

Consensus and activism through collective exchanges: a focus on El Cambalache, Mexico

Consensus
and activism

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore how consensus decision making serves as a foundation for organizing an alternative economy while the agency of the economic project itself organizes participants because it serves to distribute resources as people need them and foment a community of sharing based on the concept that as individuals we are lacking but as a community we have enough. The paper asserts that as activists looking to foment change, alternative economic projects in themselves are actors in organizing community building and resistance to capitalism.

Design/methodology/approach – *El Cambalache* (The Swap in English), located in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, is an exchange-based money-less economy that trades unwanted items as well as knowledge, abilities and skills that one wants to share. The project receives anything; specifically used, broken and/or unwanted electronics as well as just about anything else that one might possess. In exchange people provide laptop maintenance classes, language exchange, land to be worked, rooms, gardening services, objects, stories, etc. The rules in this money-less non-capitalist economy organize participation through one exchange or many.

Findings – Consensus decision making is an effective method for engaging in non-hierarchical research projects.

Originality/value – This project contributes to research in heterodox economies by presenting an original project with a new suggestion for exchange value as an inclusive process of exchange among participants in the economy. It also provides evidence that consensus decision making can be a useful and productive method for research.

Keywords Chiapas, Feminism, Heterodox economics, Anarchism, Consensus decision making, Decoloniality

Paper type Case study

Introduction

In Chiapas, Mexico as in many places, structural violence abounds. Among the many violences suffered by those living in this area, is a systematic denial of access to basic resources. Food, healthcare, literacy, potable water; money, technological devices such as cell phones and computers; and a well-maintained infrastructure of roads and electrical lines as well as many other resources are hard to come by for most people. Since the Spanish conquest of this region many groups of indigenous peoples have rebelled against the various colonial and neo-colonial governments, the slave holding plantations, and the corporations that deny access to these resources (Garcia de Leon, 2002).

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In contemporary times the fight for resource access continues. In Chiapas, though the struggle of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation is among the most well-known organizations internationally, a good number of projects fight for autonomy. Many organized groups of people work on a variety of levels to increase resource access through the creation of autonomously governed territories, campesino organizations, autonomous media collectives, direct producer to consumer networks and other heterodox economic projects. This paper tells the story of the process of organizing people in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas through a small money-less economy called *El Cambalache* (The Swap in English). The project seeks to increase resource access for participants while generating an inclusive feeling of resource-full-ness. *El Cambalache* promotes the idea that while there is little access to money in this region, attaining money does not necessarily lead to amassing resources. This is particularly important when resources include solidarity, mutual aid, education, collective process and experience and other immaterial forms of wealth. Within this money-less economy it is recognized that each person in the economy might not have everything they need and want but as a community we have enough. Access to resources can be mediated without money.

Following Murray Bookchin (1986, p. 59), “[...] the state capitalism of our time organizes its commodity relations around a prevailing system of material abundance. A century ago, scarcity had to be endured; today, it has to be enforced [...]” This material abundance stems from technological advances that have increased production of basic and not-so-basic goods to a point that there are enough resources for people around the world to meet their needs (Murray Bookchin, 1986). However, bureaucratic systems mediated through a state-enforced neoliberal capitalist-military complex effectuate limited and complicated resource access (Graeber, 2016). In response to the combination of material abundance of resources and enforced scarcity, a plethora of heterodox economic projects have bloomed around the world over the past 20 years. These projects take the shape of time banks, sharing boxes, collective and cooperative businesses, mutual aid networks, cooperative and collective housing, free stores, Really Really Free Markets, Swap Shops, alternative currencies, counter economics, participatory economics and many other non-capitalist projects.

The work of JK Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies Research Network has made a significant contribution to de-centering capitalism as the monolithic omni-present economy. Their work explores the diversity of economic practices that are happening at all times among different actors across time and space. Participation in heterodox economic projects provide the possibility for participants to practice community building and economic resistance. Karl Polanyi (2001, p. 60) writes:

[...] social relations are embedded in the economic system. The vital importance of the economic factor to the existence of society precludes any other result. For once the economic system is organized in separate institutions, based on specific motives and conferring a special status, society must be shaped in such a manner as to allow that system to function according to its own laws. This is the meaning of the familiar assertion that a market economy can function only in a market society.

