Thematic Editorial:

The Social Economy must be local and community-based

Jacques Boulet

Dear readers, friends, activists…

And dear everyone concerned about our present(s) and our future(s)…

You are entitled to wonder why we would offer you yet another issue about the ‘Social Economy’… after all, the last issue of New Community (or the New Community Quarterly as it was then still called) arriving in your mailboxes not that long ago was equally themed as: “Towards another economy – how can ‘community’ contribute to the transformation…?”

The reason – to me – seems quite obvious: our political-economic system and its associated institutional configurations and processes are so hopelessly and so persistently out of touch with what’s really going on in people’s lives and it seems as if they are determined to persist towards catastrophe (as the first contribution following this editorial proposes). In spite of a plethora of warnings, of commissions, of reports, of clear empirical/experiential signs and indications that everything is not in order, our leaders (at least those who are appearing in the media and are thus treated as such…) and most of us in our every-day ways of living, relating, thinking and ‘doing’ continue on our merry ways – most of us, in practice, living and acting as comfortable deniers… And parenthetically, dear readers, the recent federal election (I’m still trying to get over it…) certainly did not bode well in terms of turning the tide – the stifling exchanges of irrelevant and inane slogans between ‘candidates’ we were supposed to ‘chose’ between, is still rattling my sense of indignation and bewilderment… We truly do deserve better (even if it is sometimes said that we deserve the leadership we get… but we can’t be that bad, or can we?!?!?!)!

I borrowed the rather insightful concept of comfortable deniers from Rachel Ward, the Australian actress and film director, who moderated the first evening session of the recent Economics of Happiness Conference, held from the 15th till the 17th March at the Community Centre in Byron Bay, and which I had the privilege and pleasure of attending. Rachel Ward commented on our seemingly abiding need to remain ‘optimistic’ in the midst of the ever more frequent and desperate indications that we’re indeed caught in a quickening avalanche of signs that all is not well – indeed, obligatory optimism as a delusionary luxury of the (still comfortably) well-off… So this issue offers you a mixture of contributions which quite brutally invite you to face the catastrophe we’re involved in creating and of other tales of the numerous signs of growing awareness and of brave attempts at reversing – or at least at halting or slowing - the catastrophic tide…

The Economics of Happiness Conference has been one of the best gatherings I have ever taken part in, with the almost 400 participants from all over Australia and guests from most continents involved in the full spectrum of alternatives which we will need to embrace if our
hopes for survival – our own and that of the ecology we continue to brutalise for our own short-sighted interests – should retain any basis in reality. Together with the other participants in the conference, I enjoyed the liberating experience that no-one of the 40 or so plenary presenters or any of the workshop convenors felt obliged to offer yet another analysis of the breakdown of our ‘system’ globally, nationally and locally; there were no rhetorical or other ‘fights’ or ‘debates’ about the ‘right’ and ‘appropriate’ strategy to – either – prevent the collapse of the ‘system’ or to reform - let alone fix - it and possibly maintain those of its elements thought to (still) be beneficial. The generally unspoken assumption in most conversations I took part in and in most of the available literature at the Conference was that we shouldn’t even try to save the ‘system’ or prevent its collapse, but that we should rather concentrate on learning from the mistakes of the past and the present and carefully develop the alternatives necessary for our survival – with dignity and interdependently with the world (ecology) which keeps us alive and which we have a duty to sustain.

The organisers of the Conference, the International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC – www.localfutures.org and www.theeconomicsofhappiness.org) and its visionary founder, Helena Norberg-Hodge, described its focus, ‘Localisation: an Economics of Personal and Ecological Wellbeing’, as follows:

‘More and more people are recognising that the most strategic way to tackle our escalating social and ecological crises is to focus on changes to the economic system. Because of the last 30 years of globalisation – or trade and financial deregulation – ecosystems are being ravished, communities torn apart, democracy eroded, and the majority of the world population marginalised. Even governments – now weaker than many corporations – are told they cannot look after their own citizens, but must rely on a ‘free market’ that is dominated and distorted by big banks and Transnational Corporations (TNCs).

