Capitalism in the Revolution? A Feminist Re-constitution of Market Development in Philadelphia

By

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Abstract

In addition to deconstructing gender divisions, feminist geography has contributed to a reconsideration of pervasive global/local and capitalist/non-capitalist binaries in economic geography. A feminist theory of economy, in particular, troubles the naturalized understanding of capitalist enterprise’s dominant standing relative to non-capitalist and alternative capitalist productive processes. This stands in contrast to Marxist theories of the ‘neoliberal’ US city in which capitalist imperatives always determine urban development and multi-directionality is thus rendered invisible. Such an essentialist read of capital marks all economic development as an inherent defeat. Drawing on the case of a recently constructed shopping center anchored by a Lowe’s Hardware store in inner-city West Philadelphia, this paper develops a theory of economy and locality to reconsider community economic development, arguing global capitalist development is complexly intertwined in place rather than dominant. This approach to capitalist dynamics opens a wider exploration of the multifaceted relationships among local, national, and global capitals, as well as those between mainstream community development projects (i.e. CDCs, FEZs, and Enterprise Zones), community empowerment, and non-capitalist economic formations. An anti-essentialist theory of economy and space offers the analytical opening to forge practical solutions that do not presume to know what is best for neighborhood development based on an abstracted class politics. Rather, it focuses on place, and there by traces how capitalist processes can be influenced, shaped, and reconfigured by non-capitalist (and anti-capitalist) forces.

Introduction

West Philadelphia is said to be a microcosm for greater Philadelphia’s “tale of two cities,” a term referencing the juxtaposition of wealthy sections connected to the University of Pennsylvania (University City) with the highly segregated and historically marginalized neighborhoods beyond the bounds of “Penn-trification” (the ironic descriptor for the University’s urban improvement efforts). West Philadelphia is a primarily African American neighborhood with a poverty rate consistently above the national average. Following industrial disinvestment across American cities during the 1970s, West Philadelphia is arguably a textbook case of the dynamics of inner-city disinvestment and controversial gentrification schemes. In line with Sach’s' critical
account of international economic development, West Philadelphia is framed paternalistically by development agencies as a problem area, an “underdeveloped other” in need of development, change and improvement. This has made West Philadelphia a laboratory for community economic development programs, always steeped in assumptions about what market economic growth will do for the neighborhood. Such schemes are notorious for purposefully excluding the poor who have borne the brunt of disinvestment and are often met with resistance from those living within gentrification’s bounds. When a notoriously militant community in West Philadelphia took the helms of a market development project, the choice left by critics of development between cooptation and resistance proved notably insufficient to explain the dynamics that created such a project.

In January of 2008, a Lowe’s Hardware store, the anchor of a retail strip shopping center, opened in West Parkside, a neighborhood in the heart of inner-city West Philadelphia. Slowly over the next few months a McDonald’s, a Wachovia Bank, a T-mobile Store, and an AJ Wright (a discount clothing store) also opened, culminating with the ‘grand finale’ – a ShopRite supermarket that opened the following June. One look at the strip mall juxtaposed by the run down yet colorful row houses and vibrant urban gardens (mirroring the ones it bulldozed over on its own site) and the story is over before it has been told (see Figures 1 and 2). Defeat, as yet another urban gentrification scheme over-ran “a stronghold of working-class grit and politics.”

High levels of neighborhood participation that welcomed the development signified critics’ concerns about Federal Empowerment Zones (FEZs) co-opting resistance to capitalist development were correct in this instance, offering a new spin on the “dramatic suburbanization of the urban landscape,” made possible by the existence of communities desperate for any form of investment. Is this one more example of the specter of capital co-optation in the inner-city – one fought time and again by similarly marginalized neighborhoods across the country? Is this one more example of the defeat of militant and radical resistance to oppression and exploitation in American cities, evidence of an economically poor neighborhood’s inability to resist its own subjugation? Marxist urban geography has had an overwhelmingly negative read of any urban development scheme as gentrification for capitalist interests at the expense of the poor. In this co-optation/resistance binary, it is difficult to imagine a spectrum of possible relationships between “local” communities of any kind, impoverished ones in particular, and a transnational capitalist firm.
Figure 1: Row houses across from the retail center’s parking lot. Prior to the parking lot, similar homes were on that block as well (taken by author, June 2008).

