



Navigating "An Age of Chaos": Alternative Economies Offer a Regenerative and Sustainable Path Forward

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Abstract

Our current economy, governed by an insatiable growth imperative, is unsustainable for our finite planet and all its inhabitants. Thus, there exists a critical need to identify and (re)build alternatives to capitalism, as we navigate the increasingly volatile economic, social, and environmental polycrisis of our world today. Based on a (non-systematic) review of trans-disciplinary scholarship, the current topic review article, provides a brief overview of several alternative economies. Although some argue for a systemic overhaul, while others recommend transitional approaches, each seeks ways of producing, exchanging, consuming, and allocating surplus that embody values of solidarity and sustainability over profit maximization and exploitation – of people and Earth, as evidenced in various ancestral and innovative models, practices, and policies. Given the transformative potential of these alternatives, attention is then brought to the ways in which social workers and allied professionals are well-trained and positioned to support the ongoing theory, research, and implementation of alternative economies, locally-to-globally as we (re)build a regenerative and sustainable path forward.

Keywords: Capitalism, Solidarity Economy, Environmental Justice, Community, Social Work

Introduction

The 2007-2009 "Great Recession" resulted in a catastrophic housing market crash, job loss, business failure, and banking collapse [1, 2]. While the majority suffered under the weight of such precarity, those corporations and executives most responsible received enormous bailouts and bonuses [3, 4], tragically highlighting the inequitable and crisis-prone nature of capitalism [5]. Nearly twenty years later, the situation is dire, as we careen towards economic, social, and environmental collapse.

The 2022 World Inequality Report notes "the top 1% took 38% of

all additional wealth accumulated since the mid-1990s, whereas the bottom 50% captured just 2% of it" [6]. In the U.S. alone, the Institute for Policy Studies reports that three individuals own more wealth than half of the combined U.S. population (~160 million people), and that one in every five households have "zero or negative net worth," known as "underwater households" [7]. Exploring the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted (and exacerbated) extreme global inequality, Oxfam International [8] notes, "...an extreme boom in billionaire wealth is not a sign of a healthy economy, but the result of a profoundly harmful and violent economic system."

Economic precarity is met with intensifying social turmoil. Genocide, wars, and armed conflicts continue in Ukraine-Russia, Israel-Palestine, Myanmar, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, and Haiti to name but a few [9], resulting in devastating loss of life, disability, famine, disease, and widespread displacement [10, 11]. Increasing concerns regarding threats, crimes, and human rights violations amongst women and girls, migrants and refugees, minoritized individuals and communities abound [12-15].

And the climate crisis – that which affects all life on Earth, present and future generations – continues to accelerate perilously. This past year was crowned the hottest on record [16], accompanied by catastrophic wildfires, droughts, hurricanes, and flooding around the world [17]. Greenland's melting ice sheet alone, we are warned, could result in a global sea level rise of nearly one foot given current levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide [18]. The most recent *Living Planet Report* notes a "73% decline in the average size of monitored wildlife populations" globally – since 1970 alone [19]. The confluence of such trends has led the world's preeminent scientists and researchers to argue that we are rapidly approaching irreversible planetary "tipping points," the effects of which have the potential to be "...catastrophic, including global-scale loss of capacity to grow major staple crops" and lead to "...the breakdown of economic, social and political systems" [20, 21]. Speaking at the United Nations Headquarters in January 2024, the U.N. Secretary-General, António

Manuel de Oliveira Guterres, thus warns that the “the world has entered an ‘age of chaos’” [22].

Economic inequality, social devastation, and environmental ruin are seen by many as inevitable outcomes of a power-and-profit consolidating economic system [23-26]. Thus, trying to surmount the current polycrisis [27] without the (re)development of alternative, post-capitalist economies is seen by many as futile, at best [24, 26]. Given the urgency of this moment, the current essay thus strives to present a brief review of several alternative economic frameworks, highlighting the ways in which these alternatives not only critique capitalism but also outline various ancestral and innovative models, practices, and policies to foster a just and sustainable economy. Thereafter, attention is brought to the ways in which social workers and allied professionals are well-trained and positioned to support these efforts as we (re)build a regenerative and sustainable path forward.

Literature Review

Despite the longstanding social and political rhetoric asserting “there is not alternative” to capitalism and the neoliberal policies that have ushered its global ascendancy, we must remember that it – like all economic systems – is a social construction. And, as such, alternatives can and do exist. Driven by the chaos of our world today, economic alternatives continue to be theorized and realized by scholars and community activists the world over.

