

## **Everyday Contestations to Neoliberalism: Valuing and harnessing alternative work practices in a neoliberal society.**

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*"The capitalist structuring of life excludes participation from so much of human existence."*

*(Buck, 2009: 68)*

### **Introduction**

Written at a time of profound economic, ecological and social crises, this chapter promotes greater awareness around the pervasive nature of "alternative" non-capitalist spaces within the "advanced" economies of the western world. Drawing attention to the geographies of these alternative economic spaces, the aim is to consider how these work practices could be better framed, valued and understood in a more expansive economic ontology, so that they may be harnessed as a means of encouraging more empowered, inclusive and sustainable economic modes of production, exchange and consumption. Despite the dogmatic counter-narratives emanating from the incumbent political-economic elite, the starting point of this chapter is that neoliberalism has never been able - nor ever will be - able to achieve the goals of empowered, inclusive and sustainable economic production, exchange and consumption. There are many reasons for this, not least that capitalism - memorably referred to as an act of "structural genocide" (Leech, 2012) - is an economic system condemned to perpetual crisis. As Peck (2010a, 10) noted:

For all the ideological purity of free-market rhetoric, for all the machinic logic of neoclassical economics, ... neoliberal statecraft is inescapably, and profoundly, marked by compromise, calculation, and contradiction. There is no blueprint. There is not even a map. Crises themselves need not be fatal for this mutable, mongrel model of

governance, for to some degree or another neoliberalism *has always been* a creature of crisis. [emphasis added]

Yet despite increasingly vociferous criticism of the failure of capitalism, neoliberalism still retains a colonising presence *across* the political-economic spectrum at this time of crisis (see Peck and Tickell, 2002; Peck, 2010a,b; Springer, 2010) and as such exerts an incredible hold over the economic imaginary as to what is possible, preferable and achievable. To throw off this neoliberal straitjacket, and embrace more expansive, diverse and heterodox post-neoliberal visions of the future of work and organisation is thus difficult, even if desirable. Drawing on empirical evidence not only to reject the (mythical) spectre of a monolithic capitalist economic landscape, but also to underpin and map out an "alternative" economic imaginary, is an important intervention. It not only transcends the view that there is some meta-theory which is "the alternative" to neoliberalism capitalism but grounds this alternative as existing in the here and now, in in the mundane everyday practices of people all over the world. Indeed, the argument of this chapter is that these alternative forms of work and organisation that are ubiquitous are essentially *anarchist* in all but name.

While the chapter is focused on interpreting, valuing and harnessing these alternative economic spaces so as to present a truer representation of the complexity of the economic landscape, it is sobering to observe how re-reading the current reality sometimes seems far from sufficient to usher in a post-neoliberal society. Of course opening up the economic imaginary (what is desirable, possible and achievable) to display the seeds of the future as existing in present everyday practice is an important political act. However, whether this is the 'best' way to contest and challenge neoliberalism *in practice* is perhaps questionable. Others might call for more direct action that openly confronts neo-liberalism. However, it is sobering to bear witness to the naked violence that the neoliberal state can draw upon, as has been all too readily deployed to suppress and destroy dissent. This has certainly been evident

where popular, bottom-up, and truly democratic demonstrations have emerged across Europe - Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy, UK - particularly in response to the toxic impacts of austerity measures, and the neoliberalism of higher-education. What neoliberalism cannot do, however, is to do the same with the ubiquitous mundane everyday acts of economic practice and organisation found in every household and community. For us therefore, this everyday site represents a useful starting point for constructing alternative economic spaces.