Figure 2: The Lowe’s in West Philadelphia (taken by author, June 2008).
Despite the gloomy hauntings of the neon-signage looming over the neighborhood (a clear symbol of capitalist conquest), a day at the grand-opening festival and some time at the various information sessions and community meetings reveal a different mood. Community meetings haven’t been this well attended since the Mann Music Center tried (and failed) to build a parking lot over West Parkside’s section of Fairmount Park back in the 1970s. Today, locally owned businesses are getting contracts, small convenience stores that have been price gouging their food-desert costumers for years are suddenly lowering their prices, and home ownership is on the rise as the community takes the lead on housing initiatives to replace the dilapidated homes the center knocked down (see Figure 3). In other words, locally based livelihood practices are not being stamped out, they are finding new avenues for growth. The excitement, optimism, and new ideas for “what to do next” are abundant indicators of, at the very least, a story that is yet to be told.

Figure 3: Homes revitalized by the Parkside Neighborhood Association in 2006 as part of the relocation process (taken by author, May 2006).

This paper employs a feminist theory of economy to go beyond the deconstruction of the cooptation/resistance binary that exists for weighing participatory economic development. Drawing on feminist theories of economy and place this paper re-reads development by reconsidering the relationship between capitalism and noncapitalism. Drawing on the diverse economy theory of feminist geographers J. K. Gibson-Graham, the role of place is considered beyond an a priori
assumption of its domination by the global.\textsuperscript{8} If capitalism is not assumed to be dominant and is accordingly shaped by its place, then it is entirely possible for a capitalist retail center to enhance and be shaped by alternative economic practices. By demonstrating how the center is co-constituted by alternative economic and social practices, this paper shows that a transnational corporation is place contingent. In other words, local places determine capitalism’s dynamics as much as capitalism’s dynamics influence them. A feminist theory of economy makes visible the retail center’s inadvertent fostering of alternative forms of production, new spaces for social reproduction and the development of a broadened institutional capacity to communally allocate surplus. This has implications for both critical theory and community economic development policy.

The second section of this paper reviews the pervasive co-optation/resistance binary in development literature. The third section outlines feminist geographers’ J.K. Gibson-Graham’s theory of economy and their methodology for studying it. They offer a theory of economy that gives agency to the local places in which economies are enacted in such a way as to deflate the determinism of capitalist enterprise. Their re-reading of economy offers a path out of the co-optation/resistance binary to more explicitly consider the communities that enact economies. The fourth and fifth sections of this paper develop the arguments made in the first two sections through the aforementioned case study of the retail center built in West Philadelphia. This case study demonstrates firstly the way feminist theory offers a rethinking of economy and subsequently inner-city economic development and secondly the true multiplicities of the interaction between “local” and “global” capitalisms.

The Cooptation/Resistance Binary in Community Economic Development Critiques

A vast literature examines community economic development both internationally and within the United States. In spite of the variety of approaches, nuances, politics and ideologies at play in this literature, a common sense notion of economic determinism pervades. That is an assumption that problems of the poor are essentially economic and, more importantly, “economic” becomes synonymous with “capitalism.” Moreover, since the solution to underdevelopment in poor communities across the globe is to resist capitalism, the move toward more participatory approaches – that is development projects which are deeply engaged with local communities and seek to address their specific needs – are presumed to be a process of co-optation. In other words, through participatory schemas, critics of capitalist development argue, communities are unwittingly manipulated to engage capitalism and produce the conditions of their exploitation. This section argues the oscillation
between cooptation and resistance that is pervasive in critiques of development precludes understanding the role of place in capitalist development.

From the perspective of structural Marxism, which problematizes capitalism in all forms, community economic development is not genuinely interested in democratizing development; rather, hegemonic capitalist interests strategically deploy such democratization to quell radical resistance to exploitation. Partici\(\text{p}\)atory strategies perpetuate capitalism and neglect the structural causes of uneven development. Thus, community economic development policies based on participation and empowerment are often regarded as contrary to marginal groups’ broader class interests. In this context, a working-class or impoverished community actively implementing capitalist development is considered to be co-opted to serve capital’s goals rather than their class interests.

