



Student demonstration against fees and cuts, Aberdeen. Credits: <http://anticuts.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Aberdeen-student-left-banner.jpg>

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## Anthropologists witnessing and reshaping the neoliberal academy

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*Learning away from neoliberalism: Lines of connection towards other worlds*

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## Learning away from neoliberalism

Lines of connection towards other worlds

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**ABSTRACT:** In this essay, I envision the university, not simply as a discreet institution with formal boundaries to attend to and defend from neoliberal and conservative assaults, but as a location of possibility from which to locate and advance projects that connect students and ourselves to the possibility of other economic worlds.

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At a Town Hall meeting this past February, a 20-year-old college student asked House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi if the Democratic Party might consider moving a bit more to the left on “economic issues”. Pelosi’s response was, in some respects, unsurprising.

«I have to say, we’re capitalist, and that’s just the way it is».

Pelosi’s assertion of capitalism as our natural condition was then followed by a confession, «we do think that capitalism is not necessarily meeting the needs with the income inequality that we have». Pelosi then lamented the imagined loss of a more moral, “stakeholder” economy that has been replaced by a less equitable “shareholder” economy.

On the one hand, Pelosi’s response resonates with what Badiou, Mouffe, Swyngedouw and others have described as “post-political”, a condition rising concomitant with neoliberalism in which social action is delimited by a pre-existing set of possibilities. Politics can then be reduced to discussing, or merely managing and administering, what is already possible. In this case, capitalism is claimed as a natural, invariant, encompassing condition. *We can admit that capitalism is not perfect. It might need some adjusting or even resisting. But, capitalism is simply the reality that we all live in.*

It’s useful to understand Pelosi’s response as a post-political strategy that polices discursive boundaries. But it would be a mistake to presume that it is indicative of a continued, broader post-political condition in the United

States that forecloses on a politics aimed at increasing the “possibility of other possibilities” (Badiou 2010). What might have been read a decade or two ago as a re-inscription of capitalist hegemony, today feels more like desperation; the very need to make public proclamations that we live in a capitalist world is symptomatic of the ruptures in the common-sense, naturalness of capitalism. Indeed, in the process of posing his question, the student at the town hall cited a 2016 poll showing that the majority of young people aged 19-29 now reject capitalism.

### *Neoliberalism and possibility at the university*

The student’s comment squares with my changing experience teaching undergraduate students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. As part of the U.S. higher education terrain, UMass has profoundly restructured in relation to and through public disinvestment, privatization, and market logics – what some characterize as “neoliberalism”. Labor conditions, university governance, campus space, teaching and learning, and institutional objectives all bear the marks of these restructurings while new affects, beliefs, and desires that steer the university towards the interests of capital circulate among administrators, faculty, and students (Hyatt, Shear, Wright 2017; Shear, Zontine 2017).

However, even as the university is more intricately woven into market imperatives – and as white supremacy and patriarchy structure inequalities and violence across and through identities – new threads of possibility for social and ecological well-being are laid bare. A decade ago, undergraduate students in my gen-ed classes displayed considerable emotional and affective resistance to critical investigations of capitalism and interrelated forms of oppression. Invested in the imagined rewards of hard work and individual achievement, their beliefs, hopes, and desires were woven tightly into the fabric of neoliberal fantasies. Today, many of my students have no such faith in the American Dream. They are well aware of their precarious economic and ecological futures. Like most of us, they are anxious and insecure, dissatisfied with the world we live in and wary of what is to come.

Of course, experiencing overwhelming precarity does not necessarily lead to a true desire for other ways of being. As Lyon-Callo (2017) discusses, it’s not enough for students to know and feel that capitalism is “bad”. Without other possibilities at the ready, a reasonable solution appears to be to reinvest in ourselves as individuals or, at best, to resist *the impacts* of exploitation and oppression. What then might be the role of anthropologists and other academics in creating and supporting projects for students that reveal

the “possibility of other possibilities” and that show and connect them to other ways of being in the world?

In the rest of this essay I envision the university, not simply as a discreet institution with formal boundaries to attend to and defend from neoliberal and conservative assaults, but as a location of possibility from which to locate and advance lines of connection to egalitarian worlds. I briefly describe the emergence of a solidarity economy (SE) framing of social justice in Massachusetts. I argue that the enabling conditions of SE are opening new possibilities for communities, activists, and students. I suggest some modest and practical ways that anthropologists and other academics might participate in further connecting students and ourselves to the enabling conditions of other worlds.

### *Solidarity economy*

Emerging as responses to capital accumulation and neoliberal ideology, SE is a movement and a framing of economy that has its roots in Latin America and Europe. Formulated and discussed in different ways – SE can be understood as an effort to organize economic relationships, practices, and institutions that reveal and encourage, rather than conceal and discourage, our sociality and interdependence. For example, *community land trusts* transform land from a commodity to a landscape in which the needs of individuals, neighborhoods, and ecology can be fully considered. Instead of alienation and exploitation structured in capitalist enterprises, *worker cooperatives* entail collective control and deliberation over world-making surplus. Following Tsing, if precarity is the human «condition of being vulnerable to others» (2015: 20), SE helps us to see, embrace, and organize around our humanity.