The structure of the chapter is divided into three sections. The first focuses on the evidence gained through time-use surveys, undertaken by governments in the western world. This method is taken in conjunction with the more nuanced qualitative findings of organisation promoted by household work practice surveys carried out in England. This allows both a more accurate understanding of the highly limited and uneven purchase that capitalist practices have actually had across western society to emerge, and also suggests that the dominant trend is one of informalisation (i.e. more time being spent in non-commodified alternative work practices). In turn, such a radical re-appraisal of "the economic", one that recognises the heterodox nature of our economic landscapes, also requires more complex theoretical representations of the economy to come to the fore. In highlighting the significant limits of capitalism, and the importance of alternative economic spaces, consideration as to how to better represent, value, protect and develop these work practices are made. To this end it is suggested that naming forms of alternative work practice is important. In casting a critical gaze at these self-organised economic spaces, which draw on mutual aid, reciprocity, co-operation, collaboration and inclusion, it becomes apparent that many of these already-existing economic spaces are recognisably and demonstrably *anarchistic*. This then invites, in the third section, the question of how to respond to the challenge of harnessing and developing (new) anarchic spaces and forms of economic practice. How can these spaces

illustrate the ways forward so as to open up our future to more empowering and inclusive economic modes of production, exchange and consumption beyond neoliberalism?

## **Thinking Beyond Neoliberalism**

"Neoliberalism seems to be everywhere." (Peck and Tickell 2002, 382)

Neoliberalism "generally refers to a new political, economic, and social arrangement emphasizing (capitalist) market relations, minimal states, and individual responsibility" (Springer, 2010, 1025). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the hegemonic positioning of neoliberalism, by a mainstream political economic discourse, has been so successful that neoliberalism has become one of those concepts that proves "difficult to think *about* them when it has become so commonplace to think *with* them. The conventional wisdom can seem ubiquitous, inevitable, natural, and all-encompassing." (Peck, 2010b, xi). To demonstrate its dominance over the economic imaginary Shukaitis (2010a, 304) considers a scenario where you:

"Ask someone how an economy would run if not based on private ownership. Ask them how society would operate without a state. Chances are they will find it very difficult to describe, which is odd considering that for thousands of years of human history there was no state or market economy. But yet such has become so normalized that thinking outside of such is nearly impossible for many people."

Thus to think *properly* about - let alone engage identity with - 'alternatives' to neoliberalism is a considerable task. As Byrne et al (1998, 3) observed:

"To re-read a landscape we have always read as capitalist, to read it as a landscape of difference, populated by various capitalist and non-capitalist economic practices and institutions - that is a difficult task. It requires us to contend not only with our colonized imaginations, but with our beliefs about politics, understandings of power, conceptions of economy, and structures of desire."

However, it is strongly emphasised in this chapter that the best chance of encouraging a "post-neoliberal" space to emerge involves demonstrating how 'the alternative' is not wedded to some utopian future, but rather is embedded in the desirable, practical and enactable informal coping strategies that are known and familiar in the here and now. Happily, the findings here reinforce those made elsewhere (see Shannon, 2014). As Fuller et al (2010, xxv) observed: "The world of diversity is not to be found in Neverland. Instead it is real, actual, material; a world in the making rather than a world of make-believe." The case for "the alternative" being hidden in plain sight will be made shortly. Before that, it is important to understand how this may challenge the dominant neoliberal narrative about capitalism, and the future of capitalism. With this in mind, the chapter engages with the powerful narrative of the commodification thesis.

The commodification thesis assumes that the capitalist market, "is becoming more powerful, expansive, hegemonic and totalizing as it penetrates deeper into each and every corner of economic life and stretches its tentacles ever wider across the globe to colonize those areas previously left untouched by its powerful force" (Williams, 2005, 1). Crucially, across vast swathes of academic, policy-making and wider public circles, the empirical foundation that underpins this thesis is never questioned. Rather it is *assumed* to reflect the economic reality/ies of the advanced economies of the western world. To see whether or not the thesis holds up to the evidence, attention is drawn to time-use surveys. Time use surveys have become an influential method of quantifying different types of economic activity (work-based, paid, unpaid etc.) and comparing how these vary across space (e.g. nationally) and over time. Gershuny (2011, 4) has been particularly influential in developing this unit of measurement from the 1980s. Here he explains what this survey aims to do:

"Time-use...describes the allocation of time among various circumstances and subjective states. It is a key social indicator, which finds particular applications in the assessment of individuals' material welfare and well-being. It provides the core

measure of amounts of work in specific paid occupations (“normal/actual hours per week”), and for unpaid work in private households or in volunteer groups.”