Others have argued for a more pragmatic approach to such democratization, pointing out community groups make a more complex set of negotiations beyond a simple cooptation/resistance binary. This work makes clear communities often wield such policies and cooperate with development projects in ways that work to their advantage, but still do not hesitate to resist development when it does not coincide with, or disrupts, place-based needs. In other words, it is often the case that groups subject to participatory development are often simultaneously cooperating and resistant as they seek to meet a heterogeneous set of desires and goals. However, even a more nuanced argument is premised from an antagonistic relationship between local communities and capitalist development in which capitalist development is regarded as deterministic. In such analyses, both the possibility of an indeterminate set of relations between the community and capital, and the possibility of a community to co-opt policies and even capitalist enterprise for their own ends are foreclosed.

**Co-opting Capitalism**

A feminist reconsideration of capitalism renders the assumption of its dominance insufficient for analyzing economic development projects. Subsequently, it offers a frame for analysis which moves beyond co-optation/resistance binaries. Rather, according to a feminist critique of the aforementioned understanding of capitalism, places determine capitalism as much as they are determined by it. This section applies a feminist theory of economy to address the impasse of the cooptation resistance binary and outlines an alternative methodology for understanding economic development programs such as the one in this case.

Gibson-Graham argue that capitalism has been conceived as an insurmountable monolith, but in actuality they assert it cannot exist exclusive of its
exterior. They argue the subordination of the non-capitalist other in “certain kinds of Marxian economic theory [have] become an obstacle rather than a spur to anti-capitalist political projects.” Marxian economic theory [have] become an obstacle rather than a spur to anti-capitalist political projects. Marxism seems to have been called upon to transform something that cannot be transformed, that is, a discursively united, singular and total Capitalism. The assumption of capitalist hegemony diminishes difference, with the result being a vast arena of alternative economic practices left unrepresented. Gibson-Graham are interested in making visible these diminished aspects of the economy in their multiplicity of forms. Their re-conception of economy makes it possible to consider a broader path for resisting development. According to this, local communities participating in development are not inherently co-opted because capitalism is a much more complex entity. They call instead for a “politics focused on constructing noncapitalist alternatives.” Through a feminist deconstruction of capitalism, one can begin to reconsider the terms by which community empowerment in economic “development” is evaluated.

Diverse economies research has investigated enterprises (and communities) that are organized around solidarity and a beneficent, equitable distribution of surplus labor, alternative currency systems, reciprocity and care, and so forth. In general, diverse economies research projects make four categories of contribution to political economy: (1) the denial of a totalized global capitalist form through reconstituting subjectivity, (2) an investigation of the constitutions of class processes, (3) the questioning of assumptions about globalization and commodification, and (4) investigating alternative forms of economic practice. Such investigations draw on a loose matrix of transactions (market, alternative market, non-market), labor exchanges (including ones that are waged, alternative paid, and unpaid), and enterprise development (capitalist, alternative capitalist, or non-capitalist). Much of the work in this vein has sought to exemplify the transactions beyond the market, labor exchanges beyond wages, and enterprise development beyond capitalist firms, all without deeply considering the ways that changes in those three interact with and change other forms of transaction, labor, and enterprise.

The work has been so focused on bringing the alternative aspects of economic productivity to the forefront that the relationships and interactions among diverse economic practices and capitalism are yet to be fully explored. The retail center in West Parkside is a site in which the relationships and interactions between the two are vital to an understanding of urban futures. In particular, it is clear that this retail center (representative of a development of the capitalist, market economy, along with state support) will have dramatic impacts on the other aspects of the economy (ones that, prior to Gibson-Graham, were largely invisible).
Further, the feminist critique of economy lends insights into new ways of interrogating, critiquing and evaluating economic development programs. In this case, the influence of a place on a “place-less” transnational corporation is clear. The movement of Lowe’s into this impoverished community strikingly highlights the contradictions between a radical understanding of capital as exploitive and the hopes of a neighborhood buffeted from policies developed in the 1970s under the banner of “community economic development.” From that contradiction, what follows draws on this theoretical and methodological frame to re-read the role of community economic development and the influence of community on development. Through a reconsideration of the relationship between local neighborhoods and global capitalism, capitalism is considered something open to being shaped by local initiatives, rather than a holistic entity that can only be resisted. Through empirical evidence in the next two sections, this complex relationship and the possibilities for mutual constitution are explored.