Globalisation is not an inevitable process. It is happening because governments on both the political left and the right have signed on to treaties that give ever more power to TNCs. Governments are also using our tax dollars to support global corporations through direct subsidies, indirectly through infrastructure development and government R&D, and by adopting tax policies and regulations that favour the large and global at the expense of the small and the local. The result is that the rules of the game have now been so altered that local, regional, and even national businesses and banks must become global, or die.

Today’s speculative global economy is a casino – and there are no winners.’

Or, as one of the pamphlets available at the Conference poignantly zoomed in on the value-base of ‘our’ economic system:

Capitalism is the extraordinary belief that the Na$tie$t of men for the na$tie$t of motives will somehow work for the benefit of all…

The general sense at the Conference (a sense which meanwhile is emerging in many other places and contexts) was that we require a rather radical re-think and a different way of addressing the questions of survival on personal, human-collective and ecological/cosmic levels. Directly, via Skype or through reverent references in speeches and workshops, the
prophetic voices of Thomas and Wendell Berry, of Vandana Shiva and Bill McKibben, of Charles Eisenstein and Michael Shuman, of Manish Jain, Winona LaDuke and Kerianne Cox and many more — resounded strongly and in their various ways and offered a veritable quilt of hopeful perspectives and inspirations, grounding and uniting the disparate initiatives, projects and movements most participants were part of or involved in.

Helena Norberg-Hodge, suggesting that ‘the economic system is mad and it would be locked away if it were a human…’, singled out the increasing distances between where our ‘stuff’ is produced and is shipped from and where it is consumed, often after several more processing iterations; salmon caught in Canada, transported to China for canning and transported back to Canada for consumption being one example. By contrast, diversifying and localising production and markets increases, intensifies and multiplies local relationships and has the capacity to restore our local ecologies – and there were many vibrant examples of activists doing precisely that, Transition Town initiatives being just one example.

Charles Eisenstein found that ‘the old mythology is in the process of falling apart – we’re not just running out of oil – fresh water, good soil, good air are disappearing. More and more things are being monetised after they have been taken away from people – their commons – and the matrix of relationships in which we give meaning to life and living is being undermined... What are we doing to the planet, we are doing to ourselves... We need a new story, a story of the people and of inter-beingness with all other creatures... We should become the storytellers of the new being...’ (from my notes; see Eisenstein, 2011). Much of the work of the UK-based New Economics Foundation (NEF) abundantly confirms and exemplifies this assessment, as does the work of our own Australia Institute and David Orrell’s Economyths (2012) as well as several contributions in this issue.

The opening phrase of US/Canadian First Nations activist, Winona LaDuke’s talk still resonates in my ears: ‘It seems as if we humans don’t want to be around for another 1,000 years...’; she wondered and she suggested that generosity should be more valued than accumulation if we should happen to be interested in surviving; since economics is how we live, she proposed to rely more on Indigenous restorative economics, which is about restoring relationships and follows the below five rules:

- Reconsider the Creator’s law;
- We’re all related – indeed, we’re only the last ones to arrive;
- Our worldview should be cyclical, nomadic, probably (rather than espousing the ‘settled’ version of the present world economy);
- Most nouns we use to designate things are animate – they should be looked at as verbs as all things are alive and ‘have standing’;
- We should consider the impact of our deeds on the 7th generation from now...

Michael Shuman (of the Business Alliance for Local living Economies – BALLE; see also Shuman, 2006) pointed at the incredible inefficiency of food distribution; in the US, about 71 cents in each dollar paid for food go to distributors/transport and only 7 cents pays the producer... The ‘disconnect’ at present is so stark that we have created a large bunch of parasites, feeding off the work of those who are involved in the production and direct
preparation of food... Food should be at the centre of our actions for change, both of our learning and in the communities we inhabit... The Food Sovereignty Alliance and Via Campesina (see also Raj Patel’s, 2007 work) are certainly two important movements which deserve support and imitation.

Manish Jain – coordinator of Shikshantar, the People’s Institute for Rethinking Education and Development and co-founder of Swaraj University – reminded us of the importance of listening – how are we listening? he asked… what are the stories we are carrying around about other people? How are we transforming their realities in such a way that they become comfortable for us so that we do not need to change our own ways? He more particularly identified the so-called ‘population question’ as an alarmist, racist and – indeed – self-serving story, invented and repeated by those who are unwilling to see their own responsibilities in the present situation and who are reluctant to give up their privileged lifestyles – which remains the main cause of our global predicament.