Following Polanyi, in a neoliberal capitalist state, laws and institutions are created and enforced to keep resources private rather than communal, to obfuscate from consumers knowledge of how their goods are produced and to maintain exclusionary classes with little mobility between them in order to keep labor cheap. By changing how these relationships take place, new, unknown ways of enacting the social are given space

to bloom. Embracing this knowledge within a heterodox economic project brings forth economic relationships privileged within what Healy (2009, p. 1652) refers to as epistemological pluralism. Relationships between humans and the more-than-human are given space to shift toward more mutually supportive, egalitarian interactions, where the roots of knowledge and what is considered knowledge are purposefully multiple. Heterodox economic projects are well positioned to meet the needs of participants while redistributing resources more horizontally. In particular, non-capitalist economic projects redefine how value is assigned to goods and services while increasing access to these resources for populations that live in money-poor areas. Furthermore, if a market economy requires a market society, in money-poor regions, where a market economy suffers, a market society is therefore less present as well as the accompanying institutions and legal frameworks.

El Cambalache[1] is a money-less exchange-based economy focused on reviving, repairing and reusing discards as practice in degrowth and decoloniality (Araujo, 2015). The project asks, "Can new economic realities be realized as a project of liberation?" and "How do economic rules[2] become realized as a non-capitalist economic project/community?" This paper focuses on how the rules and structure of a solidarity economy work to organize actors and networks in horizontal (non-hierarchical) relationships of sharing, support and exchange to create what Chakrabarti and Dhar (2015) call politicized social transformation. The project is generated by six women. People are invited to exchange things they no longer need, as well as knowledge, skills and services they want to share. Everything has the same value because the goods traded are discards and the services provided are done through the joy of sharing. It is also believed that each person has something to contribute, be it a story, a skill or a thing. The goods and services received in *El Cambalache* are actors in transforming lived contexts. Whether it be a stroller, which is often priced beyond what is accessible for many people, a sink, a sweater or a language class, each exchange creates a benefit, a shift, and a network. The economic rules, simple and clear, organize people and realize a communal sociality. In order to create horizontal relationships in the larger economic project, women in the Generators group of *El Cambalache* practice horizontal decision making through consensus within the concept that non-hierarchical relationships beget more of the same. This paper also asks the question, "Does the act of consensus decision-making create horizontal power relationships and/or do they construct a reality-to-be of non-oppressive politics which realize themselves in practice?"

This paper explore how ideas springing from anarchism, decoloniality and community economies present practical options for creating other, more liberatory socio-economic relationships. The methods and methodology section elaborates how action research can be mediated through consensus decision making. The findings and analysis sections explore how the project creates specific subjectivities and relationships among participants where exchange values are transformative social constructions that not only organize people but also create social experiences in a money-less economy. Finally the paper concludes with an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the organizational form of *El Cambalache* specifically through its use of rules and non-hierarchical decision-making practices in order to organize and invoke resistance to the normalization of capitalism.

Literature review: locating our economy

The social studies of science and technology and the decoloniality of thought bring to the fore the question of how knowledge is generated and who is generating it.

Though specifically, the decoloniality of thought examines how continuing currents of colonialism shape the experience and social construction previously colonized peoples. Both fields coincide in the concept that Knowledge is produced in a specific location by certain people that are permitted specific debates and knowledge production (Law, 2011; Mignolo, 2000; Sousa Santos, 2014a). Here, I differentiate between Knowledge and knowledge. Where Knowledge refers to institutional and highly indoctrinated (Chomsky, 2012) forms of knowledge that arise through practices of elite knowledge production that stem from centers of colonial and neo-colonial power. This Knowledge is produced and located in Europe, the USA, and many of the states in the Commonwealth of Nations as well as elite spaces in territories that have experienced colonialism. These places constitute what is often referred to as the Minority World (Esteva and Prakash, 1998), the Western World, the First World, the Developed World and/or the Global North. The use of these terms has been proliferated within the politics of development as a specific capitalocentric view of how nations and states should be developed so that they may better fit within an acceptable market structure (Sachs, 2010). The language used is telling of its strength as hegemony, where the words "world" or "global" are used to refer to what are actually few people and less space. The authors of such language claim their ideas are "universal" or that situated ideas are "generalizable." Beyond the borders of the worlds that create "universal" Knowledge there exists what Anzaldúa (1999) refers to as the borderlands; spaces (both physical and intellectual) where undetermined liminal lifeworlds bring about the decoloniality of thought. This proposal refers to rejecting the continuing colonialisms that make invisible the thought, theory and practice that reflect lifeworlds beyond the dominant hegemonies of the Minority World. Sousa Santos (2010, 2014b) has investigated the five century long process of epistemicide over most of the planet since the discovery of the Americas. His work demonstrates specific examples of how epistemes in colonial territories were violently destroyed in order to further the hegemonic imposition of a zero-point epistemology. Much work has been done to obfuscate the ontos and epistemes beyond the borders of empire, in spite of the multiplicity of unique, place-based ways of being and constructions of knowledge that saturate much of the world. In response to westernization through coloniality Walter Mignolo (2011) has suggested that scholars and non-scholars should engage in Epistemic Disobedience, where we actively create and privilege knowledge and praxis that defy those epistemes originating in the centers of empire.