The West Philadelphia Federal Empowerment Zone

Emblematic of the rising community development field – which was somewhat responsive to post-development critiques – the Federal Empowerment Zone (FEZ) was implemented in 1993 by the Clinton Administration. FEZs represent a strange hybrid between neo-liberal development policy and a response to critiques of economic exclusion in the neo-liberal era. They bestow similar benefits to businesses as the earlier Enterprise Zones, but give surrounding communities – through the establishment of a neighborhood CDC (the Community Trust Board (CTB) in West Philadelphia) – the capacity to ensure that benefits are distributed to the community. Rather than directly offering services to marginalized communities, the program uses incentives to attract business and create jobs, but with structures in place to ensure input from local communities: “Requiring a bottom-up or community-generated approach, empowerment zones attempt a comprehensive attack on urban distress by blending economic tax incentives and social services in a coordinated effort among federal agencies and local communities.” Despite its participatory response to post-development critiques, the policy still relies on capitalist development as the primary means to improve the quality of life for the social totality.

Nonetheless, as problematic as capitalism may be, the trajectory of Federal Empowerment Zones demonstrates that a marginal community’s acceptance of capitalist enterprise is premised on the preponderance of a variety of needs. Echoing the observations of Guthman from similar places, Philadelphia Planning reports published prior to the establishment of the FEZ note the impossibility of attracting retail establishments to low-income neighborhoods, despite trends recognizing retail as an economic development strategy. Retail centers are deemed difficult to site
because “demand for retail goods and services in West Philadelphia has been weakened by the district’s 27 percent population loss since 1960. In addition, household income levels (which also affect consumer demand) are relatively low in West Philadelphia.”

Many people in the community regard drawing in such a center as an enormous accomplishment. Through careful management, negotiation and planning on the part of the CTB, the plans for the center were finalized in 2006, after which ground was broken on affordable housing for relocated residents. The center took hold soon after. Although the CTB lost federal funding in 2006, it is still functioning, supported by the Philadelphia Department of Commerce and it now receives funds from the retail center. As of 2011, the entire center is leased out to a variety of stores and services, while the CTB still meets once a month.

Figure 4: The Empowerment Zones throughout Philadelphia (PCPC 2008)
Figure 5: The West Philadelphia Empowerment Zone (UWSEPA n.d.).
The establishment of the West Philadelphia FEZ (see figures 4, 5 and 6) made it possible not only to attract retail through incentives and funding, it gave community organizations a clear role in the process. When the idea for a shopping center was solidified in 2002, the CTB worked with a private developer, Goldenburg Group, and the West Philadelphia Financial Services Institute (WPFSI), to seek out potential anchor stores, gain community favor for housing relocations, and develop the funding for future projects. The partnership to form the retail center has created WestGold, LLC. WesGold is comprised of the West Philadelphia Financial Services Institute (WPFSI) and Goldenburg Group, a private development firm. Both organizations have been vital to ensuring the construction of the retail center. Goldenburg Group could not have built here successfully without cooperation and support from the neighborhood (generally embodied in WPFSI and the CTB).
Furthermore, WPFSI (along with other business-oriented CDCs such as the Lancaster Business Association) has played an important role in ensuring that the retail center promotes economic alternatives such as entrepreneurship. It is also important to note that the CTB partially funds WPFSI through new forms of appropriation and distribution, giving it a great deal of say in the non-profits initiatives. At the same time as it makes low-interest, small business loans and collects on them, the CTB begins to sustain itself through the appropriation and distribution of surplus generated by entrepreneurs. Figure 7 demonstrates a variety of institutions and corporations in the community (blue boxes) in relation to the surpluses they generate and collect (green boxes). These flows have been dramatically impacted by the retail center and have also created new alternative social and economic practices, which I demonstrate further in the following section.
Alternative-Led Markets

In what follows, I argue that the surplus which flows from the retail center into community organizations is part of a distributive class struggle which has created new forms of “being-in-common.” Community members who, through their role in the CTB, are now accustomed to communal allocations of surplus, have begun to reenact alternative allocations in their own community. In this way, forming and overseeing the retail center has made West Philadelphia’s residents more organized, collaborative, and better adapted to create other forms of non-capitalist surplus allocation through co-operatives, communal savings and loans, and so on. In this way, this case demonstrates the plethora of possible relationships between communities and their development projects, as well as the radical potential of those interactions. In other words, their control of the center upends assumptions about the dominant nature of global capitalism over presumably “local” spaces, the community in this case has succeeded in “flattening” such relations, and understanding it as such requires further developing a feminist theory of diverse economy to consider not only economic difference but also relational difference between different types of economic practices.

