

Communal Economics

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One may define communal economics as a system in which production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services involve the cooperation and sharing of all involved. In contrast, monetary economics utilizes systems of possessiveness and competition.

Barter systems and local currencies have been used to help monetary economies out of depression as a way to supplement official currencies. (Greco 1998, 64) Since barter is an exchange system in which the goods exchanged are owned privately, it is not a form of communal economics. Since labor exchange systems involve an exchange of services, usually on an hour-for-hour basis, labor exchanges such as “time dollar” systems (Cahn, Rowe 1992) are also forms of barter and therefore are not forms of communal economics. (See table.)

Types of Communal Economies and of Exchange Economies	
Sharing Economies*:	Exchange Economies:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anti-Quota Labor Systems• Fair-Share Labor Systems• Labor Quota Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Labor Exchange Time Economy• Barter Economy• Monetary Economy
* Also known as Communal Economies or Labor-Sharing Time Economies	

Economics and Ownership

The basic values of the two economic systems, communal and monetary, represent two extremes of what may be considered the “economic spectrum.” Communal economics would be on the left side of the spectrum, characterized as having forms of common ownership of property or wealth, while monetary economics would be on the right side of the economic spectrum, representing private ownership of property or wealth. Most societies and nation-states occupy the middle range between these extremes, involving mixtures of these forms of ownership, resulting in what may be termed “economic diversity.” (Butcher 1991)

The United States of America is a good example of economic diversity. All government property and all property owned by tax-exempt organizations, such as many religious, scientific and educational institutions, are essentially forms of common ownership of property and wealth. For example, the President doesn’t own the White House. He or she is only entrusted with its use while in office by the citizenry who own it and all other government assets in common. Similarly, when a tax-exempt organization is dissolved its assets can not become private property but must be contributed to another exempt organization. Further, marriage can be considered to be a form of contract between two people affirming common ownership of wealth between them. Clearly, forms of sharing and of common ownership of wealth are important to the economy of the USA.

Although America is generally characterized as being a “capitalist” country, it would be more accurate to say that it has a mixed economy or is an economically diverse country. Forms of communal economics are essential to the growth and development of any monetary economy, if only to provide a way to absorb the “externalities” or negative repercussions of an economic system based upon possessiveness and competition. Since socialism, social anarchism and neo-liberal market capitalism all include some degree of both common-property and private-property systems, or mixtures of the two economic systems, all would most appropriately fall in the category of economic diversity on the economic spectrum.

Although a monetary economy may not exist without some form of communal economy supporting it, through at least governmental services and regulation and family-based domestic or household economics, the reverse is not true. Completely communal economies exist where there is no exchange of private property. In a purely communal economy wealth is owned in common. Since there is no or insignificant amounts of private property in a communal society, there is nothing to exchange. Thus, an important issue in communal economies is how to share the commonly-owned wealth, and that is a question of governance.

Governance and Control

Ownership of wealth is one aspect of culture. Another important aspect is the control of wealth, or how decisions are made. In either economic system, communal or monetary, the governmental process can be either participatory, such as in having a majority-rule or consensus-based and often decentralized system, or authoritarian, such as in having a command or centralized control system.

Human civilization has recorded much experience with authoritarian systems, given the number of terms used to describe this form of governance. These terms include: absolutism, aristocracy, autocracy, communism, despotism, dictatorship, fascism, feudalism, gerontocracy, kleptocracy, matriarchy, monarchy, oligarchy, patriarchy, plutocracy, theocracy and totalitarianism. In contrast, humanity has comparatively little experience with participatory forms of governance, and so fewer terms are available. These terms include: consensual governance, democracy, egalitarianism, libertarianism, and parliamentary systems.

When considering forms of communal economics, it is essential to keep in mind that communalism is not synonymous with authoritarianism. Just as with monetary economies, communal economies may utilize either an authoritarian or a participatory form of governance.

Motivation for Sharing

In a communal economy commonly-owned assets are entrusted to individuals for their use, not earned in exchange for a person's labor. Upholding all agreements, such as the community's bylaws, property code, and behavior code, as well as its labor contribution requirement (e.g., “labor quota”), earns the individual's right to membership, and in turn, membership provides access to all of the wealth of the communal society.

What can be difficult to understand in the communal economy is what motivates individuals to produce common wealth to be shared by all members. Generally, a focus upon spiritual values serves to motivate religious persons to share in communal society, and some of the most successful and long-

lived communal traditions are spiritual or religious, such as Catholic and Buddhist monasteries, Hindu ashrams and Anabaptist Colonies. Yet since at least the beginning of the Industrial Revolution there have also been many secular communal societies, arising from a rational or intellectual rather than a spiritual motivation for the sharing lifestyle. For many religious communities the motivation to share is considered to originate from an external revelation (i.e., transcendence), while for secular communities and many earth-based spiritual communities the motivation to share may be considered to be from an intuitive nature (i.e., immanence).

