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## 2

# The conception of value in community economies

*Teppo Eskelinen*

Conceptions of value state the purpose of economic practices and ultimately steer economic activity, as any social system has a tendency to generate what is seen as having value. Further, a dominant value conception is both *performative* and *ontological*. Performativity means that the associated ideas not only describe, but also shape social reality. Any given dominant conception of value changes social reality so that more of the valuable will be produced. Further, descriptions of value become treated as really existing aspects of social reality and further the only possible descriptions of value – thus ‘ontologisation’. Alternatives then appear to counter ‘what exists’.

Yet such conceptions are not necessarily conscious but can be implicit. Therefore, an explication of hegemonic value conceptions is needed in order to support alternatives. As stated in the introduction, it is necessary for the purposes of social justice and ecological survival to create more localised, egalitarian and sustainable economic forms. Community economies not only entail non-capitalist *practices*, but also a unique *idea* of what is valuable, and thereby worth doing. Community economies

insist on seeing value in social interaction, community, self-organisation and empowerment. This chapter sets out to describe the dominant capitalist value conception, a community economy alternative, and analyse how the welfare state ethos could move in the direction of the latter.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the welfare state is a fluid concept, which can refer either to an ideal (ethos) or really-existing systems of governance. The existing systems do have patterns deviating from capitalism, yet they are becoming ever more penetrated by the markets. From the viewpoint of the theory of value the main question is, whether the self-perception of the welfare state is to *redistribute* value while accepting the capitalist value conception, or to push a value conception which deviates from the capitalist one. As noted, especially the idea of decommodification has been lately on the losing side. Therefore, at best the community economy conception of value can function as a challenge to the welfare state: it could resume the notion of decommodification, and further assume such community economy virtues as limits to growth and the value of social interaction and care. Indeed, the fluidity of the concept of the welfare state should not be understood as an ambiguity, but as an open arena of political struggle. The welfare state can then assume a narrow capitalist conception of economic value and see itself as redistributing this value, or it can see its very essence as based on a broad value conception.

Yet having noted the variance of welfare states, the same needs to be said about community economies. Indeed, the category refers to a range of initiatives and institutions characterised by mere family resemblance. It is consequently difficult to point out *the* definite value conception of community economies. Therefore, I will focus here on one concrete example: timebanks. Timebanks are community-based economies in which *time* is used to calculate the value of a provided service. This is a way of emphasising equality, as no-one's time has more value than anyone else's. Practically, the

system is based on a centralised system of accounting in which time to provide the services is credited to or debited from the accounts of the provider or recipient, causing the accounting system as a whole to balance at zero. Practically, any timebank member can announce skills or needs on an (often digital) noticeboard and agree on an exchange (either between the parties themselves or mediated by a ‘broker’). In addition to insisting on equality, the system sees enhancing community-building as its mission.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, relying on a single case might seem like a limitation and indeed makes general reference to community economies somewhat tenuous. Yet timebanks can be seen as an archetype of a community economy. Furthermore, while they might not exhibit all aspects of the category, they are very explicit about the advocated conception of value. Further, they aim at transformation both in the realm of market exchange and in the realm of social relations, community and participation. The explicit and the transformative aspects facilitate the analysis of their distinctive value conception.

### **The hegemonic value conception**

The capitalist conception of economic value has gained a hegemonic position. Because the hegemonic conception is rarely articulated and more typically just embedded in practices as a given, a criticism and search for alternatives should begin by making the value conception explicit. While this could be done by analysing the daily functioning of the capitalist society, there is also an explicit value conception available: the one articulated in economics. Contemporary mainstream economics is intimately connected with capitalism. Furthermore, it carries major epistemic power because this economics is the science for both describing and reproducing the capitalist order: it is then a system for reflecting, what capitalism sees as valuable.

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1 For general introductions to timebanks, see Cahn 2004; Seyfang 2004; Gregory 2015.

The idea of value as it exists in contemporary economics is based on two theories seen as mutually exclusive: the *labour theory of value* and the *subjective theory of value*. More precisely, economics can be seen as being grounded on the demand-based theory of value, so that the justification narrative sees the labour theory of value as the only existing (and conceivable) alternative to it. In other words, the conception of value in contemporary economics is based on these two ideas: first the dominance of the demand-based theory, and second the belief that the theory of value needs to be chosen from these two mutually exclusive alternatives.

Classical political economy, including Ricardo as well as Marx, leaned on the labour theory of value (Theocarakis 2010). The classical economists assumed a theoretical entry point, according to which value refers to the amount of labour embodied in a commodity, including historical labour needed to develop the necessary physical capital. Ricardo formulated the theory as follows: ‘The value of a commodity, or the quantity of any other commodity for which it will exchange, depends on the relative quantity of labour which is necessary for its production, and not on the greater or less compensation which is paid for that labour’ (Ricardo 1817). ‘Labour’ is thus a very general term for categorising human productive activity appearing in several societal and historical contexts (Mandel 1990). Furthermore, it is seen as a commensurable substance, which allows the comparability of completely different kinds of goods.