Ensuring a beneficial relationship between the new center and the neighborhood’s alternative surplus allocations is not accidental. Instead, it is a carefully negotiated process. Successful supervision of the business practices in the center to encourage rather than compete against entrepreneurship was also on the minds of community leaders: “It doesn’t end here…the [community trust board] has to make sure everyone is in compliance, has to stay on to make sure it’s a success” (Interviewee 4). This reflects the sentiments of careful negotiation and supervision of transnational corporations throughout the process. The retail center is on property owned by the community and it pays rent to the CTB. This new sense of ownership, as well as the increased number of people who came into the community to shop, has inspired a great deal of entrepreneurship in the community. Formulations of entrepreneurship have been part of the retail center from early in the project’s development. Now that the center is opened, these foundational efforts are blossoming in co-constitutions between small businesses and the center, spawning new ideas, opportunities, and hopes for alternative means for producing surplus.

Of course “other” possibilities always exist in these types of formations, mainstream or not, and thus various non-capitalist alternatives could easily be in direct opposition to the center. In this case, however, developing alternative class processes of production is not antagonistic to capitalist development, nor are they co-opted. Instead, many of the entrepreneurial opportunities being considered hinge on the presence of the center through a variety of contract possibilities. Some community
members are interested in creating community gardens with affordable greenhouses, and ShopRite executives have been at every meeting – enthusiastic, encouraging, and excited to contract the produce for sale in their store. While there has been an interest in community gardening for a long time, it has never been able to take off in the way that it now has with ShopRite as a buyer. In another example, a discount on startup materials and aid in administering small business loans is being negotiated with Lowe’s. Thus, through such programs run by the Community Trust Board, the businesses in the center are strategically positioned to enhance economic diversity rather than diminish it.

In addition to fostering different class relationships, the center is premised on an alternative model of property ownership. In traditional understandings of capitalism and class antagonisms it is significant to an understanding of inherent exploitation that capitalist enterprises own the means of production, including the land. Here this relationship is complicated because the CTB (a communal organization) owns the retail center property. This has had two major impacts on the diverse economy: (1) it ensures at least some surplus generated in capitalist production within the center is not extracted from the community and (2) it creates a distributive role that has put the CTB in a position of effecting intentional economic processes.

Though the CTB has long been responsible for distributing wealth through its role in disseminating federal money since its inception in 1995, the retail center has opened up new possibilities for it, particularly with the sustained funds flowing to it: “We’re going to rehab some more houses, we are going to light and fix up that 52nd street train station, we have transformed Marion Avenue, everything is feeding on itself, it’s snowballing and we are really getting a bang for our buck” (Interviewee 1). In early plans for the retail center, prepared collaboratively by WPFSI and the CTB, the stated goals were to: “Empower the community through local ownership, land ownership, and provide a perpetual stream of income to be reinvested into the community.” And it was already conceived that “The income from the shopping center will be used for greater community development; [to] increase matching dollars to participants of the FSA31 program; [to] provide training and other grants for community groups in the EZ; [to] invest with EZ property owners to rejuvenate the community and create more opportunities for local business owners.”32 The rents paid to the CTB from the retail center represent communally allocated surplus – non-capitalist form of economy. This income provides money for loans and grants for small businesses and other alternative forms of production and reproduction.

In this light, the CTB does not match the FEZ’s initially conceived purpose to primarily serve as a vehicle to create jobs in the capitalist market, or even critiques of community economic development more generally. In West Philadelphia, the CTB is
dedicated to gaining community *ownership* of community-produced surplus. As Interviewee 2 explains, the initial mobilization involved part of a class-based redistributive struggle to own the land:

The thing I’m most pleased about is that the community owns the land…that is what I am most pleased about owning that and that’s something that doesn’t happen…That’s something that was continually worked on, nobody wants to give minority communities anything and yes it’s always been a struggle, and it’s going to continue to be a struggle, but this will be perpetual income now and beyond even when I’m gone, or until someone comes a long and figures out how to revert it back.