In Massachusetts, efforts have exploded around SE activity over the past 10 years, with explicit formulations in our three most populous cities of Worcester, Boston, and Springfield (Loh, Shear 2015; Loh, Jimenez 2017). Of particular interest, these efforts foreground a social justice frame that seeks to address exploitation and oppression by transforming the conditions that, in part, create inequalities and violence in the first place.

*A solidarity economy movement is emerging from lower-income communities of color in Massachusetts. This movement aspires to transform capitalism – as we know it – into a world rooted in values of democracy, justice, and sustainability. These dreams arise from those making Black Lives Matter, from immigrant workers making poverty wages, from ex-prisoners locked out of the mainstream economy, from tenants barely able to make rent, and from communities being displaced to make way for the 1% (Loh, Jimenez 2017: 3).*

Loh and Jimenez describe eight different SE networks in Massachusetts that are organizing through *consciousness shifting*, *building power*, and *alternative economies* in order to «transform and go beyond capitalism» (*ibidem* 7). SE makes claim to worlds that embrace our shared vulnerability, «at the base of these big dreams is collective care for each other – solidarity» (*ibidem* 4). SE enables people who are dissatisfied with or actively rejecting the set of existing possibilities delimited to capitalist ideology, to truly imagine, organize around, and enact other economic worlds. To illustrate further, I turn to a remarkable student activist group, Divest UMass.

### *Enabling conditions and the edges of other worlds*

In 2016 Divest made national news. After years of organizing, culminating in the occupation of the UMass administration building, Divest forced a public commitment from the Board of Trustees to divest the university's endowment from the fossil fuel industry. Shortly after this fantastic win, thoughts turned to a project of reinvestment. Rooted in an intersectional, climate justice analysis, Divest wanted to ensure that the divested funds were reinvested in a socially-just way. As ideas were formulated and discussed, Divest members encountered a solidarity economy frame, which has begun to reshape their imaginings and politics.

In the summer of 2016, some Divest leaders attended a meeting with the Boston centered Ujima Project. The Ujima Project aims to help cultivate solidarity economy through a community-controlled capital account; community members envision and then democratically decide how to invest in local SE enterprises and initiatives. It was during one of these visioning meetings that the Divest members began to reframe what was politically possible. One Divest leader describes how the stance towards possibility presented new affects to embrace.

It was the first time, that, well, it felt like a purely hopeful space. It was like, we have everything we need in this community... we need to connect the dots and use our own creativity and solutions. That was really, really, really cool.

For another prominent Divest leader SE is a way to help move beyond a politics of opposition and redistribution *within* our dominant economic ontology.

[Divest] was always [intended to be] about taking down the bad, and building the new. I was getting not very energized because I couldn't see a direction to go in after taking down the bad. Even when we talked about reinvestment it didn't make sense. I knew that capitalism was bad but, I didn't know how to get

out of that...then we went to Boston to talk to [SE activists]...we talked about the solidarity economy network that they were envisioning and thinking about that combined the theory and the values and practical things that were already happening. We don't have to wait for this thing that would come it was already happening.

Divest leaders have subsequently spread these new imaginings, affects, and desires – activated through the enabling conditions of SE – to membership and the broader public. This past winter, Divest held a well-attended teach-in at UMass featuring a panel of SE activists from across the state. The teach-in was intended as both general education and as the beginning stages of a potential campaign to reinvest in the SE movement. In addition to the potential campaign, members of Divest are now working with SE activists in a variety of ways through existing university structures. One has developed a collaborative research project involving video documentation that is a part of their senior thesis. Another has taken an internship with the Data Commons Project that is mapping and connecting SE. Still another has joined the communications committee of a growing worker cooperative organization in Springfield whose staff director is also the director of the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network.

### *Lines towards other worlds*

SE invites a politics from which to envision and organize around “new” and suppressed ways of being. It's but one example of a project that shows us the possibility of, and begins to connect us to, other worlds. Worlds in which our precarity – our vulnerability to others – can be collectively embraced and social and ecological well-being can be more fully realized. I suggest that anthropologists concerned about the multi-faceted dimensions of what some describe as neoliberal restructuring of the university can pay careful attention to the opening of multiple political fronts as capitalist ideology loses its coherence. As we struggle against the impacts of capitalism and related systems of oppression in, through and beyond the university, we can mobilize our existing resources and practices – our teaching, writing, and research, and even “neoliberal” practices like internships and volunteer opportunities – to help create and support lines of connection towards other worlds.

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