In recognizing the epistemicide that was part of the centuries-long institutionalization of terror and violence called colonialism, it is important to be cognizant that the destruction was also ontic. The subjectivities of people that lived the oppression and destruction of their communities, knowledge and ways-of-being were negated as an institutional process. The decoloniality of thought, while promising for creating a liberatory politics of knowledge, is not without its critiques. Decolonial feminist scholars writing from locations within and beyond the borders of empire have called attention to the principally male voice that is present in these discourses, noting that hetero-patriarchy is often also a colonial construct. For example, in writing about how gender relations were among the first impositions of coloniality Maria Lugones (2010, p. 743) explains:

Only the civilized are men and women. Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as not human in species- as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild. The European, bourgeois, colonial, modern man became a subject/agent, fit for rule, for public life and ruling, a being of civilization, heterosexual, Christian, a being of mind and reason. The European bourgeois woman was not understood as his compliment, but as

someone who reproduced race and capital through her sexual purity, passivity, and being homebound in the service of the white, European, bourgeois man. The imposition of these dichotomous hierarchies became woven into the historicity of relations, including intimate relations.

The constriction of sex-based definitions of gender, compounded with the hierarchical ranking and dehumanization of every person that was not a white European bourgeois man has done work to hide and erase many subjectivities. The economic project that *El Cambalache*, a collective of six women, strives to create is located in this history and its residues. Our work in part is create other spaces for gender, women's thought and epistemic disobedience. Similar to Lugones proposal, we build this resistance collectively. Here I quote her at length because the similarities in our proposals, while they were not created knowing each other, are not coincidental, they come from living in these spaces:

One does not resist the coloniality of gender alone. One resists it from within a way of understanding the world and living in it that is shared and that can understand one's actions, thus providing recognition. Communities rather than individuals enable the doing; one does with someone else, not in individualist isolation. The passing from mouth to mouth, from hand to hand of lived practice, values, beliefs, ontologies, space-times, and cosmologies constitutes one. The production of the everyday within which one exists produces one's self as it provides particular, meaningful clothing, food, economies and ecologies, gestures, rhythms, habitats, and sense of space and time. But it is important that these ways are not just different. They include affirmation of life over profit, communalism over individualism, "estar" over enterprise, beings in relation rather than dichotomously split over and over in hierarchically and violently ordered fragments. These ways of being, valuing, and believing have persisted in the resistant response to coloniality (Lugones, 2010, p. 754).

This being together, creating close contact among those in resistance to colonialisms and allowing for our mutual collective creation in plurally gendered spaces that extend to all other life spaces is an essential part of *El Cambalache* that is elaborated later in this paper.

Scholarly practice, the work of producing Knowledge has played an important role in creating and obfuscating worlds. Gibson-Graham (2006), building on the work of Judith Bulter looked at the performative nature of the social sciences recognizing that scholars shift, perform and influence the realities they study. While Michel Callon (2007) and Timothy Mitchell (2007) have focused on how economists did not study and report on existing economic practices but rather created predictive suggestions, theories and models in order to constitute markets, politics and specific market regulations which then forge economic worlds. Callon refers to this process as not only being performative but also enacting performance, where performance is the active formation of economic practices and relationships (2007). In working to refute the idea that there is only one economy, the diverse economies framework reveals a wide range of economic interactions that happen among people everyday within and along side what was once considered a monolithically capitalist economy (Gibson-Graham *et al.*, 2013). The once common idea that capitalism was everywhere, in everything[3] has since been rejected to reveal a great range economic interactions. While it is evident that the governments of each nation-state maintain and extend the form of economy it has chosen to impose on its citizens, more situated sites of practice reveal many kinds of economic, socio-political, care-focused, ecological interactions (Araujo, 2016). Within economic relationships these exchanges may take the form of gifting, sharing, unpaid labor, barter and alternative-capitalist practices (White and Williams, 2014). While they are small, decentralized and varied in meaning and experience, these practices are ubiquitous (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Graeber, 2001).