Placing herself at a careful distance, and knowing the history of development in the community and its co-optive and exploitive nature, Interviewee 2 still recognizes the project’s potential. In tandem with efforts to ensure entrepreneurship, there is a clear sense of communal ownership being promoted through the partnered community organizations:

It came from the community, the grassroots…Since this is what this is, this is a pilot, my concern is that people who don’t appreciate what is going on, that that’s going to destroy it…ignorance is not blissful, education is the key. If someone goes and steals, what you are doing is you’re messing up my house. This is yours and if you mess it up this is what you get. You own this, it’s not the “white man’s” (Interviewee 2).

Or, in other words, it’s not the capitalist’s.

Rather, it is part of an intentional economy carefully engineered by the CTB and its supporting organizations. Developing the center including organizing relocations, directing WPFSI, and ensuring ownership of the land, have all strengthened the CTB. Each leader has a variety of obligations and the desire for a shopping center was something that made continued and consistent participation in the CTB particularly attractive. The CTB embodies possibilities for new class processes, as exemplified by the ones it has already established and continues to create. In the political interest of developing diverse economic practices through new constitutions of class processes, the CTB should be understood as an alternative class process. In my view, the people who represent the CTB and other neighborhood groups closely aligned with it are part of the becoming of an “intentional economy” or “projects that treat economy as a political and ethical space of decision.”
Although the retail center sits in the bounds of the Parkside neighborhood, it is part of the larger FEZ effort and this has created new ties amongst neighborhood organizations that do not normally work together. Since the creation of this CTB and the retail center project, these neighborhood organizations have come to work together much more often and are in closer conversation with one another now than they were prior to the retail center. Bringing together more groups does not seem to have disenfranchised the individual neighborhood groups; it has instead made them more unified and even more powerful:

Well this just is not all about Parkside…Carol Park, Cathedral Park, Mill Creek and Parkside, we were the major players and they always took our suggestions through the whole process, we were never left out of the loop…which I loved [because] it sits in our community…[at engagements and meetings] I always include all the neighborhoods, this is not a one organization thing (Interviewee 1).

The CTB has helped to unite neighborhoods, sharing benefits across boundaries, giving them more control over the distribution of the surplus generated by enterprises. It has thus become an important part of community “being-in-common” and the creation of new social networks for non-capitalist practices.

Finally, this has allowed even more opportunities to support community-based ownership at even the familial and individual level. Both the Family Savings Account (FSA) and Anti-Gentrification fund are new forms of directing surplus generated by the community into forms that benefit it and were developed in relation to the center. These funds in part have been generated as the community becomes more comfortable with alternative forms of allocation. The FSA was part of the initial conception of the retail center as another means of directing surplus generated by the retail center. The FSA program is designed to promote financial literacy and savings for future investment in a home, business, or education set up through neighborhood organizations and Wachovia Bank. Each dollar saved by participants will be matched using funds raised in the retail center. In what can be conceived as a new allocation of surplus based on the contribution of the center’s surplus, the overall intention has always been for people in the community to attain greater control of surplus allocations.

Collecting and redistributing rents from the center has been practice for developing similar types of allocations. As leaders sit on the CTB and through their ownership of the center property, they are now further able to appropriate surplus. The ability to create community surplus allocations has replicated itself in the
participating organizations. Parkside has set up one such trust to further substantiate their own goals and mitigate concerns about the center:

It’s not going to be gentrification…we are very concerned about property taxes…so we opened a club and we put money in every month and when property taxes come we have the money to pay it…there is help, if you’re having a problem with property taxes call Parkside. We can take you through. Same thing with mortgages, don’t let four months go, don’t let your property go down because someone will get it. We don’t want that (Interviewee 1).

In a neighborhood particularly susceptible to gentrification, predatory lenders, and exploitive real estate market shifts, these types of funds are important in protecting the community from the gentrification the retail center could spark.

The center has also created new spaces of social reproduction, from which to foster the social ties necessary for alternative forms of production, reproduction, and social organization. Although seemingly benign and often dismissed as the privatization of public space, these offer in a diverse economies frame a new potential site for social change rather than defeat. By having new meeting spaces, cleaner and more aesthetically pleasing grounds, as well as a central place with distinct purpose, informal connections become more plausible. This can be more precisely traced through a longer ethnographic study of the neighborhood, as it continues to respond to the center, but the “buds” of these types of connections are evident. The spaces and resources of the center are community assets that can enhance alternative economic activity by strengthening the social networks that foster these activities.