The labour theory of value has been criticised for being ambiguous about the relation between value and price (generally on the subject, see González 2013), or even as metaphysical (Robinson 1962). Yet the most influential criticism focuses on the tendency of labour theory of value to ignore the subjective valuations of market agents, in other words demand. This criticism gave rise to the marginalist school of thought and the subjective theory of value that forms the basis of neoclassical economics. According to this theory, the economic value of a given good is determined by

the interplay between subjective valuations of goods (expressed through market demand) and the scarcity of these goods. Thus, the value of a given good cannot be objective and constant, like the labour theory of value suggests, but depends on the will of consumers to pay for the good.

The subjective theory of value tends to reduce all theorising on value into market transactions, in which the expressed valuations of atomistic market subjects are decisive. The theory ignores the value of things external to market goods as well as non-commodified goods, as it assumes that valuation has to be expressed within the market, if (economic) value is to exist. Indeed, the social aspect of the economy or value that the theory recognises is the existence of instrumental market relations: people might engage in exchange and contracts as they observe temporary mutual gain. Furthermore, value is seen to be consumed in the instance of transaction: whatever happens to the object after the transaction is a personal issue and beyond the scope of value theory.

On a quick look, the existing value conception, or more precisely the paradigm describing these as mutually exclusive alternatives, might sound sensible. Therefore, a critical look needs to be taken on the particular weaknesses within this conception.

Both labour and subjective theory of value state, that value can be detached from the social basis which enables its production. This has a dual implication: firstly, no social patterns of care, upbringing or such, are recognised as valuable; and secondly, the social process in which economic goods are exchanged, is seen as meaningless from the perspective of determination of value. Moreover, no notion of power is incorporated in the value conception, therefore casting the hierarchies in economic processes or their unmaking as insignificant.

Additionally, the subjective theory of value functions effectively as a justification for capitalist practices, particularly because of what it omits. Two issues in this regard stand out. First off, the subjective theory of value leans on an idea of well-being,

according to which well-being is always enhanced when more market preferences are met, thus forming the basis of seeing the limitless growth of consumption as a well-being endeavor means to improve well-being. Secondly, it sets no limits to how much the perceived value of different inputs can be seen to deviate, thereby giving an excuse to any magnitude of disparities.

All this leads to a need to see beyond these apparently exclusive choices. It is not necessary to base the theory of value on either a mechanical reference to the labour time used to produce the good, nor a narrow theory functioning as an excuse for capitalist practices. A better alternative is to ground economic value on the whole process, including reproduction, social interaction as a basis for well-being, together with a notion of limits to growth and consumption. I will now turn to the community economy conception of value as articulated within timebanks, to see how these theoretical points figure in that context.

### **Characteristics of the community economy conception of value**

Mainstream economics appears locked with the ostensible necessity to choose between the labour theory of value and the subjective theory of value. While within social science there have been some theoretical attempts to surpass this dichotomy<sup>2</sup>, community economies can be seen as highly informative for these attempts, as they not only theorise, but also practice given value forms. Community economies insist in their practice on an idea of value, which would better grasp the social element inherent in economic activity. This social element of value is not reducible to either subjective notions nor mere labour time.

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2 Some theorists refer to 'real value', implying that there is some significant quality which should be attached to the capitalist conception of value (e.g. Kallis 2018). Others have argued that despite being quantifiable and subject to calculation, value is deeply embedded in social relations (e.g. Laamanen 2017, 3), and thereby fundamentally a comparative concept (Graeber 2013, 226).

The task is then to explicate a theory of value from the basis of the conception embodied in practices of community economies. Community economies should be understood as economic in the sense that there is some facilitation of exchange or organisation of resources. Further, there has to be some sufficiently shared value conception. This conception can be implicit as well as explicit, yet it will be enacted in the practices of the system. The unique form of *economic value*, not accepting the mainstream economic way to draw the distinction between economic and non-economic, is one of the key components making community economies stand as a distinct category.

Below, I will sketch the key aspects of an alternative (community economy) conception of value as expressed in timebanking. ‘Alternative’ should be understood here in the sense of deviating from the hegemonic economics narrative, rather than as marginal: the conception can be widely enacted in everyday social life, yet discursively marginalised. The analysis will be based on a reading of key materials introducing timebanking. This comprises of, first, books and reports explaining the concept and ideology. Second, different kinds of booklets, internet publications and info leaflets are used. Third, this body of texts is complemented with interviews of some long-term timebank developers. These interviews are not systematically analysed within this chapter, but rather were used as a basis on which to form a preliminary understanding of the issue<sup>3</sup>.

The purpose of the analysis is then to use existing material to scrutinise a conception of value within practices of alternative economies which could extend to inform the purposes of the welfare state. The conception of value is presented in terms of what is unique in it. Therefore, it includes no separate category for use-value in general: the obvious fact that people seek services because these services are useful for them.

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<sup>3</sup> The interview material is used more systematically in Eskelinen 2018.



