

## **Solidarity Economies: An Exercise in Remapping the Economy**

We need to redraw our economic maps. Or perhaps we need to start drawing economic maps in the first place. I have a feeling this might be a highly subversive activity – not always faithfully resembling the neoliberal models that supposedly represent the whole of our economic activity. In my own life, those elegant curves and complex equations seem only glancingly relevant. I am aware of the dominant cold capitalist calculus decreeing that it is somehow more “efficient” to demolish the varied small businesses in my town, to be replaced by a Wal-Mart Supercenter; decreeing that the layers upon layers of plastic enmeshing my purchases, soon to be enmeshed in a landfill, is merely an “externality”. When I go about my daily economic life, however, my decisions can be much less easily mathematized – they take into account people, relationships, and values. Indeed, when neuroeconomists map our brains while we make decisions about money, all sorts of rational and emotional regions are active.

My own everyday map of economic relationships and networks looks nothing like the traditional capitalist economy that supposedly dominates all else. I buy much of my food from local farmers, and, in the midst of moving, through the wizardry of Craigslist, most of my “new” materials have been gently used by someone else in my local area, and dispersing my “used” goods simply requires finding where they might be needed and appreciated next, not a disposal site. When I do buy new, I try to take along my personal (often dangerously convoluted) roadmap, pointing a way towards a purchase that somehow takes into account working conditions, environmental concerns, and animal welfare, with as few compromises along the way as possible. Many other things I give and receive don’t take place in the money economy at all, from gifts, to volunteer time, to payment-in-kind. I work in a non-profit, I bank at a local mutual bank, and I have countless other options for how I can more consistently live my values through my economic life.

This is not to say that I am some sort of economic saint. In fact it is still difficult not to be a mindless consumer. After all, my generation finds it much easier to identify exercising our political beliefs with attending a protest march in the midst of like-minded dissidents, and not with the contents of our carts at supermarket check-out lines (and what we carry them home in). This simple act of buying or not buying receives no rush of affirmation from the similarly self-righteous; it seems so lonely; it seems so futile and incremental. Moreover, there are a thousand ways that the capitalist economy makes it difficult, if not impossible, to live my values through my economic life, a thousand ways in which it is not even adequately designed to meet my basic needs, but there are also thousands of new economic practices and movements springing up to meet these challenges.

And I must add an additional point on my own personal map, seemingly far-flung, but incredibly close to the content of my work. It is a small informal community, on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where I first truly began to grasp the term “solidarity economy.” My inspiring teachers were a group of women who worked in a jewelry collective, a collective that had been incubated by a university program. Although this initiative was most likely one of their only opportunities for employment, they spoke not

of financial remuneration, as I had expected, but of the benefits of having confidence in their own skills, of having friends, of using the collective's space to hold educational programs for their daughters. In short, I was shocked to learn that the very same values that we hold to in our home lives could also be valued in our work lives. I was shocked to learn one of the central premises of the solidarity economy.

You see, the second point of drawing our economic maps is that this practice visibilizes a whole other economy – an economy that I am intensely interested in studying – the solidarity economy. The solidarity economy is the sum of all of those connected economic alternatives guided by values. It is not just a map, but it can be mapped because – unlike most alternatives, dreamed up by academics, existing only in curves, equations, text, and long-term vision – it already exists. It is growing organically from the grassroots.

The solidarity economy is already organizing coalitions in and among progressive movements around the world, and it emphasizes our connections to other people, and to our environment. Solidaritous practices are cooperative, egalitarian, democratic, locally based, and sustainable, and they allow us to express our values through processes of producing and consuming. The ultimate aim of these practices is the destruction of unjust hierarchies, the fulfillment of human needs, the development of human potential, and the preservation of our communities and environment. And so really, the solidarity economy is almost indefinable, because it is many things simultaneously. It is a collection of existing economic practices, as well as growing networks of these practices. It is theoretical framework based on values, one that describes an economy based on human needs rather than an insatiable drive for profit, as well as a global movement that advocates for economies that reflect these values. It can be a way of scaling up initiatives that work, of transcending political boundaries, and even of challenging neoliberalism

Many of these solidarity economy initiatives, initiatives that you and I may support every day, from worker cooperatives, to community-supported agriculture, to eco-villages, to time banks, to community credit unions, have been around for decades (if not invisibly co-existing with the dominant system for even longer), but the ways that they are connecting and spanning trans-national, cross-sector, multi-scaled projects is new. This new wave of organizing, this new framework of organizing, is spurred by the many crises of neoliberal capitalism. We are realizing that we must work together – in coalitions based on our shared values and not on identical institutional structure – to learn from each other and to fashion workable solutions. This is the solidarity economy.

On other continents, the solidarity economy has been organizing resistance for years, if not decades, while here in the U.S., these projects are sprouting through the cracks in neoliberalism as well, but the movement itself is just beginning. Just as elsewhere, the growth of the solidarity economy movement is connected to and facilitated by the Social Forum movement. Both have similar characteristics and yearnings, seeking to synthesize the experiences, values, and visions of progressive social movements, while at the same time respecting their diversity, and searching for a plurality of answers to neoliberal globalization through participatory learning and reflection. At the first U.S. Social

Forum, held in Atlanta in 2007. The U.S. Solidarity Economy Network ([www.ussen.org](http://www.ussen.org)) was born. Now a core group of diverse academics and activists – including myself – are far-flung nodes on a U.S. map, trying to bring the framework and the organizing to the U.S. Again, I think mapping is the key. We need physical mapping, to highlight the many innovative practices that already surround us. We need conceptual mapping, to show how diverse actors and institutions – from freegans to union organizers – can find themselves in the solidarity economy without participating in all its practices. We know all too well that mapping can delineate boundaries, but it can also be an exercise in inclusion.

I first learned that mapping can be a radical act when I stepped into Rio de Janeiro, and realized that most maps did not include the over 600 informal communities patchworking the city. The dwelling places of almost 2 million people, 1 in 5 residents of Rio, were simply not visible. Our traditional maps of economic activity can be similarly exclusive. The solidarity economy is a lens for seeing these alternative practices, and for helping them grow. It is a descriptive process, rather than an abstract theory to be debated and quantified. The increasing toll that the neoliberal economy makes on our relationships, our earth, and even our psyches demands a change, a process of transformation and mobilization that will require an ongoing process of redrawing our economic maps. Making the transition requires what Immanuel Wallerstein calls a “middle-run strategy,” it will require making tough choices, forging strategies, and choosing the lesser of two evils, and a map, like a battle plan, can help us in ways that a model cannot. Luckily we have already begun the charting. Look at your own economic relationships; I’ll bet you’ll find some practices that are already challenging the empire, I bet you’ll find some practices that could be shifted into the solidarity economy. Draw your maps, and redraw them to show the solidaritous practices and institutions you would like to support throughout your economic life. There is your goal, my friend.

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