To follow is a brief overview of the relevant literature related to several of these alternatives, to include the solidarity economy [24, 28, 29] and cooperative commonwealths therein [30-32]; well-being economy [33]; doughnut economics [34]; transitional, plentitude economy [35]; and community economies [25, 36]. Although some argue for a systemic overhaul, while others recommend transitional approaches, this review highlights the ways in which each seeks ways of producing, exchanging, consuming, and allocating surplus that embody values of solidarity and sustainability over profit maximization and exploitation – of people and Earth.

The Solidarity Economy and Cooperative Commonwealths therein. One such example, the solidarity economy is understood as “a global movement to build,” [24] guided by “values of equity in all dimensions (race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on), cooperation and solidarity, economic and political democracy, sustainability, and pluralism” [28]. Though the language of the “solidarity economy” emerged in Latin America [37] and Europe [38] in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is comprised of a mélange of age-old as well as innovative ways of living, laboring, and caring for each other and Earth, to include regenerative and sustainable environmental practices (e.g., community supported agriculture, permaculture, local food hubs, etc.), non-monetized exchanges to meet social and material needs (e.g., bartering, ‘really, really free markets,’ gifting, time banking), participatory/protagonist democratic practices (e.g., public assemblies, neighborhood councils, participatory budgeting), non-extractive/predatory banking and lending (e.g., community credit unions, public banks), and dignified caring labor (e.g., multistakeholder and social care cooperatives) and workplace democracy more generally (e.g., worker cooperatives, wage ratios, downshifting), to name but a few [39-46].

As the Solidarity Economy Movement continues to evolve, economist Jessica Gordon Nembhard and co-op educator/developer and co-founder of the Synergia Institute (<https://synergiainstitute.org/>) John Restakis [30-32, 47, 48] remind us that cooperative commonwealths have and continue to form the bedrock of the solidarity economy. Far from a novel idea, commonwealths emerged more than a century and a half ago during the early cooperative movement led by Robert Owen and others [31]. As defined by Gordon Nembhard, a cooperative commonwealth is “created from the bottom up, building on multiple grassroots cooperative enterprises and democratic community-based

economic practices, these networks collaborate and federate from the local to municipal, regional, national, and international levels” [30]. The three primary goals of which are “sustainable economic prosperity for everyone, poverty elimination, and enhancing local democratic control over economic activity, capital, and collective wealth” [30], which—individually and collectively—are thought to “...reinforce and reward human solidarity, to care for the planet, to nurture community, and to support the fullest realization of our aspirations as social beings” [31].

Well-Being Economy

Political scientist Lorenzo Fioramonti [33] likewise outlines a shift from extractive, growth-oriented economies, development practices, and related metrics (e.g., GDP) towards a well-being economy. With its fixation on growth-at-all-costs, he argues the former fails to account for the cost of negative externalities, to include air, water, and land pollution and the related health and social impacts. In contrast, the latter proposes a multi-dimensional understanding of economic and social well-being that situates development as a process through which to bring about “...an improved state of existence for humanity and our ecosystems” [30]. Towards those ends, he encourages the (re) development of “horizontal” organizational and political structures that center cooperation in, for example, networked local economies, (reclaiming) the commons, and participatory governance structures.

Doughnut Economics

Similarly, economist Kate Raworth invites us to reimagine the possibilities of circular or doughnut economics, that center “a social foundation of well-being that no one should fall below and an ecological ceiling of planetary pressure that we should not go beyond” [34]. Much like Fioramonti, the objective thus changes – away from growth, towards thriving; from devaluing to (re)valuing (monetarily and otherwise) care; from enclosing towards reclaiming the commons (land, technology, etc.); from disavowal towards a recognition of and working within human and planetary limits. She outlines twelve basic needs to ensure thriving, to include – access to food, clean water, education, healthcare, and decent work [34], underscoring the need to “...create an economy that is distributive by design” [34].