Anarchist thought and practice strives to do away with all forms of domination (Clough and Blumberg, 2012, p. 337) by creating horizontal power relationships among humans and the more-than-human members of assemblages. While there is no one specific way to enact anarchism, there are many options for free expression as long as it does not oppress another member of the community. Non-capitalist economies can take on anarchist characteristics when those economies do not require domination to function. These networks are expressions of small though vibrant anarchist communities at work (White and Williams, 2014). Heterodox economic projects sometimes support a practical path toward autonomy. Where autonomy is the ability for participants to decide how the economy will function, who will benefit and how power relationships will work among its members. The goal of creating autonomy for an economic community or any other kind of community may be anarchist through practices such as mutual aid, the desire for freedom and self-organization (Chatterton, 2005, p. 545).

Resistance takes on many forms, from extensive mass movements, to active desertion, to individuals simply not obeying rules and procedures (Scott, 2012, p. 1985). Organizing resistance among people in a diverse and complex ontos-rich space often requires creative, novel approaches to tackling problems and envisioning resolutions. The relationship between activism/resistance, politics and economic organizational forms has a long history. Those who have opposed the dominant economy have suffered oppression and destruction in myriad ways. Be those systems feudal, slavery, state socialism, capitalism, or other economic systems, the cost for not practicing the system which one is expected to uphold is often a costly prospect, risking access to the resources necessary for flourishing, life and liberty. The embedded nature of the economy suggested by Polanyi may be present at the macro scale of nations, though at the micro-local scale, following the work of the community economies collective, there is a great diversity of economic praxis. At both macro- and micro-scales the relationship between how economic exchanges are practiced and the political experiences and goals of those practitioners are linked.

The great heterogeneity of economic praxis that simultaneously exists within and along side capitalist (Gibson-Graham, 2013; Roelvink *et al.*, 2015; White and Williams, 2014) and post-Soviet (Pavlovskaya, 2015) organizational forms further demonstrate on one side, active resistance to imposed economic systems and on the other side, desire by people to share, give, volunteer and exchange in ways not prescribed by a nation-state, but rather as they choose (Araujo, 2016). Other social processes at hand form and shift how economics are practiced. Norms such as the privileging of generosity rather than avarice, of well-being in the home rather than abandonment of children by their parents, care for neighbors and friends as well as mutual aid and support often guide how people interact with each other far more than official government mandates about the activities of homo economicus.

There are many examples of heterodox economic projects around the world that challenge the capitalist dominance of economic relationships. SEWA, the self-employed women's association in Ahmedabad, India is a trade union started by and for women that is not only a union that struggles for access to adequate income, but also full employment, literacy, shelter and education (Sewa.org). While the Mama Lus Frut scheme in Papua New Guinea provides income to women for collecting oil palm fruits that have fallen to the ground which is then used within the local indigenous economy to support many aspects of social reproduction (Gibson-Graham, 2004). In New York City several women's collectives work to make women's issues more visible while educating their communities and embracing horizontal decision-making structures

(in the next section I elaborate the importance of decision-making structures). These collectives include The Blue Stockings Bookstore, Activist Center and Fair Trade Cafe [4]; the WOW Cafe Theater[5] and Black Women's Blueprint[6]. Each project provides space for thinking about and organizing around issues of gender, access to resources and social empowerment. While this is only a short list of projects created by and for women and their communities, it is important to recognize that within each of these projects, women have created them in order to improve their access to resources and autonomy in their societies. Rather than solely looking to be incorporated into the neoliberal economy, they are working to have the collective effect of transforming their communities and increasing community members' resource access not only in physical goods but through networks of care and support.

Methods: learning how to swap

Research methods enact realities (Law, 2004; Mol, 2002). This project embraces performative economic research in order to put in motion an economy with horizontal power relationships where it creates space for, "the oppressed to become researchers of their own circumstances" (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 133) and create new spaces through action based community development (Gibson-graham, 2006).