Anthropologist Richard Leakey offers an explanation for the secular or immanent motivation for sharing. Through his study of human prehistory in Kenya he arrived at the theory that evolution has resulted in the development of our sense of obligation and generosity and other emotions, as human instincts helping to assure the success of our species. He asserts that "Sharing, not hunting or gathering as such, is what made us human." (Leakey 1978, 120) Therefore our ability to know right from wrong and to seek peace, love and harmony (referred to in some spiritual traditions as our "inner light") may simply be an aspect of human development, like language capability, that evolved through natural selection. Some people may seek community because their sharing instinct is stronger, while in others the competitive instinct is stronger, keeping them from sharing.

The desire to live in community can be presented as an innate drive in the human constitution, possibly as strong as the primitive drive for sugar, salt and fat in the diet, for procreation, competition and other basic instincts. Indeed, many animal species are gregarious and have evolved complex herd, flock, pod and other mutually beneficial group structures. Humanity has simply further developed these natural instincts. With the advent of civilization, human culture has tended to favor authoritarian governance and exchange economies, yet those humans with a strong sharing instinct have devised social and political-economic systems throughout recorded history, respecting the communitarian preference in ways appropriate to their era of the development of human civilization.

Researchers at Emory University in Atlanta, using magnetic resonance imaging, studied the "neural activity in young women who were playing a classic laboratory game called the Prisoner's Dilemma. ... The brightest signals arose in cooperative alliances and in those neighborhoods of the brain already known to respond to ... licit or illicit delights. 'It's reassuring,' Dr. Bern said. 'In some ways, it says that we're wired to cooperate with each other'" (Angier 2002, p. F1).

Today there are several models of successful communitarian societies appropriate to our highly-mobile, information-rich, technologically-advanced culture. Most "ecovillages" (Jackson 2000) and "community land trusts" (Krinsky, Hovde 1996) are economically diverse with combinations of private and common property. "Cohousing" (McCamant, Durrett 1988) communities are generally collective or cooperative communities, meaning that they share some private property with no commonly-owned property. Communal communities, having virtually no private property include some Christian (Janzen 1996) and other spiritual communities and some of the secular communities (Kinkade 1994). All of these forms of communitarianism are generically called, "intentional community," defined as a fellowship of individuals and/or families practicing common agreement and collective action. (Butcher 1991)

The Time Economy

All of the various types of intentional communities use some form of sharing system, or some degree of communal economics. Any organization having a labor contribution for which there is no monetary

or other compensation given in exchange for their labor could be said to use a “time economy.” (Butcher 1997) Note that labor exchange systems such as time dollars are a form of time economy, yet they are not communal economies or sharing economies, they are exchange economies. A communal economy exists when members share the fruit of their labor as common property, rather than distribute that fruit to the members as personal property.

Anti-Quota Labor System

The simplest form of time economy may be called an “anti-quota” labor system where there is no minimum labor contribution requirement (i.e., there is no “labor quota”) for a person to maintain their membership in the group. Cohousing communities tend to use such purely voluntary anti-quota labor systems.

A common example of an anti-quota time economy would be where a church encourages its members to perform duties that the congregation has considered to be important to its mission, such as singing in the choir. When a church passes the collection plate, it earns money for the programs that it provides, including vocal music during the Sunday service. The portion of collection-plate income, member pledges, donations and other revenue not used for salaries or other compensation, is then shared by the congregation for things such as building maintenance and choir robes and sheet music. Thus, aside from any paid labor, the non-compensated labor that the congregation provides to the church helps to earn revenue for exchange with the outside monetary economy. Within the church congregation, however, the anti-quota time economy is used to manage the church’s communal economy of sharing. In contrast, for-profit corporations have economies involving only the accumulation and exchange of private property.

An example of a church that formed an intentional community is Shepherdsfield Community in Missouri, originally a Lutheran congregation in southern California. (Janzen 1996) That transition involved a change from an anti-quota labor system to a more specific work requirement that may be called a “fair-share labor system.”

Fair-Share Labor System

In many communal intentional communities, especially large communal societies, members make commitments to work in particular areas as their primary work role, often with members rotating among various full-time positions, usually without recording or reporting hours worked. Expectations of the fulfillment of such labor contributions may be called a “fair-share labor system.” Examples of community networks that had or continue to use fair-share labor systems are: Israeli Kibbutzim, Japanese Yamagishi Kai in Japan, and the US and Canadian Hutterite Colonies (Gorni 1987. Fair-share labor systems tend to result in gender-specific work roles, with women in domestic or support services.

Monastic societies usually have specific labor-sharing expectations. For example, the Rule of St. Benedict, written in the sixth century CE, specified work as a requirement of the monastic order.

Labor Quota System

More complicated communal economies involve the setting of a “labor quota” or minimal required labor contribution for a person to maintain their membership in the group or community.

Communities with labor quota time economies counting one hour of work as one “labor credit” are usually secular, replacing a cultural, spiritual or religious orientation to sharing with a commitment to a more quantifiable sharing process. Variable-credit labor systems in which different tasks are valued at different credit are rare because of their complexity. Labor quotas may be only a few hours per person per week, as in many small collective households, or they may be full-time workloads and may even include sub-quotas for particular tasks shared by all members, such as cleaning or income-producing.