Plentitude Economy

For economist and sociology professor Juliet Schor the way forward – particularly as a transitional framework – involves an economy of plentitude, which “puts ecological and social functioning at its core, but it is not a paradigm of sacrifice” [35]. Although underscoring the need for large-scale change (e.g., ending fossil fuel subsidies, environmental accounting, education and healthcare reform) [35], she advocates for small-scale efforts to compel macro-level shifts. Towards those ends, she encourages downshifting – reducing working hours (e.g., 80% time for 80% pay) – to not only address unemployment but also create more time. With this time, we are then able to do more for ourselves and each other locally, (largely) outside the market/monetized economy: grow and store our own food and fix, reuse, share, and gift things. We are also able to prioritize time with others, to rebuild often-threadbare social networks and communities by centering relational versus transactional exchanges. All of these, she argues, are associated with less environmental strain (e.g., less commuting, less consumption of throwaway goods) and remind us that we can, if we so choose, (re)define *true wealth*.

Community Economies

Feminist economic geographers Gibson-Graham have long engaged the theory and practice of post-capitalist economies. Spanning the terrain of philosophy, economics, and social-political theory to community-based, participatory action research, they remind us “...our economy is what we (discursively and practically) make it” [25]. Informed by psychoanalytic and Buddhist thought, they raise

questions regarding our economic subject formation – the how and why of its development and maintenance, associated desires, and fears; and, thus, the processes through which self (and collective) transformation might be potentiated. They ask, for example, “How do we become not merely opponents of capitalism, but subjects who can desire and create ‘noncapitalism’” [25]?. Towards that end, In more recent work, Gibson-Graham and colleagues recently provided an accessible compendium of ideas, learning activities, and examples of individuals and groups engaged in the work of (re)building community economies, understood as a “...space of decision making in that we negotiate our interdependence with other humans, our species, and our environment” [36]. They raise questions about how we do or might live well, distribute surplus, engage with others, consume, care for the commons, and (re)invest in our (human and planetary) future. They too offer examples of strategies like downshifting (working less hours), universal health care, self-provisioning, wage solidarity, worker-owned enterprises, community-supported agriculture, and gifting. Therein, they encourage us to see ourselves as “economic protagonists” and to (re) tell and share stories of collective responsibility and care, attuned to time and place, and often and openly contested and reconfigured. They note, that in their work they have “...taken back the economy by reframing it as a space of ethical action rather than a machine that must be obeyed” [36].

The current essay has presented an admittedly brief overview of literature pertaining to several alternative economies. This is done not to simplify these (or the many other) efforts, but rather to reflect that although each offers unique language and emphases, systemic overhauls vs. transitional adjustments, there exist shared values, principles, and strategies throughout. Values related to care, interdependence, and reciprocity with and among people and Earth. Principles of solidarity, equity, democracy, sustainability, and pluralism [29, 50]. And, related strategies and policies that support the development of resilient social infrastructures and ecosystems, built upon, for example, community-based, participatory decision-making and governance (e.g., public assemblies, neighborhood councils), community-supported agriculture, downshifting/reduced working hours, safe and affordable cooperative housing, wage solidarity and worker-owned enterprises, self-provisioning, gifting, as well as more macro-level shifts to include universal health care, free education, universal basic income, and public banks.

Implications for Practice

Social Work and Alternative Economies

Gaining momentum, alternative economic frameworks are increasingly recognized by many international organizations as providing promising models, practices, and policies through which to address poverty and inequality and build a sustainable future, to include: the Office of Economic Cooperation and Development [51], the United Nations [52], and the International Labour Organization [53]. These very outcomes – in addition to many of those notes above – have and continue to inform the research, practice, and teaching foci of social work and many other allied professions. One need only look to the *American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare's* call to action via the “Grand Challenges for Social Work” to see the intersection, with their stated goals of “individual and family well-being” (i.e., close the health gap, build healthy relationships to end violence), a “stronger social fabric” (e.g., eradicate social isolation, create social responses to a changing environment), and a “just society” (e.g., reduce extreme economic inequality, achieve equal opportunity and justice) (<https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/>). As such, it is recommended that social workers and allied professionals look to the theory and practice of alternative and solidarity-based economies as a fecund framework to advance related research, policy, and practice as we collectively navigate the polycrisis facing our world today [27].

In so doing, we are reminded that social workers are uniquely trained and well-positioned to support and lead transdisciplinary efforts to explore alternative economies. For example, many – if not most – social work programs center training in community-based participatory research, social theory, community organizing, policy development and analysis, and program planning and evaluation. And, as professionals deeply rooted in community who have gained the necessary exposure to economic alternatives (e.g., policies, practices, models, historical and contemporary examples via their infusion across the curriculum, practicum, and continuing education opportunities), there appears a plethora of occasions to collaborate with individuals, community groups, local non-profits (e.g., worker centers) and leaders to increase awareness of and begin to implement and evaluate alternative and solidarity economies within and beyond local communities.