Action research began in a series of conversations with Paty about what kind of economy we would like to be part of. Recognizing that we would have to work collectively to bring about a heterodox economic project, we posted flyers in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico during July, 2014 asking, "Have you ever dreamed of being part of an alternative economy project? We have too!" The project came out of an experience of frustration around feeling trapped in a predominantly capitalist economy, where years of activism had made small strides toward changing our economic interactions. The project was originally conceived as a non-capitalist economy, however, its form was unknown. In August, 2014, six women came together to meet, learn, and talk in a collective that continues to function and conduct economic research to this day. From the beginning it was decided that every meeting would have a physical work component or productive activity as well as a theoretical component while we organized ourselves to realize a community economy. The collective was informed from the first meeting that while the goal of the project would be to create a solidarity economy, we would also be conducting economic research as the economy grew. Though I am originally from New York, at the time research began I had been living in San Cristobal de las Casas for seven years and had participated in a number of collectives and social change projects. Wary and aware that many people, especially those involved in social struggles, frequently have problems with academics, I nervously explained that I was doing research for my doctorate and that each person could decide to participate in the project as a co-researcher or as they chose. Everyone said they were very interested in documenting our process and progression as a project. To this day, all information and discussion around how the project is presented is agreed upon by consensus. More recently, after a screening of our project's documentary film a scholar in the audience asked me about my positionality in the project. Later, I asked Sarai, one of the members of the collective what she thought about my presence as a scholar in the project. She responded, "I think what most academics don't understand is that they are not anymore important than anyone else." The other members of the Generators group are Sarai, Josefa, Cinthia, Mary and Paty. Two of the six Generators are indigenous women and all of the women in the group are Mexican except for myself, being from New York. Half of the group is from Chiapas. The group ranges in age from 22 to 54 years old at the time of writing with the median age being 35. Each member of

the Generators group has a job outside of the project, with work in biochemistry, a pharmacy assistant, a cafe barista, a cafe administrator, and an accountant.

In San Cristobal de las Casas there is a long history of activism and resistance. Since the Spanish conquest of Chiapas there have been mass rebellions about every 20-50 years (Garcia de Leon, 2002). The Zapatista uprising in 1994 was one of the most recent and recognized rebellions worldwide. However, locally, there are many organized leftist groups, made primarily of both campesino and indigenous peoples in resistance to the state and capitalism. Many activists, people that were once activists and those somewhere in between live here. In Chiapas there was never a mass killing of activists in resistance to the state on a scale similar to the genocide in Guatemala or El Salvador in the 1980s and 1990s. Rather, while there has been violence and massacres, most participants in resistance groups have survived periods of mass insurgency. There is a long history of knowledge among activists in radical thought and practice. The combination of current activists with many people with the experience of having lived through the heartbreak of disillusionment when social movements are not necessarily what they seem, leads to a multitudinous public that is simultaneously very busy and somewhat bitter about the possibilities of what a new project might achieve.

These first barriers were overcome through the decision that each meeting would end with the realization of a previously inchoate goal. Over the first eight months, the group connected through two four hour meetings each week, talked, did workshops and projects together and created the Generators group. The first meetings were workshops in consensus decision making, accompanied by gardening at each person's house, making candles, decorating the space and celebrating birthdays[7]. Working and socializing created a space for camaraderie, story-telling, and developing trust. Over time the Generators group grew and realized a communal space for care-taking and creative exploration where group process was open to newness and risk. As Mary, one of the Generators commented, "We walk together toward anti-capitalist thinking, constructing a community where we can exchange and inter-change."

Consensus decision making was the primary action research method. It was implemented from the beginning to encourage each participant to take on the responsibility of generating the project. While consensus decision making is not normally considered to be a research method, it uses many tools that are common in qualitative methods. One of the most similar standard methods for looking at group thinking and idea construction is the focus group. Because a consensus requires that each person in the group agrees on the decision being made in order for it to move forward, participant observation, collective questioning, and debate about each step of the project has allowed for a collective creation of the research at hand.