I have added references to works by several of the contributors to the Conference and I warmly recommend them as essential components of a necessary movement towards a locally and community-based future way of living (and surviving!).

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A few months later, in May, I had the opportunity to travel to the UK and visit the Schumacher College (www.schumachercollege.org.uk/about/schumacher) in Totnes (Devon) and the Cooperative College (www.co-op.ac.uk/contact-us/) in Manchester, both partners of the Borderlands Cooperative (part of the network of this journal; see www.borderlands.org.au) and of our Graduate School, OASES, in Hawthorn/Melbourne (see www.oases.edu.au). What most struck me – yet again - in my conversations with activists, academics, thinkers and organisers in these two institutions was the previously mentioned attitude pervading the Economics of Happiness Conference: let’s not waste our time with trying to figure out what’s ‘wrong’ with the ‘system’ we inhabit... we do know it does not work... let’s not focus on the political arrangements we ‘inhabit’ and which only leave us the choice between – what looks like – a greater and a lesser evil in as far as the major political parties are concerned… let’s rather concentrate on the necessary development of the alternatives generative for our own and our world’s survival.

Since 2010, Schumacher offers a Master’s course in Economics for Transition (www.schumachercollege.org.uk/courses/ma-economics-for-transition) in addition to its longer standing Master’s in Holistic Science. The courses have been regularly oversubscribed and attract an international body of students and several of the above mentioned Conference contributors are or have been regular lecturers or workshop convenors at Schumacher. I had been invited to offer an evening ‘fireside’ talk to members of the College and to participants in the pioneering Transition Town initiative in neighbouring Totnes (see Rob Hopkins, 2008); I was to speak about ‘the development of community as the restoration of local relationships’ and the ensuing conversation amongst the 30+ participants was stimulating and inspiring.
Again, the general acceptance that most of our energies should be oriented to and spent on the development of living ecological, social and localised alternatives was striking; no-one made the ubiquitous ‘at the end of the day...’ or ‘the bottom line is...’ type remarks which so characterise speeches by politicians and CEOs of TNCs and other apologists, in which they freely admit that ‘the system’ is collapsing, that the climate is warming, etc. but then usually finish off by saying that nothing can really be ‘politically’ done at present and that one needs to take care of the dollars and the ‘rules of the game’... Again, the recent Australian federal election serves as a devastating example...

By contrast, the general acceptance that ‘the game is about over’ reverberated around the room and, more broadly, felt like an legitimate assumption in most of the conversations I had with colleagues and students at Schumacher College; as well, Schumacher founder Satish Kumar’s splendid journal, Resurgence (www.resurgence.org), is an urgent, persistent and beautiful confirmation of both the need to admit to the desperately catastrophic slide we are finding ourselves in and documents the emergence of multifarious initiatives everywhere to stem the slide...

My experiences and discoveries at and through the Cooperative College in Manchester were even more astounding and one has to wonder why news of the really important developments in the UK cooperative sector is not being conveyed to audiences in Australia. The Cooperative movement in the UK – but, as I learned, in many regions of the world, especially the so-called ‘developing’ world – is experiencing a veritable renaissance, last year’s UN-established International Year of the Cooperative being a highlight. Starting a few years ago, and accelerating as the incoming conservative government in the UK slashed funding and personnel, closed down public services and privatised or ‘outsourced’ many of them, even conservative politicians were noticed inviting ‘mutuals’, cooperatives and not-for-profits to move into the breach and take on the running of schools, the provision of public housing and health services and the cooperative movement responded with enthusiasm.