When the findings of the time-use survey are held against the arguments of the commodification thesis, a radically different interpretation of the uneven economic geographies between 'paid' and 'unpaid' work across western society emerges (see Table 1).

**Table 1 Allocation of Working Time in Western Economies**

| Country      | Paid work<br>(minutes per day) | Non-exchanged work<br>(minutes per day) | Time spent on non-exchanged work as % of all work |
|--------------|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Canada       | 293                            | 204                                     | 41.0  |
| Denmark      | 283                            | 155                                     | 35.3  |
| France       | 297                            | 246                                     | 45.3  |
| Netherlands  | 265                            | 209                                     | 44.1  |
| Norway       | 265                            | 232                                     | 46.7  |
| UK           | 282                            | 206                                     | 42.2  |
| USA          | 304                            | 231                                     | 43.2  |
| Finland      | 268                            | 216                                     | 44.6  |
| 20 Countries | 297                            | 230                                     | 43.6  |

*Source:* derived from Gershuny (2000 Table 7.1)

Without question, taken both individually and collectively, when time is taken into account, the figures fiercely contradict the suggestion that capitalism (i.e., paid work) is all pervasive. Rather, the reality of the extent of capitalism is far shorter than would be expected, should the commodification thesis hold true. Indeed, the average number of minutes spent in paid work

was just over 90 minutes more than non-exchanged work in more than twenty countries surveyed (see Burns et al, 2004). Moreover, when the same evidence base, collated from over 20 countries, is used to indicate the shift over time (e.g. from the 1970s to the present day) between paid and unpaid work as a percentage of total work, this shows *more* minutes per day spent engaged in unpaid or subsistence work (see White and Williams, 2012a, b).

A richer, more detailed and meaningful impression of work practices and organisation can be achieved when the time use survey is considered alongside a household work practice survey. A particular strength of the latter is that it encourages a richer, complex and pre-dominantly qualitative understanding of economic participation at the household and community level to emerge. Table 2 shows the UK localities where this approach has been undertaken.

**Table 2 Household Work Practices: UK Localities Studied**

| Locality-Type   | Area                         | Number of Interviews |
|-----------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Affluent rural  | Fulbourn, Cambridgeshire     | 70                   |
| Affluent rural  | Chalford, Gloucestershire    | 70                   |
| Deprived rural  | Grimethorpe, South Yorkshire | 70                   |
| Deprived rural  | Wigston, Cumbria             | 70                   |
| Deprived rural  | St Blazey, Cornwall          | 70                   |
| Affluent suburb | Fulwood, Sheffield           | 50                   |

|                 |                               |     |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|-----|
| Affluent suburb | Basset/Chilworth, Southampton | 61  |
| Affluent suburb | West Knighton, Leicester      | 50  |
| Deprived urban  | Manor, Sheffield              | 100 |
| Deprived urban  | Pitsmoor, Sheffield           | 100 |
| Deprived urban  | St Mary's, Southampton        | 100 |
| Deprived urban  | Hightown, Southampton         | 100 |
| Deprived urban  | Saffron, Leicester            | 50  |

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Providing more detail in terms of what is included in household work practice surveys, a wide range of tasks are considered (see Table 3). Typically, participants are asked how they get everyday tasks completed and for each task, the interviewee is asked whether the task had been undertaken during the previous five years/year/month/week/day (depending on the activity). If conducted, first, they are asked in an open-ended manner who conducted the task (a household member, a relative living outside the household, a friend, neighbour, firm, landlord, etc.) and the last time that it had been undertaken. Second, to understand their motives to get the work done, they are asked why they chose that particular individual(s) to carry out the work, whether they were the household's first or preferred choice, and if money was not an issue, would they have preferred to engage a (formal) professional individual, firm, or company to carry out the task? Third, they are asked whether the person had been unpaid, paid or given a gift; and if paid whether it was 'cash-in-hand' or not and how a price had been agreed. Finally, they are asked why they decided to get the work done using that source of labour so as to enable their motives to be understood.