The use of consensus decision making has built a practice of non-hierarchical, decolonial economics. Consensus decision making has a long history in activist and specifically anarchist circles for making decisions where all participants are included (Graeber, 2013). It has been embraced by many movements because while it may take time to come to a decision where all participants are content, and there are critiques of exactly how horizontal relationship may be, there is a greater chance of the decision at hand reflecting the desires of decision-makers. This is contrasted with a majority vote, where up to 49 percent of those voting may not agree with the outcome but will be forced to go along with it. Consensus was used as a research method in order to negotiate and minimize as much as possible the asymmetrical power dynamics that often arise and separate scholars and co-researchers in action research (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

The project functions as much as possible without hierarchy, with the belief that if the assemblage is imbued with non-dominative practice, it would resonate within the heterodox economic network. As a research method, consensus decision making is interesting because while the project is explicitly performative in that a community economy is being created as research and resistance to capitalism, the direction and form taken by the project is entirely decided by the group. As a member of the Generators group I have been part of the formation and execution of the project, however my voice has been one of six. Consensus decision making requires all persons involved in the meeting and the decision being made to participate and agree with all steps before moving forward through an explicit structure that facilitates knowledge-sharing and open communication[8]. Any one person that does not agree with the decision can block it from happening. The structure used in this form of consensus decision making embraced by *El Cambalache* was developed by Freeman (1970-1973). Built out of delegation, responsibility, distribution, rotation, allocation, diffusion of information and equal access to resources, consensus strives to collectivize knowledge to the furthest extent possible. Horizontal power relationships require an active emphasis on helping those that participate less and those speak more to speak less in order to even asymmetrical power relationships. Walking in the door, each person carries a multiplicity of ontos, epistemes, power relationships and conceptions from each lifeworld. Recognizing these complicated lenses that are worn, makes the consensus process difficult but worth the time invested.

El Cambalache opened its doors to the public on March 21, 2015. Many conversations were had about how the project would advance and how the public would interact with the Generators group. It was decided that anyone could participate in exchanges while the Generators would administer the project. Over the past 14 months over 700 people have exchanged goods and services in *El Cambalache*. Their participation may occur only once or they may come regularly. People that participate in exchanging come from all different backgrounds and nationalities. Most people that participate come from the neighborhood where the project is located, in Cuxtitali. They are mostly women and often have little access to many basic resources such as clothing, domestic appliances, and electronics.

Findings: exchange value changes everything

In fall of 2014, three of the Generators put together a presentation for the rest of the group on exchange value. In the meeting, exchange value was presented as an emotional process. The focus was the moral and personal values that are exchanged in economic interactions. Exchange value was an emotional experience that came from each person's life. The Generators talked about the shame and betrayal felt when one's work is valued less than what is needed to buy all of the essentials for daily life. They spoke of the fear of being in debt and not meeting commitments, as well as the fleeting happiness that comes when things are purchased and feelings of self-worth as varying depending on access to money. There was a desire among the group to forge an economy that did not effect those feelings. As time passed and the conversation grew it was decided that the project would be based on redistributing that which was undervalued; for example, abilities that were not necessarily used for making money but were something that the person enjoyed would be valued as important. Objects that were unwanted but still useful and would normally be considered garbage would be the primary goods exchanged. This was the rule that was developed, "Everything has the same value because what is inter-changed are things one no longer needs and

knowledge, abilities and services you want to share". The project accepts just about any object as long as it functions or is repairable. A pencil will have the same value as a sweater, a chair or a laptop. To this date over 700 people have participated in exchanges from diverse parts of the region and the world. When asked what they think about *El Cambalache* most people reply, "It's useful," "It makes sense that things should be shared" and "People feel like they are part of something". One participant said, "I like how all things and services have the same value, it means that what I can share is as important and valuable as what someone else shares and that makes us the same."

Inter-cambio in Spanish is the literal translation of exchange, but *inter-cambio* is a term we have created, meaning each person is changing together with another person or group. *El Cambalache, donde tenemos el valor de inter-cambiar* (The Swap, where we have the courage to change together) is one of the rules born of consensus, written on the office walls and repeated time and again. This rule refers to the desire to create a community that is not tied to the rules of capitalism. Specifically the rule contradicts notions such as, a person is given a value based on accumulated wealth, where race, gender and class are tied to the ability of each person to acquire money, goods and power. Josefa, one of the members of the Generators describes *inter-cambio* or *inter-change* as, "It is a change that comes from the inside out, it is changing the way one thinks, not everything can be bought with money, it is also about being more generous in order to share what you don't use anymore and knowing other people can use it." *El Cambalache* organizes people because it meets the needs of those that participate in it by providing goods and services as a community where everything has value, the same value. This process is explained by Patricia, defining *inter-cambio* as, "Recognizing within ourselves that we are a social construct of an oppressive hetero-patriarchal capitalist system, in order to identify that, and from there, begin to construct other life alternatives." Sarai adds, "To think about "dismantling capitalism" first we must begin with work, from below, from the depths. We begin to loosen these interior barriers that have been imposed upon us since we were born in this capitalist system." While Cinthia, reflecting on the impact of *inter-cambio* said, "Inter-cambios are concrete anti-capitalist actions that we can do in the quotidian, [...] without waiting for the great revolution that overthrows the capitalist system. Through *inter-cambios* we change ourselves and at the same time our individualist, consumer, competitive relationships imposed by capitalism."