Communities with labor credit systems provide for members to work from one to five or more different “creditable” jobs in a particular day. Such a “radical flex-time” labor system supports members working in cross-gender roles, such as men sharing childcare, food service and other creditable domestic labor, and women sharing business, industrial, maintenance, construction, political, and other roles. “Egalitarian” labor credit systems, affirming the feminist goal of equality of the genders, provide training for all members in multiple skills for greater workforce flexibility, and more freedom of choice in work and one’s personal schedule. Drawbacks of the radical flex-time system are less efficiency as members frequently transition between jobs, and lower productivity as members concentrate less on proficiency in any one skill.

The best examples of communities using labor quotas are those in the Federation of Egalitarian Communities. Some, like Acorn Community in Virginia only require a quota of work in particular areas, such as in the least desirable fields of income and cleaning, while the rest of the member’s voluntary labor contribution to the community is entirely up to them in type and quantity. East Wind Community in Missouri requires a full quota of around 40 hours a week, sometimes including income and cleaning quotas.

The community with the most complicated time economy, involving labor budgeting and reporting, is Twin Oaks Community in Virginia. The community’s total labor supply is calculated (number of members times the labor quota), and from this labor budgets are set for particular work areas in the same way that money is budgeted. “Done labor,” or each member’s completed work in the budgeted work areas, is then recorded and reported, and compared against the previously set budgets and the person’s labor quota. A member’s failure to meet their labor quota gives them a “negative labor balance” which must be cleared by working extra hours in the future, in order to avoid placing into jeopardy the person’s membership in the group. “Over-quota” work is used to correct a negative labor balance or to earn vacation time for the member to be applied against a future quota. A member’s labor quota may be reduced for health or other reasons, and a permanently reduced labor quota is equivalent to the “pension” in monetary economies.

Through the system of labor budgets the community as a whole decides its collective priorities by how it divides its labor supply. The entire labor budgeting process, along with the income and expense projections process, is repeated in regular planning cycles, serving to keep the members of the community empowered and invested in the communal society. As a communal economy using a form of participatory governance requires a considerable amount of communication in decision-making, authority is usually delegated to managers, co-managers or committees in each work area, with feedback and appeal processes serving the value of maintaining a community-controlled economy. Delegating collective authority to managers is a means of making participatory governance more efficient by reducing the number of meetings. Also, acknowledging that individuals have the freedom and autonomy to make decisions that they believe to be in the best interest of the community nurtures trust and commitment.

Communal Distribution

Production in communal economies is only half of the economic process; the other half being distribution and consumption without an exchange system. Regular planning cycles setting labor and money budgets (the latter from exchange with the dominant culture outside of the community) is the primary method of sharing communal assets. Budgeting is essentially a form of rationing, since there are always more ideas on things to do than there are resources. One budgeted item is usually small personal discretionary funds or allowances, which results in communal assets becoming private property. This is for exchange outside of the community for commodities or services that the community does not provide, often for vacations.

Other forms of communal distribution include: first-come-first-served (e.g., food serving and other items “up-for-grabs”), to each as needed (e.g., health services), seniority (e.g., Twin Oaks’ sabbatical program), resources given to individuals for personal needs and wants upon request (e.g., East Wind’s “Weeds and Knots”), drawing lots rolling dice or other systems of chance, and the “double-blind preferences matrix.” This latter distribution system is used in situations where two or more people want the same item, most often a room or residence, or when there are any limited numbers of items to be distributed among interested people. All of the items to be distributed are given a similar name such as a type of flower, then all of the people desiring those items are given a similar name such as a type of animal. Each person in the matrix rates the items according to their first through third preferences and a two-dimensional matrix is made, with flowers on one axis, animals on the other. A member is found who does not know who or what the animals or flowers represent, and is asked to arrange the matrix so that each animal gets its highest preference possible in flowers, resulting in most people getting their first or second preference.

Communal Theory

Communal distribution is managed in egalitarian communities to provide the greatest good for the greatest number, or to each according to need, with the highest degree of fairness possible given the limits of the community’s resources. Developing fair and equitable methods of producing and distributing communal assets is essential in those communities affirming that creating community does not require the deprivation of privacy, whether in relationships, goods, or space. By contrast, in monasticism an ascetic lifestyle and a vow of poverty are defining features of the community.

To explain how entrusting communal resources to individual members can be consistent with the communal value of sharing, two theories are available. First, the “communal privacy theory” states that increasing levels of privacy, afforded by entrusting additional resources or powers to members does not reduce the community’s level of communalism as long as the equity or ultimate responsibility and power remains shared under communal ownership and control. Second, the “communal sharing theory” states that the greater the experience people have of sharing among themselves, the greater will be their commitment to the community thus formed. (Butcher 1991)

Increasing computerization of communal economies using various forms of time economies for production and various processes for distribution will aid the growth of communal economies as long as those processes serve the values and needs of the members. Sharing in communal society can include beliefs, ideals, thoughts, feelings and emotions as well as goods and services, power and leadership in communal governance.

Further Reading

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