



Power and privilege in alternative civic practices: Examining imaginaries of change and embedded rationalities in community economies



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Neoliberalism
Imaginaries of change
Alternatives
Community economy
Responsibilization
Environmental privilege
Food networks
Community energy
Barter groups
Community bicycle shop
Land trusts

ABSTRACT

Community economies can be considered as examples of the diverse economies growing outside common capitalist logics of private accumulation and profit, seeking to bypass or reconfigure dominant global trends of societal and economic organization. Yet, these communities seem to fit quite well under a neoliberal program in which responsibilities are shifting downwards, favoring multi-level governance over State intervention and accountability. This binary character makes imperative an open and critical discussion on the development of community initiatives, including on the motivations and visions of citizens practicing alternative ethical consumption. This article explores the neoliberal rationalities embraced by community members within the imaginaries of change they frame and examines how these rationalities contribute to (re)producing neoliberal conditions and forms of governance. Our analysis builds on semi-structured interviews conducted among the members of 11 initiatives in 5 EU countries and on participant observation. We argue here that communities articulate an “alternative imaginary” of change that appears imprinted by core neoliberal rationalities around questions of individual responsibility, the role of the State, and civic participation and equity. It is an imaginary related to the construction of CBEs to by-pass existing socio-political and economic configurations. This imaginary more often than not responds to neoliberal promises of individual freedom and autonomy and seems to undermine CBEs’ more radical possibilities at the same time obscuring more diverse voices of transformation.

1. Introduction

In the Global North, community economy practices are often initiatives committed to a transition towards a low-carbon and more localized economy, and built around principles that distance themselves from traditional capitalist forms of economic organization. In this paper, we refer to initiatives such as barter groups, community gardens and farms, consumer cooperatives, bike repair workshops, community energy projects, waste recycling and transformation groups, land trusts, and other forms of community economy.

The scholarship on community economy is positioned within two opposite political and discursive perspectives: an uncritical celebration of its practice and effects or an equally uncritical condemnation of its limitations (Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015). From a more nuanced perspective these community-based economies (CBEs) can be seen as examples of diverse economies growing outside common capitalist logics, recognizing their potential to bypass or even reconfigure dominant

global trends. Such a posture also increasingly recognizes that CBEs fit quite well under a neoliberal program in which responsibilities are shifting downwards towards civil society, favoring multi-level governance over government intervention (Rosol, 2012; Guthman, 2008a; Pudup, 2008; Busa and Garder, 2015). It therefore calls for a more open and critical discussion of the development and role of community initiatives (Richardson, 2015).

In line with the more critical line of thought, Guthman and others have asked how activist groups “seem to produce and reproduce neoliberal forms and spaces of governance [and] at the same time [...] oppose neoliberalism writ large” (Guthman, 2008a:1172). From a definitional standpoint, neoliberal discourses promote community development as an essential channel of political engagement and as a compensatory mechanism for the inadequacies of the market (Jessop, 2002), which in turn helps to produce neoliberal subjects and mentalities (Pudup, 2008; Slocum, 2004). Other studies have shown how neoliberalism constrains activism by limiting “the arguable, the

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fundable, the organizable, and the scale of collective action” (Guthman, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c), and how it creates a mental block that prevents individuals from imagining a more fundamental social change (Žižek, 2009), and addressing, among others, deeply-rooted privileges and power relationships (Anguelovski, 2015b).

In this paper, we embed the discussion around the sort of articulations between neoliberalism and its contestation on the ground (Leitner et al., 2007), specifically looking at community-based economies. We also aim here to contribute to the analysis of the “parallels and tensions between neoliberalism and environmentalism” (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Swaffield, 2016). Additionally, a number of scholars have pointed to the need for more extensive qualitative work to fully understand the behaviors and motivations of citizens engaging in alternative ethical consumption choices (Johnston et al., 2011), examining “not just what people buy, but also how they connect purchasing with citizenship or social engagement” (Busa and Garder, 2015: 340). In this paper we seek to answer the following questions: Which are the collective imaginaries of initiative’s members about the possible societal change they can achieve and the strategies they can use to achieve change? What are the implications for the initiatives if their collective imaginary of change embraces certain neoliberal rationalities? By imaginaries of change, we refer to preconceived ideas, visions, and discourses framed by individuals about what societal change should look like and the role that communities have in the transition to a more sustainable, low-carbon and socially just economy. In the paper, we examine how such imaginaries influence the actions that individuals undertake and how, when these individuals are part of a movement, they imprint the collective discourse of the group. Imaginaries underwrite different responses to shock and challenges, normatively prescribe the types of futures that should be attained and influence in the translation from ideas into practices (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009; Felt et al., 2016). In other words, they influence what is possible and what is desirable – they make CBEs a preferred solution for a number of contemporary social and environmental problems over other possible strategies (see the plans of progressive European cities to promote and support the community economy).