At the time of my visit (early May 2013), over 500 schools had become and operated as cooperatives (see www.co-op.ac.uk/schools-and-young-people; and http://www.co-operativeschools.coop/message/co-operative_trust_schools and more generally www.co-op.ac.uk), with another 100 schools going through the training and transition process and another 200 having applied to become cooperative schools (see Mervyn Simpson’s article in this issue). The cooperative principle not only applies to the school governance (with students, parents, teachers and other personnel as well as community representatives from the local area served by the school – especially other cooperatives or not-for-profit organisations – acting as School Boards and much involvement of all groups in the running of the various sets of programs and activities), but it also finds resonance in the school curriculum. Visiting a High School (Whalley Range 11-18 High School) in a very disadvantaged area of Manchester (over 90% of the 1,300 girls are from disadvantaged families, more than half Muslim; see www.wrhs1118.co.uk), I witnessed such a strong sense of student ‘ownership’ of their school, their stories covering the walls of the corridors and the seven cooperative principles proudly displayed in massive lettering at the main entrance. The girls were grouped around tables of four, selected with different abilities in the various learning areas and
assigned pertinent roles around the cooperative learning process – an amazing sight which also found expression in the school magazine, largely put together by students.

If only Australia could abandon its fascination with the ‘private – public’ (non-) debates, we could finally turn our attention to the real issues, including whether we are appropriately preparing our children for the rather dismal future(s) we are leaving them to struggle with, given what we’re doing to our (and their) ecology and our (and their) political-economy…!

In Rochdale, the birthplace of the cooperative movement in 1844, I visited the Borough Housing Cooperative (see www.rbh.org.uk and www.mutuo.co.uk), which had been given management control over 13,000 dwellings, previously managed by the Borough itself; the latter had run out of money because of the cuts to the national budget. Again, talking with their CEO and observing the goings-on in the main office and the respectful ways in which tenants (now cooperative owners of their housing and actively involved in its management!) and office staff dealt with one-another, it felt as if a quite fundamental shift was in the process of evolving…

And again, how much would it take for Australia to move towards a more mature debate about housing justice, about the right to appropriate and affordable housing and about diversifying the availability of housing options beyond the ‘public’ and ‘private’ dichotomy and their well-known limitations, by supporting and financing community-owned cooperative and mutual options, including co-housing and versions of intentional community housing, especially also for the ageing?

One of the leaders of the Cooperative College in Manchester told me that they had simply ‘given up’ waiting for the election of a government which would unequivocally support social justice, improve schooling and social and health services, foster ‘on-the-ground’ participation by people in the governance and practical running of their services and amenities. Since all parties in the UK (similar to Australia) are welded-on to a neo-liberal and economic-rationalist agenda, rather than keep voting for the party considered the ‘lesser evil’ in terms of the defence of and support for social justice, equality and well-funded and delivered community services in the hope of even a gradual change in policy direction, my conversation partner said that the cooperative movement had started to look at any election outcome as an opportunity to promote and spread the cooperative and ‘mutual’ idea and practice. As mentioned, the conservative parties, having advocated for decentralisation, participation and having invited mutuals and cooperatives to take on the running of local institutions and services, thus offered the opportunity for the cooperative movement to ‘move in’ with the results I have briefly illustrated before…

I have a strong sense that there are some lessons here for us… and for everywhere else where the belief in democracy and social justice has been battered during the last few decades… which is about everywhere in the ‘developed’ world, I’d say…

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Finally, to round out this editorial, it is a real joy to introduce to you, dear readers, several very welcome appearances in the local community development literature as well as publications in the broader intellectual areas centrally important for how we think about ourselves as human beings.

First, community development literature; we can celebrate the publication of not less than five new CD books in Australia in the last 12 to 18 months; we have already discussed a few of those but will certainly review them together in one of the next issues. Suffice it for this editorial to name them briefly (again): Tracey Ollis’ (2012) *A Critical Pedagogy of Embodied Education* (Palgrave) was the first to be published, followed by Peter Westoby’s and Lynda Shevellar’s (2012) edited volume on *Learning and Mobilising for Community Development* with Ashgate. Peter then followed this up (with Gerard Dowling – 2013) with a thoroughly re-done and expanded second edition of *Theory and Practice of Dialogical Community Development* (with Routledge). Finally, Jim Ife’s (2013) *Community Development in an Uncertain World* (2013), the fifth edition of his well-known ‘handbook’, (now published by Cambridge University Press); and Mary Lane’s (2013) *People, Power, Participation: Living Community Development*, published by the Borderlands Cooperative, were launched a few weeks ago in Melbourne with well over 100 enthusiastic people in attendance. That has to augur well for the continued relevance of our ‘trade’ and a clear rebuttal of those who have presaged its ‘demise’!