The parking lot constructed with the retail center is already being utilized, replacing Fairmount Park as a new public space for community organizing and services. The city’s park system is under-funded (bordering on defunct), and this makes the space in the parks difficult to reserve, access, and secure. For a variety of reasons, this has led to a dramatic decrease in the use of parks. Indeed, it has been argued that such neglect on the part of the city is explicitly intended to limit social action. Without minimizing the concerns of the privatization of public space, the center’s parking lot has filled a void left by government neglect of public spaces in the neighborhood. This lot has helped to foster and sustain events that encourage alternative forms of reproduction.

In the early planning stages, the CTB insisted the center offer meeting spaces for their organizations, and ShopRite obliged. Although the center is located in the West Parkside Neighborhood, the sense of ownership is credited to the CTB. Moving
the CTB meetings to ShopRite has increased attendance, and my interviewees believe this will increase attendance at their neighborhood organization meetings as well. As it is much easier and appealing to attend a meeting in a new facility, offering free dinner and located where people run their errands. In this sense, a meeting at ShopRite is more appealing and convenient to attend than a meeting in a tucked-away basement of a church or community center – spaces where people do not feel a sense of welcome or ownership if they are not already a member. Also, if meetings for each community organization are held in the same place at similar times (in the evenings), this can informally help to foster inter-neighborhood collaborations that would not otherwise occur. The sorts of issues discussed in these meetings have always been part of alternative modes of surplus allocation, social organization (even of resistance), and social network enhancement. In other words, these rooms within a capitalist enterprise are spaces in which an alternative economy is being fostered. It is only by disrupting the epistemic unity attributed to capitalism that these observations become possible.

**Conclusion**

This example makes a strong case against limiting analyses of neighborhood mobilization for the retail center (and even the FEZ) as either a concession to capital or the community as duped. Instead, analyses must develop a feminist theory of economy that re-conceptualizes local/global economic binaries and puts capitalist modes of surplus generation on the same plane as alternative processes. This paper is not meant to argue against the exploitative nature of capitalist labor relations. While it is undeniable that this center represents the perpetuations of said relations, the bounds of what constitutes a “capitalist” firm are blurred and the possibility of a capitalist firm to benefit and foster non-capitalist alternatives warrants exploration. A capitalist firm is much more than capitalist labor relationships and should be distinguished from the variety of economic flows in which it participates as an agglomeration of forces. At the same time, there is nothing inherent about either beneficial or detrimental relationship. The role of the retail center in fostering non-capitalist forms of production and alternative forms of social organization are contingent on the already high levels of mobilization in the neighborhood organizations. It is further contingent on the institutions already in place (partly through the democratization of community economic development projects) that gave the community ownership and authority over the financial design of the center. At the same time it is the desire for the center that strengthened this institutional framework in the first place.

Capitalist development is not, in my view, inherently beneficial nor detrimental to other forms of surplus production, appropriation, and distribution. Rather it can be co-constitutive of those alternatives. This co-constitution can only be fostered
through changing the imaginary of what constitutes a capitalist firm and recognizing the fluidity of its bounds. Community economic development cannot and should not be led by a priori notions of capitalist class relations as the dominating force determining the whole of social life. Instead of asking if this retail center will create jobs or foster a middle class as a singular stimulus program or if it is co-opting anti-capitalist resistance, I propose these projects be evaluated (and even accepted or encouraged) based on their ability to enhance alternative economic practices that promote non-exploitative processes for producing, appropriating, and distributing surplus. The more explicit this consideration becomes in academic work on community economic development, the more imaginaries outlining alternatives to exploitation and marginalization will be available for policy implementation.

5 Federal Empowerment Zones were implemented by the Clinton Administration in 1993 as an economic development program for blighted urban communities and neglected rural ones. This legislation is outlined in more detail in section 3.
12 Gibson-Graham 1996, p. 22.
Board Meetings from 2002 of surplus value. Here I draw directly from four of my interviews with community leaders. My participant observation was important to my broader understanding of the community’s “being.”

I attended Community Trust Board meetings, WPFSI planning meetings, and opened activities, and general community meetings. My participant observation was important to my broader understanding of the community’s “being-in-common” and flows of surplus value. Here I draw directly from four of my interviews with community leaders, meeting minutes from Community Trust Board Meetings from 2002-2007, and proposals presented to the CTB by WPFSI.

FSA is the Family Savings Account and is outlined in more detail below.

CTB Meeting Minutes, 2006.


