

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MARY-BETH RADDON, *Community and Money: Men and Women Making Change*. Montreal: Black Rise Books, 2003, xiii + 198 p.

Community and Money is about community currencies, a modest grassroots response to unwelcome effects of forces we have come to call globalization. These currencies aim to create and extend community, stem the outflow from local economies, help reduce poverty, and/or promote social change. But, for Raddon, it is only through the symbols and structures of gender that the operation of these currencies can be understood, and their potential assessed.

Chapter 1 describes some contemporary community-currency systems, as well as Robert Owen's Equitable Labour Hours, which figures throughout the book. It also compares community currencies favorably (in flexibility and range) to systems of informal barter, in which many users had also engaged before joining a currency system.

In chapter 2, before launching a critique of "regular" money (i.e., modern, general purpose, federal currencies that support a competitive, self-interested, market mentality), Raddon reports that the community-currency movement is ideologically gender-egalitarian. Hardly surprisingly, however, she notes that, in practice, members reproduce mainstream gender inequities. It is the gap between the ideal and real that she tries to illuminate.

Subsequent chapters raise issues and make arguments that are supported by field data drawn from 37 in-depth interviews with male and female movement members, scattered in six cities (in Ontario and the state of New York). Raddon also participated in one such system for four years. These people belonged to local systems representing either of two popular types: LETS ("greendollars") which work essentially as an accounting system for keeping track of exchanges between members and of individual balances; and HOURS, which issues paper notes that can be used by members, who earn them by exchanging with one another, or with non-members.

Because these currencies do not lend themselves to capital accumulation and profit maximization, they are meant to promote equality, although, as chapter 3 indicates, users' commitment to that goal varies (with women's being generally stronger). Establishing equivalencies is a crucial concern here, and wider cultural standards intervene, including "the systemic

undervaluation of 'women's work'" (p. 45). In illustrating how women and men reflect on mainstream understandings of distributive justice, Raddon finds gender symbols and structures at work (and she also uncovers the seeds of a broader class analysis that largely falls outside her frame of reference).

Chapter 4 uses LETS to analyze community currencies as "gift economies." It begins with a cursory review of the social anthropology of the gift, and its relevance as a critique of market relations and as a model. It then reports on the confusing and "awkward nexus between gift and money exchange" (p. 79) that participants experience, and that Raddon could have better illuminated by applying finer analytical distinctions. Rather than decrying the absence of an English term encompassing both gift and payment, she might have distinguished generalized from balanced modes of "gift" exchange, thereby also explaining why community currencies can actually increase social distance between intimates. Quite rightly warning that "gift ethics can be used to reinforce systems of status" (p. 72), Raddon shows how LETS exchanges can enhance male status and disaffirm women's gender identities.

LETS figures prominently in chapter 5, which returns to the question of the undervaluation of women's work. Data indicate that women themselves tend to undercharge and (lacking in sociological imagination) attribute this to personal weakness. In contrast, whether they undercharge or not, men are generally at ease with establishing and negotiating prices, and Raddon chooses two case examples of men who construe exchanges in personally advantageous ways. After an almost textbook critique of role theory's ability to explain such differences, she provides a set of vignettes that highlight women's struggles to change their relationships and self identities. A third set of case studies reveals how the non-commercial, communitarian conception of LETS transactions can vitiate the ignominies of status subordination; concretely, housework and other low-status work does not feel demeaning when undertaken in the context of a respectful and relatively personalistic community.

The next chapter, which contains an interesting discussion of the progressive potential of consumer politics, tries to assess community-currencies not only as a consumer movement but also as a broader countercultural one. Raddon catalogues ways that the currencies invite a re-thinking of consumer choice (e.g., they cannot be exchanged for cheap imported goods, and do induce users to spend for otherwise unaffordable local products). This discussion left me feeling that the medium was being mistaken for the motivation (of critics of economic culture). However, Raddon goes on to argue that the currency systems per se educate and politicize members about money, that they could help municipalities if integrated into local tax systems, and that they help create community. The chapter also claims that the "*gendered* separation of production and consumption" (p.141, emphasis added) impedes the realization of movement goals, essentially by promoting account imbalances that threaten the systems. Finally, chapter 7 argues that the achievement of

balanced accounts requires members to integrate "the gendered aspects of their inner lives and their relationships" (p. 175).

Though she periodically acknowledges that women and men differ by degree or central tendency, Raddon's insistence on the centrality of gender is sometimes strained. She characterizes certain attitudes and orientations as gendered per se, thus creating essentialized binary constructs. For example, features of capitalism are by definition "masculine." In so doing, she renders gender visible at the expense of a wider political-economic critique.

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