

Economic Representations: What's at Stake?

David F. Ruccio

Four items serve to frame my discussion of what I think is at stake in this project on economic representations:

Item #1

An important component of *Empire*, the much-discussed book by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, is an analysis of contemporary economic relations. According to Hardt and Negri, the "new reality of capitalism" involves the production not only of commodities but also of subjectivities. Central to this process of "biopolitical production" are three aspects of "immaterial labor": "the communicative labor of industrial production that has newly become linked in information networks, the interactive labor of symbolic analysis and problem solving, and the labor of the production and manipulation of affects."

Item #2

An ethical economy is both portrayed in and performed by the narrative of the Marquis de Sade's story of *Justine*. David Martyn (1999) argues that Sade portrays ethical relations in economic terms by showing that beneficence and generosity are caught up on relations of exchange, and thus petty and calculating, while injury and theft, which involve no recompense, appear as magnanimous and liberal. He also demonstrates that the legend of Justine cannot be contained in the "same pattern of economic exchange that governs the other ethical themes of the novel," since it is impossible to determine whether it will constitute a "gift" or a "theft" of virtue with respect to the reader.

Item #3

Community currency and local trading schemes—such as Ithaca Hours, Toronto Dollars, and the M15 LETSystem (in Manchester, England)—are increasingly common. In the case of

Ithaca hours, organizers and participants argue that a local currency serves to "stimulate local production of goods"; "strengthen awareness of our community's skills and give us more control of the economy"; "increase the core of employment which provides for local needs"; help us "see and feel that we're part of doing this"; "make people think more about what money is," as "an exchange of energy and resources"; and "develop a system of abundance, sharing, and cooperation."

Item #4

From the song "A Bird in the Hand," by Ice Cube:

I didn't have no money so now I have to hunch the
Back like a slave, that's what be happenin'
but whitey says there's no room for the African
Always knew that I would boycott, jeez
but welcome to McDonald's can I take your order please
Gotta sell ya food that might give you cancer
cuz my baby doesn't take no for an answer
Now I pay taxes that you never give me back
what about diapers, bottles, and Similac?
Do I gotta go sell me a whole lotta crack
for decent shelter and clothes on my back?
Or should I just wait for help from Bush
or Jesse Jackson, and Operation Push?

What's at Stake

These four items are specific examples of a larger trend, what I consider to be a rich and diverse pattern of "economic talk" outside the official discipline of economics. Almost every discipline, especially in the humanities and social sciences, includes a large number of scholars who engage in economic analysis—by analyzing economic events, deploying economic metaphors in social and cultural analysis, or using economic theories and concepts to analyze texts, artworks, and other cultural artifacts. Additionally, activists outside the academy have taken up and become participants in debates concerning a wide variety of economic issues, from globalization and sweatshop production to community development and living wages. More generally, popular culture—in genres as diverse

as music, television, and novels—is replete with references to and representations of economic themes and issues.

This ubiquity of economics, inside and outside the economy, is not matched by a sustained discussion among the various groups. Academic economists rarely acknowledge, let alone read and engage with, the economic analyses carried out by academic noneconomists. By the same token, scholars in disciplines other than economics often refer to economics as a singular method or set of conclusions, thereby overlooking or ignoring the variety of theoretical approaches that together make up the discipline of economics. And, for the most part, neither group within the academy has taken seriously the languages and discourses of economy that are produced and disseminated by economic activists and others outside the academy.

Let me try to state what I think is at stake in this project on economic representations. I am *not* interested in examining economic representations (across the disciplines and outside the academy) merely in order to promote more or “nicer,” more respectful dialogue among the participants. But I do want to explore the implications of the idea that economic knowledges don’t solely or necessarily originate in or spread out from a center within the academy. Thus, in my view, economic theories and approaches can be seen as being produced, learned, and contested in many different sites, including academic departments other than economics and nonacademic venues, and to be embedded in many different practices, again both inside and outside the academy.

One of the consequences of “decentering” economic knowledge is that it opens up the possibility of investigating both the content of the different knowledges that are located in various sites and practices other than the official discipline of economics and the different discursive structures—the different methods and protocols, the different narrative strategies and rules of formation—of these academic and nonacademic economic theories and statements. To be clear, I do not see myself as a romantic who sees every alternative to the mainstream and every pronouncement of non-experts as containing the real truth that is being concealed by ideologues who are simply protecting their domain of power. For me, the sociologist’s discourse or statements emanating from the so-called person in the street have no epistemological privilege in

revealing a blunt truth that the experts are too blind or too partial to see. Rather, I am interested in the ways knowledges produced mostly in sites distant from the headquarters of academic economics are, in fact, discourses whose rules of formation and discursive regularities can be recognized and discussed.

A second consequence—especially with respect to approaches formulated and followed by academic noneconomists—is that we can focus our attention on the specificity of their contribution to economic thought, on the relation of this contribution to the larger field, and, perhaps most importantly (at least for me), on the ways in which these contributions intervene in the debates and differences that already exist within the confines of the existing profession. One issue in which I am keenly interested is the extent to which these formulations are understood as an “antieconomics.” On this last score, I am mostly concerned with which economic discourses “within” the discipline such terms as ethical economy (along with libidinal economy, economy of desire, and so on) oppose, partially reformulate, or extend.

A third consequence, particularly where everyday economics is concerned, is that we can begin to unearth and examine knowledges of existing economic arrangements and imaginaries of alternative economies that are hidden within or behind, that in one way or another exceed, “official” ideas about the economy. By official ideas I not only mean mainstream, “neoliberal” celebrations of private property and free markets to which so much attention is directed these days; I’m also referring to heterodox (including Marxian) conceptions of a monolithic, hegemonic global capitalism. Thus, we may find that everyday economic discourses represent the modern-day equivalent of a Bakhtinian carnival, which includes, on one hand, stylized parodies of (and even attacks on) all sorts of official academic languages and pronouncements and, on the other hand, conceptual strategies and ways of seeing that pave the way for alternative practices and institutions.

I suppose that, in the end, what I am looking for are ways in which existing conceptions of both the discipline of economics and “real” economic relations and institutions can be denaturalized, made different from themselves, and new ones can be produced. Granting recognition to and exploring the content and rules of formation of economic

representations outside the official discipline of economics comprise one way of creating a new discursive space to accomplish that objective.

References

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