One man who has come several times to *El Cambalache* works walking door to door collecting garbage from homes and businesses for a small fee around midday. He is in his 60s and is accompanied by his grandchildren who work with him. He was invited in to get to know the project and though he does not speak much Spanish (he speaks Tsotsil, a local indigenous language), his grandson translated for him. As a garbage collector, he sees discards everyday in all their forms. However, upon entering into La Troje[9], our storage space where unwanted items become exchangeable items, he began to look at Sarai in disbelief, "I don't need money to take these things?" translated his grandson, "No," said Sarai, "Its a swap, you leave something here that you don't want or want to share." "But I have nothing" he said, looking away. "Everyone has something to offer, have you thought of teaching Tsotsil? That's very useful." At this point he became emotional. "I didn't think that was something someone would want," he said. A week later he came to schedule when he would begin giving classes.

Conflict inter-changes

Between June and August, 2015, *El Cambalache* encountered its first obstacle to the idea of not accumulating goods, and sharing to build a sense of community through

money-less exchanges for the first time after hundreds of exchanges. Several participants in the economy began to take many many pieces of clothing, sometimes amounting to up to 90 pieces. They would come several times a week. members of the Generators would try to explain that the project is about focusing on needs and building a community where among everyone there is enough. However, they continued to take and take. Sometimes things would be returned but for the most part objects were leaving in quantities that seemed far beyond the needs of any single family, regardless of how large. This was brought up in many meetings. At first, it was decided that the ideas of the project needed more explanation because after living in capitalism for an entire life, perhaps it was difficult to value not accumulating things. However, the abuses continued. The problem were the rules of the project, that because everything has the same value, the exchange values are non-hierarchical so 90 shirts can equal one shirt. Furthermore, "Was it ok or not if people sold things they acquired in *El Cambalache*?" It was decided that as in other types of economic interactions, participants should not be interrogated as to how they were planning on using their goods or the knowledge they acquired in classes. Some members of the project were in favor of barring the abusing participants from being part of *El Cambalache*. However, that idea did not survive consensus, rather in the end it was agreed that time limits would be set to how often people could come to *El Cambalache* (once a month for those that take a lot) and that a special meeting would be set up where the Generators would sit down and talk with the participants so that everyone was on the same page and from there a decision would be taken.

Analysis: consensus reflections on the value of waste

Consensus decision making in conjunction with the personality of each of the Generators transforms inter-personal relationships and the group thought process. The space created by the easy sharing of ideas in a group with horizontal power relationships allows for the development of concepts such as inter-cambio, as well as other rules that enable building an inclusive social movement. Discards take all forms, not only are goods and knowledge under-valued, but people as well. Though there has been a great deal of resistance to the denigration of indigenous people in the region with successful incremental struggles to support a multiplicity of ways of life, oppressions continue. Having something to give when one is told they never have enough draws people in and includes them in the resistance to being under-valued. Following Hawkins (2006), the way each person wastes positions them as the ethical person they want to become. In becoming a space beyond capitalism *El Cambalache* transforms waste into usable items and creates inter-cambio.

El Cambalache practices a form of value constructed by meeting physical, emotional and intellectual needs/desires through the inclusion, transformation and flourishing of community members. Moving beyond commodity fetishism, which creates a hierarchy of value, *El Cambalache* privileges horizontality; valuing commodities, knowledge and services. One of the key points of struggle within social movements is to include those people that are marginalized or discarded by capitalism in conjunction with other structural violences. This marginalization pressures social movements to create assemblages free of domination that must be anti-capitalist because Capitalism creates alienation and hierarchy through exploitation and commodity fetishism.

