way – by refocusing the economic discourse from the generation of profits and output, to the issue of the provisioning of human needs. As such they reflect women’s traditional work and sensibility, and build it into the core motivation for production and consumption. Feminist economists, among others, have long proposed the provisioning of needs as the proper focus of economics¹⁰ (Nelson), as the proper goal of economic life.

A prime example of solidarity economy organizing around provisioning is the burgeoning food sovereignty movement. This movement, in which women play the primary role, is based on the simple demand that all people should have the right to healthy food. Farmland should be cultivated, first and foremost, to feed the people, not for export crops. City dwellers should

¹⁰Nelson, Julie. 1993. “The Study of Choice or the Study of Provisioning: Gender and the Definition of Economics,” in Ferber and Nelson eds., *Beyond Economic Man*.

have access to urban gardens to grow their own food. The food sovereignty movement opposes industrial agriculture and genetic engineering, which, although highly profitable, produce unhealthy products, pollute the environment, and destroy small farmers. It also advocates for access to land for all those who want to farm it. Interestingly, the movement has defined food sovereignty as requiring “an end to all forms of violence against women.”¹¹

The focus on the centrality of the provisioning of needs also means that people’s basic needs have priority above relationships of private property. In particular, if there are needy people, and resources that are unused – like uncultivated lands, or boarded up factories, or vacant homes and apartment buildings—people should be able to use them. Land-takeovers by the MST in Brazil; factory takeovers in Argentina and elsewhere (even Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago); housing squatting and the anti-eviction movement throughout the world; all are part of this growing practice. One of my favorite examples is when mothers in Denmark whose children needed a place to play cut down the fences surrounding a large abandoned military facility, jump-starting the development of a solidarity economy community called Christiania.

Domination, Subordination, Feminism, and Solidarity

In their most evolved state, self-defined solidarity economy practices and institutions actively reject not only gender, race, and class hierarchies, but the hierarchical top/bottom, winner/loser, domination/subordination meme that is at the core of capitalism. They reject the notion that one advances oneself by “bettering,” exploiting, beating, or dominating others; that the rich and powerful are good, and winners, and the poor are bad, losers. Instead, they strive to be deeply egalitarian, and empowering, especially to those who have been oppressed, including women. Their core is mutuality, cooperation, the search for mutually beneficial “win-win” solutions. This generates a stance of openness to learning and transforming in liberating ways, in response to input from the most oppressed groups. Feminist activism and theory have played an important role in developing this general anti-oppression stance, a stance which moves beyond identity politics (feminists are women, anti-racists are people of color, etc.). As a movement which has brought women together across class, race, sexuality, religion, country,

¹¹Patel, Raj. Plenary Speech, Canadian Summit on a People-Centered Economy, Ottawa, May 30, 2010)

it has learned to incorporate in its platform opposition to all of the other forms of oppression which affect women. The breakdown of oppressive economic hierarchies of all types – not just gender hierarchy – has become a basic tenet of feminist activism and theory in the U.S., as a result of the interventions of Black, lesbian, working-class, and disabled women.¹²

What emerges on the other side of the transformation of our domination/subordination-based economy is the solidarity economy. At the core of the solidarity economy is an understanding that we are all in this together, part of an interdependent whole. We can not assure our own flourishing if we do not also assure the flourishing of everyone else, including the most downtrodden, and of earth. We can not experience well-being if we are not also in right relation with other human beings, and with nature. Instead of competing with one another to move up the class hierarchy, we need to work together to find solutions to our economy's crises that work for everyone.

Conclusion: The Solidarity Economy, Caring, and The Empowered Feminine

Capitalist development began the process of women's liberation by drawing women out of the home and into capitalist-organized labor markets. The limits of equal opportunity feminism have channeled women's resistance and creativity into more transformative, solidaristic economic forms. Now women are playing a major part in creating the solidarity economy all over the world. A key part of our contribution is to transform caring from an activity which embodies subordination and takes on the brunt of capitalist oppression, to a strong feminine activity – undertaken by men as well as women – which emphatically and nonviolently affirms life, and refuses to collaborate in the mistreatment or abuse of oneself, of others, or of earth. The rising of women and of the feminine represents “a radical social change that starts in the most intimate of spaces” and extends into the economy and across the planet¹³ (Patel). As it finds creative expression in the proliferation of solidarity economy practices and institutions across the planet – these institutions are, in turn, further transforming women out of the subordinated feminine, and teaching both women and men to relate to others

¹²See for example, hooks, bel. 1984. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press and Mohanty, Chandra. 2003. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

¹³Patel, Raj. Plenary Speech, Canadian Summit on a People-Centered Economy, Ottawa, May 30, 2010)

and to earth in caring, mutually supportive ways.

About the Author

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