Second, most of us activists – either in the community or in the relevant educational areas – have had a hell of a time to argue against the widely accepted (or so it seemed) ideology that human beings are essentially and primarily selfish, self-centred, greedy and competitive and that, therefore, all attempts at cooperation, altruism, collectivism and, indeed, ‘community’ development were quite out of order – unless they would/could be understood as ‘enlightened self-interest’ (and even then…!). Western thinking, ever since the Enlightenment but ever more forcefully and culminating in the neo-liberal/economic rationalist assumptions and proclamations since the 1980s (Thatcher: there’s no such thing as society…!) has led to a belief that greed is not only good but that it is part of our natural state as a species.

Now, a growing body of research (especially neurobiological and associated disciplines), theory and literature is – finally - restoring our species to its fundamental social and cooperative origins. Rifkin’s (2010) *Empathic Civilization* offers over 700 pages of research findings and theory about humans’ essentially collaborative nature and Marco Iacoboni’s (2008) *Mirroring People* – in more simple and direct ways – does so in less than half the number of pages. Rifkin introduces his tome thus:

‘Recent discoveries in brain science and child development are forcing us to rethink the long-held belief that human beings are, by nature, aggressive, materialistic, utilitarian, and self-centred. The dawning realization that we are a fundamentally empathic species has profound and far-reaching consequences for society.’

Bowles and Gintis (2011) – well-known for their work about class and schooling throughout the 1970s – have assembled an impressive array of findings across a great variety of disciplines to offer evidence of humans beings as a cooperative species. They and others (for
example, Boehm, 2012; Richard Cassels in McIntosh, 2013; Ryan and Jethá, 2011) argue that it is the capacity to cooperate which has been the driving force behind the survival and evolution of hominids and their continuity over hundreds of millennia, rather than the inventions of the great minds and the assumed deeds of great ‘men’ over the last few hundreds or thousands of years…

And, to conclude, many of the suggested readings in the list below and several articles included in this issue sit very comfortably within the here suggested evolving conceptual, intellectual and practical ‘landscape’, offering abundant suggestions and evidence from many sites and projects across the world that ‘another world is possible’. I have first selected a range of articles which highlight particular aspects and instances where the sense of ‘institutional collapse’ of our political economic system(s) is clearly illustrated; they talk about poverty, hunger, corruption, ecological disasters caused by our economic profligacy, etc. A second series of contributions then show a great variety of emerging alternatives, tentative attempts at re-inventing ways of cooperative, democratic, small-scale and localised and sustainable ways of living, of recreating a ‘commons’, of re-inventing ways of relating with one another as humans and with our ecology as the only one we’ve got and which we destroy at our own peril…

The articles and contributions derive from a great variety of sources and cover the globe… which really should give us, in Australia, some courage to also get into the act and find inspiration to support our energies… and therewith show how it is possible to resist the impositions of the ‘system’ on our livelihoods and to go beyond mere resistance and create that ‘other world’ which, as the slogan goes, ‘is possible’!

So, with the Bioneers (www.bioneers.org), in their June 2012 Newsletter, I suggest:

As the world situation heats up both literally and figuratively, each of us faces a profound choice – and collectively we face the same choice: life and hope – or resignation and decline. Both are self-fulfilling prophecies. The real tipping point is the consciousness we cultivate and our actions that flow from it. In every system, the hardest thing to change is the paradigm, but it can happen fast. As the great systems thinker and ecologist Donella Meadows advised: ‘Keep pointing at anomalies and failures in the old paradigm. Keep speaking loudly and with assurance from the new one. Insert people with the new paradigm in places of public visibility and power. Don’t waste time with reactionaries; work with active change agents, and the vast middle ground of open people.’

And that seems good advice for readers of the New Community and their friends… especially in the rather distressing environment of post-election Australia…

Happy reading and let us know what you think (and, of course, let us also know what you are doing)!
References and further reading

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Shuman, M (2006) The small-mart revolution: How local businesses are beating the global competition San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler
Smith, P & Max-Neef, M (2011) Economics Unmasked: from power and greed to compassion and the common good Totnes/Dartington: Green Books