Towards those ends, we could, for example, support the development of age-, linguistically-, and culturally appropriate curricula regarding alternative economic models, practices, and policies to address, for example, housing insecurity, poverty, political disengagement, and the climate crisis (e.g., highlighting, for example, housing, social, and worker-owned cooperatives and collectives; participatory budgeting; community gardens and regenerative agricultural practices). Therein, calling upon popular education techniques to center alternative epistemologies and cosmologies, trans-or-anti-disciplinary approaches that stress interconnected systems. Through dialogue and storytelling explore the ways in which our labor, care for each other and the earth, use of our time and resources – are all intimately connected to the economy. In so doing, we might inspire knowledge acquisition, experience, and confidence with alternative economic models in ways that encourage community members to assume leadership roles as we collectively (re)build communities of care and solidarity.

In so doing, a (re)valuing of care – rhetorically and in practice – appears critically important not least of which given the ways in which the social work profession itself continues to be devalued (e.g., unmanageable caseloads, poor wages, lack of respect; [54]). Within such conversations, social workers might explore alternative models of care/service provision (e.g., worker cooperatives, social care cooperatives) that center quality care and dignified working conditions. They might likewise begin to examine the roles and responsibilities of the state, exploring more directly the challenges and possibilities of shifting, as suggested by John Restakis, away from a welfare-state (dependency) model toward that of a “partner” or “enabling” state, wherein “citizens, acting through civil institutions that they control (predominantly, locally), directly influence the direction and execution of public policy” [32]. Such efforts would embody a critical shift – professionally and politically – away from the engagement of individuals and communities as “service users” [31] towards engaging them as “protagonists” [29, 36] in (re)building a just economy.

In addition to educational and practice opportunities, social workers are encouraged to support research and evaluation efforts within alternative and solidarity economies. For example, community-based participatory research approaches and multi-dimensional evaluations of models and policies that center care *and* dignified labor (e.g., worker-owned and social care coops), as well as age-, culturally-, and linguistically appropriate alternative economies curricula and pedagogical approaches (e.g., popular education) would be of great benefit. Also, longitudinal analyses of educational efforts and associated outcomes emanating from geographically specific communities engaged in building a local (and/or regional) solidarity economy ecosystem are critical. In so doing, insight is gained regarding how and in what ways sustained alternative economies education has supported community-specific shifts in consciousness;

the redefining (and measurement) of (human and community) welfare and prosperity; the building of programs, policies, and organizations responsive to social need *and* benefit; the conditions that give rise to (or foreclose) supportive local policy, programs, law, funding, and training mechanisms; and the development and growth of value chains, as examples [55]. Such effort will be indispensable in building awareness of economic alternatives, monitoring (and adjusting) ongoing efforts, identifying best practices, and building an evidence-based and advocacy platform for economic alternatives to capitalism.

Discussion

We find ourselves at a trailhead. Our current path, paved by capitalism's insatiable growth imperative, is unsustainable for our finite planet and all its inhabitants. The current essay highlights the promise of alternatives (re)emerging from the chaos of our world today, a turning towards economies built upon solidarity and equity, sustainability and democracy where objectives shift from growth, towards thriving; from devaluing to (re)valuing (monetarily and otherwise) care for each other and the earth; from enclosing towards reclaiming the commons (e.g., land, technology, etc.); from disavowal towards a recognition of and working within human and planetary limits.

Such efforts recognize the complexity of humans as both self-interested *and* cooperative/solidaristic [29], as members of a larger interconnected web of life. Therein, local communities are seen to foster opportunities for (re)connection with each other, our labor, and the land; as places of repair, of honoring dignified labor, of learning (again) how to engage in participatory/protagonist democracy and foster intergenerational sharing and (re)education regarding alternatives to capitalism, in ways attuned to local history, culture, and (evolving) context. Given opportunities for greater accountability, based on ongoing relationship-building, face-to-face and hands-in-soil interactions, local communities provide opportunities to explore and (re)define the role(s) and potential opportunities of the state as a partner in building a just and sustainable path forward. As community members, social workers, and allied professionals committed to greater justice in this world, may we remember, as noted by American author Ursula Le Guin, "we live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings" [56].

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