As a feminist decolonial anarchist project, *El Cambalache* includes multiple ontos and epistemes in the structuring of the project to undermine dominant hegemonic discourses around wealth and growth from the centers of empire. Consensus decision making

creates a space where ideas and proposals are heard and discussed by all members of the Generators. This assemblage, as an act of epistemic disobedience, creates space for practice and knowledge creation where previously a discourse against capitalism and the frustration with a lack of resources overwhelmed debates about how to resist domination. *El Cambalache* has brought people together from many distinct circles that share the goal of redistributing resources, while building a network to do so that did not exist formally at the scale of the project. Doing more with few resources is a constant process in Chiapas, and building a non-hierarchical heterodox economy out of discards re-assembles the possibilities of what may be an economy. The value of the discards in *El Cambalache* has a distinct form of value where the goal is that the sheer act of participating is highly valued, not equated with an abstract symbol but rather an inter-cambio. Because participation is inclusive a community of people is slowly growing together, exchanging and meeting, learning, giving and taking. The relationships that develop in non-hierarchical spaces beget respect and an assumption of responsibility for each person that uses the space. Rather than barring those participants from being part of the economy, concessions were made in order to accommodate their participation in the project. This reinforces the inclusive participation in the project. It also creates a space for transformation for all persons involved, where a man who believes he has nothing to give can be a teacher or people that abuse the system can be welcomed in to become better members of the group. There is a feeling of pleasure in seeing people find things they need as each person becomes part of something.

Conclusion

El Cambalache realizes money-less onto-rich spaces by dismantling capitalism in exchanges which create inter-cambio through consensus decision making and collective action research. As a resistance movement, *El Cambalache* calls forth practices that feeds the flourishing of non-capitalist economies because it is a diverse network of people, things, ideas and practices that transform each other toward non-dominative relationships through a rule-based system. The use of a non-hierarchical, open-ended decision-making process resonates throughout the network as an organizational form that begets more non-hierarchical relationships. These relationships create an inclusive space for participants and those who will in the future further transform *El Cambalache* into new liberatory decolonial realities that eschew individualist consumption based thinking and embrace collective well-being. The focus on exchange value as an emotional process that negotiates the gamut of experiences and self-worth in particular, presents an alternative scale of value that incorporates the experience of economic actors in the network. This perspective arose within an anarchist space where economic practices are built around having sufficient access to resources and providing that access to the surrounding community. *El Cambalache* contributes to the literature on heterodox community economies, anarchism and feminist decolonial thought by providing a living example of what a horizontal non-capitalist economy may look like. Finally, *El Cambalache* proposes a different organizational form, based on clear, simple, economic rules where participation and inclusion in the project are easily achieved and few barriers other than knowledge of the existence project limit participation.

While the project is small it strives to construct decolonial, feminist, political-social transformation by embracing epistemic plurality. As a collective we have worked to create trust within our group so that each persons ideas are valued even if they do not fit within traditional ideas of what is knowledge. This process has been complex and

most transformation happens within the Generators group. As project grows we will have to explore how to extend our decolonial practices outwards into the community that is forming. This will be a new path for us. The project is a daily process that looks to decrease our dependence on money. Returning to Lugones, through our praxis of decolonial feminism we look to produce ourselves everyday in non-hierarchical collective well-being. While it is unknown how long *El Cambalache* will continue to flourish or how far it will reach, we are encouraged by the appearance of three new Cambalaches since the project began. We invite other interested groups and scholars to join in this process with us so that our network may undermine the dominant economy.

Notes

1. Full disclosure, this author is one of the founding members of *El Cambalache*.
2. While much work has been done on how performance of capitalism is done by economists, scholarship on performative scholarly practice of non-capitalist economics is less present (see Roelvink *et al.*, 2015).
3. This idea reflects much more about those proposing it than the evidence shows about the practice of capitalism.
4. See <http://bluestockings.com>
5. See www.wowcafe.org
6. See www.blackwomensblueprint.org
7. A similar technique for building camaraderie among project participants suggested by Cameron and Gibson (2001) was having a pizza making party where participants could cook together and get to know each other.
8. For a more detailed description of the step by step process for using consensus decision making, see Butler (1990).
9. La Troje is a word used in Tsotsil communities in the Venustiano Carranza municipality of Chiapas. It means the storage space for corn, corn occupies an important place in many cultures in Mexico. It often is a metaphor for the life energy. La Troje for *El Cambalache* is the space where all objects, clothing, apparatuses and food are received and exchanged.

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