Our analysis builds on in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted among the members of 11 CBEs in 5 EU countries and on direct participant observation. Our work reveals a common trend among CBEs where the development and articulation of an imaginary of change has been seemingly imprinted by core neoliberal rationalities. Those rationalities are linked to questions of individual responsibility, the role of the State, and civil participation and equity. It is an imaginary related to the construction of CBEs to by-pass existing socio-political and economic configurations. We refer to this imaginary as the “alternative imaginary” throughout the document. We argue that this imaginary might cause unexpected or undesirable outcomes related to the reproduction of existing power and privilege. Though couched in terms of social transformation, the imaginary put forward by CBEs’ members may inadvertently serve to support the hegemony of neoliberal conditions and forms of governance. Although the collective imaginary presented here might not be the only one embedded in CBEs, it is a recurrent imaginary throughout many of our interviews. We also recognize that different and even contradictory imaginaries might be combined within a social movement or even within individuals (Beguiria Muñoz, 2016; Di Masso and Zografos, 2015).

The paper proceeds as follows; We first examine how the literature on neoliberalism and neoliberal subjectivities offers a new perspective on the development and internal dynamics of CBEs. Upon the presentation of our research design, we analyze the members’ imaginaries of change of and how certain neoliberal subjectivities are influencing CBEs’ actions and strategies hindering CBEs’ more radical possibilities. Finally, we discuss the relevance of our study for scholarship on the politics of alternatives.

2. Placing community economies in the framework of neoliberalization

2.1. Community economies between spaces of resistance and neoliberal rationale

In this paper, we refer to community economies as grassroots groups or organizations working in the field of sustainability which in general use bottom-up solutions for providing certain goods or services in a way that reflects the needs of the community. By gathering people from a geographic area (a community of place) or around a particular idea (community of project) or (as frequently occurs) both, CBEs can take diverse forms, including: DIY workshops, food consumers’ cooperatives, social enterprises of low carbon courier services, community supported agriculture projects, and community energy projects. CBEs are seen as “liminal social spaces of possibility” (Harvey, 2012), as nowtopias (Kallis and March, 2014), as experiences that organize differently, bringing new shared rules and practices (Raven et al., 2008) and aiming to create an urban environment of more local, self-organized, autonomous and resource efficient forms of organization.

Since the 2007–2008 financial and economic crises, these initiatives have become more visible and have at times even become part of the political program of governments at different scales. Examples of this burgeon are “new municipalisms” attempts to favor activists groups or national governments’ austerity policies (Hancock et al., 2012; Magrinyà, 2015; Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015). CBEs are widely recognized as sites of grassroots participation and place-based community development (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014), as forms of enhancing social interactions (Conill et al., 2012), as drivers of a low-carbon economy (Burch, 2010; Seyfang, 2010), as economic relocation agents (Bailey et al., 2010; Hopkins, 2009), and as tools for alleviating poverty (Stockton and Campbell, 2011; Walker, 2008). Furthermore, they are also praised for challenging hegemonic ideologies, resisting capitalistic logics, and empowering society (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014). Many also recognize community economy initiatives as enactors of politics of possibilities, that is as groups that operate in diverse ways within the current socio-political regime and economic system and challenge the discursive domination of the capitalist system (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Lee et al., 2008). By doing so, these groups might help to recover “the imagination of what a world that isn’t capitalist could look like” (Harvey and Haraway, 1995:519).

Although these diverse economies represent real variations of the globalized and profit-seeking capitalist economy, they operate within a broader political and economic regime: the neoliberal program. Neoliberalism can be described as “a near-global project [...] to reconfigure economic and political governance in line with many of the founding precepts of liberal theory” (McCarthy, 2006b:87). Its main pillars are self-regulating markets, double separation of the State from the economy and from civil society, and promotion of “community” (or a plurality of self-organizing communities) as a “flanking, compensatory mechanism for the inadequacies of the market” (Jessop, 2002:455, see also Levitas, 2001; McCarthy, 2006a, 2006b). Political restructuring within the neoliberal regime involves the establishment of new forms and rules of governance able to support such pillars.

Scholars have argued that the top-down neoliberalization regime is inseparably linked to “the production of neoliberal mentalities of rule – specifically attempts to enforce market-logics, to create conditions in which competition can flourish, to shift caring responsibilities from public sphere to personal spheres, and to depoliticize or render futile various social struggles over resources and rights” (Guthman, 2008b:1243). In this regard, Foucault’s concept of governmentality, although not unique to neoliberalism, is highly relevant to explain the everyday reproduction of mentalities in regards to community action (Schofield, 2002; Boelens et al., 2015; Pudup, 2008). The new governance of the neoliberal era is precisely linked to the deployment of a “common sense of the times” (Peck and Tickell, 2002), one that embeds

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