**Table 3 Indicative list of Material tasks investigated in the questionnaire**

| Nature of the task   | Individual tasks  |
|----------------------|---|
| Property maintenance | Outdoor painting; indoor decorating (i.e. wallpapering; plastering) replacing a broken window; maintenance of appliances; plumbing; electrical work.            |
| Property improvement | Putting in double glazing; house insulation; building an extension/ renovating; putting in central heating; DIY activities (carpentry/ putting up shelves etc.) |
| Routine housework    | Routine housework (washing dishes/ clothes/ cooking meals) cleaning the windows; doing the shopping, moving heavy furniture.                                    |
| Gardening activities | Sweeping paths, planting seeds/ mowing lawn   |
| Caring activities:   | Childminding; pet/animal care; educational activities (tutoring); giving car lifts; looking after property.   |
| Vehicle maintenance  | Repairing and maintenance   |
| Miscellaneous        | Borrow tools or equipment; any other jobs   |

While acknowledging that there are significant differences evident across the household work practices within the deprived and affluent wards studied (see Table 4), the important finding for our purposes here lies in the aggregate percentages. This displays the existence of not a neo-liberal market society but an economy of difference and diversity. The penetration of the

market into the household is shallow and uneven. In terms of challenging capital-centric perceptions and expectations, therefore, there are several particularly important findings here.

**Table 4 Participation Rates in Different Labour Practices**

| % respondents in last 12 months participating in:  | Deprived urban | Affluent urban | Deprived rural | Affluent rural |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| <i>Monetised labour</i>                            |                |                |                |                |
| Formal paid job in private sector                  | 16             | 48             | 19             | 49             |
| Formal paid job in public and third sector         | 20             | 27             | 18             | 25             |
| Informal employment                                | 5              | 7              | 6              | 8              |
| Monetised community exchange                       | 60             | 21             | 63             | 30             |
| Monetised family labour                            | 3              | 6              | 2              | 4              |
| <i>Non-monetised labour</i>                        |                |                |                |                |
| Formal unpaid work in private sector               | 1              | 2              | 1              | 2              |
| Formal unpaid work in public & third sector        | 19             | 28             | 21             | 30             |
| Off the radar/ non-monetised work in organisations | 2              | 0              | 2              | 1              |
| One-to-one non-monetised exchanges                 | 52             | 70             | 54             | 73             |
| Non-exchanged labour                               | 99             | 100            | 100            | 100            |

Source: Colin Williams's own English Localities Survey

Focusing on the urban localities for example, first, the majority of monetised transactions were not to be conducted by those in formal paid jobs in the private sector. Instead, 60 per cent of monetised exchanges in deprived localities (where the gross household income was less than £250/ week), and 21 per cent in affluent localities, were accounted for by monetised community exchange. Burns et al (2004, 32) refer to this type of exchange as 'autonomous' paid informal work, where people engage in paid work mostly for friends, relatives and neighbours (and) exhibits strong characteristics of mutual aid. Mutual aid (one-to-one non-monetised exchanges which takes place between households) was also a key informal coping strategy, as was self-provisioning (work that is non-exchanged labour by members of the household for the household).

Far from a commodified world in which the capitalist market is dominant over other spheres of production, what we can clearly identified here in these localities therefore, are real, dynamic, and meaningful modes of alternative exchange, ones which are neither market-like nor profit motivated (in the narrow monetary sense) (see also White, 2011; White and Williams 2012a,b).

Capitalism, having less purchase in the present than is dominantly assumed, is therefore but one possible mode of organisation. We are in many important and authentic ways, already living this alternative economic life in the here and now. Ultimately the evidence that underpins the central arguments of this paper, when taken to their most radical and logical conclusions, draw new epistemological representations of the economic. Under this critical epistemological gaze, it is capitalism that becomes a *utopian* (im)possibility; an economic *alternative*, a *fantasy*. As Williams (2005, 5) argued, it is "those who assume the ubiquity of commodification who are living in a dream world rather than facing the stark reality of economic life today."

