

# Supporting the Scene in Association with Others: Do-It-Yourselfers and Difference

Does DIY stand inside or outside capital's economy?

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I attended a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) event three years ago that was promoted as a “zine release show.” Ostensibly devoted to the distribution of recently published zines, the event provided zine writers with an audience of people with shared dispositions, but this essay considers a less obvious way it drew people together across difference and precipitated a politics.

My article has three parts: first, a description of the event; second, an analysis considering whether it was an instance of what some call non-capitalism; third, the argument that it exemplifies a politics of difference.

## **The show**

The zine release was part of a punk rock show followed by an after-party. My notes of the event are as follows:

“The zine release show was hosted [by residents at a house near the university]. Attendees knew the house as a “punk house,” and their behavior indicated familiarity with the conventions of such spaces. For instance, almost everyone arrived with between three and five dollars for the bands and sought out [the residents] to make a donation even though they were not specifically asked for money. Some attendees also spent money at a long table of zines, tapes, and records, or at the “bar”—a piece of scrap wood balanced on milk crates. Signs posted on the bar and the table indicated that all proceeds would go to the touring bands.”

The bands played to a crowd of 30 or 40 people who stood within arms reach of the musicians. During songs, audience members kept tempo with their hands, nodded their heads, or moved enthusiastically, jostling others with their dancing. The dancers occasionally knocked over microphone stands and cymbals, but attentive audience members took it upon themselves to set the equipment upright. [Two attendees] snapped photos for their fanzine and blog.

When the music ended, many of the attendees went inside to eat food served on a kitchen table. [One person eating at the table] said the food had been gleaned from the dumpster behind a grocery store in a suburb north of the city. While people ate, [some attendees] drank beer around a fire they stoked with branches that the electric company had chopped from the neighborhood's trees. I was told that, in the days before the show, [the residents] had collected those branches from the alley behind their house. The food was eaten and the fire put out sometime in the early hours of the morning. As [the residents] went to bed, the remaining few went home or stated an intention to sleep on a couch. (November 2007, Columbus, Ohio)

## **The event as an instance of non-capitalism?**

For anti-authoritarians critical of the hierarchies endemic to capitalist production, it is tempting to identify the zine release show as an instance of non-capitalism. Certainly some aspects of it lend themselves to being identified as such. Indeed, if one understands so-called non-capitalist economic arrangements as simply those not organized to facilitate profit-making, then the event was a site for a variety of non-capitalist practices. The house where it

was hosted was a not-for-profit venue, had a kitchen stocked with food from a dumpster, and was furnished with handed-down couches on which non-renters often slept.

Further, the show's attendees donated money to bands and zine writers, not to a promoter or club, and therefore directly compensated creators for time spent honing their craft. Despite having no obligation to do so, attendees also voluntarily facilitated the show and wider scene of which it was a part; their unwaged work included righting toppled equipment and taking photographs that would, when printed in fanzines and posted on blogs, promote DIY events to come.

One can point to these apparently non-capitalist practices of exchange and work as evidence that the event was an already-existing alternative to capitalist social relations. Some would say that the capacity to participate in creating and sustaining non-capitalist arrangements is gained by recognizing that it is not necessary to wait for capitalism to disappear in order for them to exist.

Geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham wrote books, essays and articles that argued precisely this. Her work envisions an economic landscape of difference rather than sameness, and suggests that, when one attends to existing difference and resists a seductive assumption that we are dominated by a capitalist totality, one becomes capable of making and maintaining other worlds.

Gibson-Graham worked against an imaginary of capitalism in which it is coextensive with the developed world and necessitates the expansion for which it penetrates difference on its fragile non-capitalist frontiers. She worked to recast capitalism as a descriptor for only some economic activity, and—as if to correct past oversights—took to examining non-capitalist economies “in all their specificity and independence.” But if Gibson-Graham's analyses convincingly showed that multiple economies coexist, they did not promise to defend them from expropriation.

Gibson-Graham's anti-capitalocentric representations do suggest alternative economic possibilities, but they also demand accepting a binary of what's in and outside of capitalism. While capital is not given the privilege of determining all economic practices, instances of capitalism are converted to otherness in order to preserve the integrity of purported alternatives.

If capitalist and non-capitalist economies coexist in these new representations of economy, they are not only distinct but also discrete. To follow Gibson-Graham and celebrate specifically non-capitalist forms of organization is therefore to dissociate their practitioners from others and set apart the analysis of alternatives from an interrogation of the hierarchical forms of organization they presumably oppose.

So, though I share a desire that pervades Gibson-Graham's work—a desire for a politics of “here and now”—I am provoked to wonder whether the move to examine non-capitalism in isolation is sufficient or whether making workable alternatives still depends on examining what it is about existing capitalism that must be transformed.

I lean towards the latter because, by bracketing circuits of capital from analysis, one risks missing what it takes to confine their logic to a narrower (and narrower, and narrower...) sphere of social life.

#### **DIY events and their “outside”**

DIY events can be understood differently and with consequences for envisioning possible interventions in existing economic arrangements. Representations that isolate purportedly non-capitalist DIY spaces from others may well succeed in maintaining their alterity if that is to be assessed by their apparent lack of contamination by characteristics of the so-called mainstream, but representing DIY spaces in that way risks obscuring Do-It-Yourselfers' political opportunities for negotiating how they relate to others.

On the other hand, emphasizing that Do-It-Yourselfers' identity is constitutively related to those others demands that we grapple with a politics of difference through which untidy spaces of DIY activity emerge. And emphasizing the untidiness of DIY spaces also felicitously corresponds with what happens on the ground.

Recall that on the night of the zine release show, food gleaned from the dumpster of a natural food store was served on the kitchen table. By consuming that food, Do-It-Yourselfers came to be materially entangled with and fortuitously enabled by the practices of grocery store management and employees.

Recall also that some Do-It-Yourselfers drank around a fire that was stoked by branches collected from the alley. By doing this, they were drawn into association with the neighborhood's electricity provider, who hired private professional tree-trimmers to protect the house's wiring from branches, and with the state's Public Utilities Commission, with whom the electricity provider had to coordinate the tree-trimming service.

Far from being dissociated from the everyday life of a capitalist world “outside” the event, the DIY practices in evidence at the zine release show were facilitated by Do-It-Yourselfers’ relationships with particular institutions and the circuits of capital by which they were maintained.

There is something to be celebrated however, even if it is not unadulterated autonomy. Do-It-Yourselfers’ efforts to glean waste left behind by institutions through which capital unmistakably flows does show they are actively negotiating the terms of their entanglement with the forms of organization those institutions embody.

Perhaps making this visible will compel people not yet participating in DIY activity to pursue such alternatives to profit-making economic arrangements. In the meantime, some acknowledgment that DIY alternatives only exist in association with circuits of capital is central to the construction of a future in which Do-It-Yourselfers are regarded as properly political and more than just a tribe of naive individualists (or lifestylists) who fleetingly evade, but must eventually capitulate to wage labor.



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