## Representing and Valuing "The Economic"

"Of course, one person's alternative is another person's orthodoxy." (Parker et al. 2007, xiii).

Given the centrality of "alternative" work practices in the advanced economies of the western world, how should this diversity - and the dynamic economic relationships that underpin different work typologies - be better represented and visualised? Here a total social organisation of labour approach has been particularly instructive (Table 5).

**Table 5: Typology of forms of community engagement in the total social organisation of labour**

| PAID   |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|
| 1. Formal paid job in public, private or voluntary sector<br><br>e.g., formal job in voluntary organisation<br><br><b>FORMAL</b> | 2. Informal employment<br><br>e.g., wholly undeclared waged employment; under-declared formal employment (e.g., undeclared overtime); informal self-employment | 3. Paid community exchanges<br><br>e.g., paid favours for friends, neighbours & acquaintances | 4. Paid household/family work<br><br>e.g., paid exchanges within the family<br><br><b>INFORMAL</b> |
| e.g., unpaid work in formal community-based group; unpaid internship   | e.g., unpaid children's soccer coach without formal police check   | e.g., unpaid kinship exchange, neighbourly favour   | e.g., self-provisioning of care within household   |
| 5. Formal unpaid work in public, private & voluntary sector  | 6. Informal unpaid work in public, private & voluntary sector  | 7. One-to-one unpaid community exchanges  | 8. Unpaid domestic work  |
| UNPAID   |  |   |  |

Source: Williams (2009: 2) Fig 1: Typology of forms of community engagement in the total social organisation of labour Unravelling cultures of community engagement: a geographically-nuanced approach

What is particularly important to note here is the way hash lines are used to emphasise the fluidity and dynamism between the economic typologies identified. There are no *absolute* economic practices that exist in splendid isolation, and that operate in some pure space independent of 'other' types. In contrast, the figure encourages the reader to appreciate the complex economic landscape as existing on spectrums of difference (on the  $y$  axis between paid and unpaid, and on the  $x$  axis between formal and informal).

By collapsing formal boundaries that separate "formal" (capitalist) and "informal" work practices calls into question the very concept of "alternative" economic spaces. Interrogating where the alternative exists, and what it represents (and how it can be preserved and protected against creeping forms of commodification and appropriation) is extremely important. Jonas (2010, 3) captures the danger of a washed down, co-opted "alternative" here:

it now seems as if alternatives are proliferating everywhere. Whether it is lifestyle, housing, finance, economies, food, music, politics, language, culture, holidays, gardening, decorating, activism, entertainment or, for that matter also, academic research, we all want to embrace alternatives.

Uncritically highlighting non-capitalist "alternative" possibilities, new visions, new futures of work and organisation, clearly is problematic, and a more rigorous discussion is needed as to "whether or not alternatives are necessarily seen as alternatives to the mainstream per se." (Jonas, 2010, 4). For example, focusing on the question of housing, Hodkinson (2012) interprets the alternative(s) to market provision as being 'alternative-oppositional', 'alternative-additional' or 'alternative substitute'. As Hodkinson surmises: "alternatives can either happily co-exist with or substitute for dominant social configurations, or seek to transform and transcend them." (p 426)

One significant way of defining and protecting the grounds on which a radically oppositional (anti-capitalist/post-neoliberal) alternative exists is to represent it by another name:

*anarchism*. On so many levels, these self-organised, bottom-up, inclusive, free-from-coercion empowering forms of work practice are examples of anarchy in action. Colin Ward (1973 [1996], 8) drew attention to the importance of recognising the anarchism in the everyday, which he considered as present within

common experience of the informal, transient, self-organising networks of relationships that in fact make the human community possible, rather than through the rejection of existing society as a whole in favour of some future society where some different kind of humanity will live in perfect harmony." (Ward 1973 [1996], 8)

Elsewhere, there are many further bonds between (many) alternative economies outlined here with an anarchist collective emphasis on "the social" (see Badelli, 1972; Day 2010; Jun, 2012; Landauer, 1895 [2010]; McKay, 2008]). For DeLeon and Love (2010, 160): "anarchist theory is informed by the autonomy of the individual, the importance of small and localized communities, the move toward more organic and organizational structures, social justice and the freeing of our desires." What we would like to emphasise here is a working understanding of anarchism as a theory of organisation that considers alternative work practices; "a description of human organization rooted in the experience of everyday life." (Marshall, 2011, 17) Ward, like Kropotkin who inspired him greatly, saw anarchism in action, rooted (however fleetingly) in the everyday, his anarchist perspective being, "mainly concerned with the relations between people and the environments in which they lived, worked and played" and promoting an understanding anarchism as a theory of organisation, in which "the ideal-typical organizations were voluntary, functional, temporary and small." (Levy 2011, 13)

The next pressing question to be addressed then becomes just 'how' can these *anti*-capitalist anarchic economic spaces be harnessed? This is a significant challenge. As Posey (2011, 299) notes:

The economic turmoil of the last 2 years has shown that three decades of neoliberalism have failed to produce an economy that is not bubble-prone and that is capable of improving the living standards of most people in the world. Articulating an alternative to neoliberalism is therefore an urgent task.

Despite the crisis of neoliberal state capitalism, which continues to debilitate and destroy many organic life-affirming social, political, ecological and economic spaces, we must recognise the remarkable resilience and resistance embodied in these spaces, as well as in the people that organise and invest in alternative economic strategies. There is a remarkable truth that captures the contemporary realities of economic life that so impressed the Russian anarchist geographer Kropotkin at the turn of the twentieth-century. For now, as then:

Although the destruction of mutual-aid institutions has been going on in practice and theory for full three or four hundred years, hundreds of millions of men [and women] continue to live under such institutions; they piously maintain them and endeavour to reconstitute them where they have ceased to exist. " (Kropotkin, 1901 [1998]: 184)

The realities of economic life in the contemporary world embody great hope, promise and possibilities for anarchist 'alternative' visions of work and organisation to continue to take seed, blossom and flourish.

## **Conclusions**

Moving from a "capital-centric" reading of economic exchange (Gibson-Graham, 1996) and re-positioning capitalism more properly as *one* possible mode of economic exchange, is in one sense to embark on a radical departure from normalised imaginations, conventions and expectations about what we are told "the economic" is, and where our economic futures lie. And yet, paradoxically, peering into non-commodified activities is to pay attention to, celebrate and value those type of activities of production, exchange and consumption that all of us are already actively participating in, renewing and creating in the form of a diverse array of vibrant and real, 'alternative' non-capitalist forms of economic and political spaces in our daily activities. In this way, re-reading the/our economic landscape does not require strenuous leaps of imagination and mental gymnastics that result in visualising some sort of

utopian brave new economic world. On the contrary, to look beyond capitalism, is to observe the 'alternative' that plays a central role in our everyday coping strategies. But interrogating the alternative further is necessary should one wish a "post-neoliberal" future to become more of a reality.

Identifying a great deal of the alternative forms of organisation as anarchy in action is an important step in establishing a firm foundation from which to understand and promote these work practices, and ensure that they are not co-opted by creeping commodification. These diverse "anarchist" alternative economic practices can - and do - provide real opportunities to move society toward truly empowered economic, environmental and socially sustainable futures. It is hoped that the central arguments develop in this chapter will promote further creative discussion as to how "alternative" non-capitalist spaces can be more fully engaged and promoted. If there is one final thought, it would be remain conscious of, and sensitive to, the diverse economic landscapes - and the possibilities that they present. Thinking and acting "beyond neoliberalism" brings sharply into focus an overlooked world of informal work and organisation predicated on the values of community self-help: physical, social and emotional worlds that we (co-) create, engage, maintain, harness through our voluntary participation and support. These alternative and uneven spaces - in the final analysis - are intimately known, deeply valued and, we contend, essentially anarchist in all but name.

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