*Proper recognition of the core economy*

Timebanks challenge the mainstream conceptions of value by insisting that these conceptions fail to properly recognise the *value of all inputs*. In other words, only inputs which directly turn into a form with market value (commodified) are currently recognised as economically valuable. This leaves unrecognised not only subjectively valued noncommodified things but also the very basis of production and societal continuity. Indeed, a key aspect of the self-understood mission of community economies is to make visible ‘the core economy’, referring to the indispensable but often invisible acts of reproduction: nurturing, daily work around the household and the community. A further implication of the concept is that these activities are an essential part and basis of the economy rather than a set of fringe activities or non-productive activities (Cahn 2009; Stephens et al. 2008; Boyle et al. 2010; Cahn 2009; Coote 2010).

The undervaluation of core economy was particularly accentuated and institutionalised in the traditional gendered division of labour, which assumed females to be responsible for the ‘reproductive’ tasks, while males were expected to assume the ‘productive’ tasks. Within this interdependent division of labour, only men were recognised as producing value – and thereby rewarded with monetary compensation. This disproportionate pressure on women to focus on the ‘reproductive’, and its simultaneous gross undervaluation, has not ceased to exist. The conception of value highlighting the importance of ‘the core economy’ challenges exactly the idea that the ‘reproductive’ and the ‘productive’ could be separated along the lines of what creates and what consumes value. This is in contrast with the hegemonic economic theory which, while accepting that there is a given private sphere, has considerable difficulties in recognising any kind of economic value to be produced by this sphere (family, community). Part of the reorganisation of these categories is to properly recognise the category of community.

The core economy is sometimes metaphorically called the ‘operating system’ of the more visible capitalist economy: one tends to ignore its importance, until it is in disrepair (Cahn 2004, 53–55). This refers both to its importance and universality: indeed the hidden economic activities ‘*everywhere* abound’ (Gibson-Graham 2006b).<sup>4</sup> Yet the core economy is not *only* an ‘operating system’, but it is valuable independently of whatever might ‘operate on it’. Community economies see their task as not only to make the core economy visible, but also to nurture it. Pushing for recognition for the core economy by noting its necessity for other economic functions should not lead to seeing it as only *instrumental* in producing the mainstream economic relations and institutions. It is quite a different matter to say that the core economy is vital for social well-being than to say that it is needed for the mainstream economy to function. Clearly, part of the conception of value indicated by the notion of the core economy is that it comes prior to other forms of economy and is valuable as such.

### *Empowerment*

A major difference between the mainstream conceptions of value and the community economies’ conception is that the latter insists on the *empowering* function of participation in economic exchange. Mainstream economic thought clearly shows no interest in any notion of empowerment, as this kind of ‘psychology’ is beyond its scope. Within this way of thinking, goods (which can be tangibles or services) exist in the market and might be subject to more or less demand, but no attention is paid to people’s self-esteem or the social relations of the producer or to the effects participating in the economic process might have. The value of goods is seen to derive solely from the fact that someone desires them, in other

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4 See also Gibson-Graham (2006b) and Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen (1999), expressing similar kinds of ideas about the marginalisation of reproductive activities and their value as enabling all other economic activity.

words from the individual preferences.

The community economies' reversal of this approach typically comes in the form of concepts such as 'skill' or 'potential'. Timebankers insist that *nobody* is devoid of valuable skills, as everyone can contribute somehow to the community. These skills just need to be properly identified, and indeed helping others to identify this potential significantly contributes to what makes the economic process valuable. A constantly used formulation is that 'people should be recognised as assets' (Boyle et al. 2010) in contrast to treating them as expenses<sup>5</sup>.

The idea of universal possession of valuable skills (which only sometimes need to be identified as they have become hidden by the functions of capitalist society) has several highly important implications. First, it lays the ground on perhaps the strongest normative stand within these community economies: the insistence on equality. If everyone has valuable skills, it is pointless to emphasise personal differences in quantifiable productivity. Second, it becomes equally pointless to say that some people 'feed' others, in other words produce value that is consumed by others. While any community will need some division of labour, timebanks emphasise that the capacity to contribute to the community excludes no-one, and therefore recognition as equally valuable contributors is in the heart of the practice. Third, this leads further to the empowering role of contribution: the proper identification of skills and ability to contribute can indeed be empowering through enforcing the notions of participation and belonging. While this kind of recognition is typical for social policy or social work, the explicit point in timebanking is that this is also a function of a good economy.

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5 Yet these ideas do have a resemblance to some formulations of the labour theory of value. Especially Marx' notion of 'living labour', which later becomes captured in capitalist labour relations. However, nothing in the concept of living labour points to active empowerment.

### *Co-production*

More generally, the idea of *co-production* is central in community economies. It emphasises the need to do away with a clear distinction between the producer and the recipient: if ‘recipients’ are involved in the production of a service, the service tends to be of better quality. Whereas tangible goods are first produced and then, separately from the production process, merely handed over to the consumer, in co-production, both the ‘producer’ and the ‘recipient’, and the ‘productive process’ and ‘consumption’ are inseparable. The notion that production and use are intertwined, has sometimes been made by using the term ‘produsage’ (Bruns 2007).

Yet co-production is not merely a technical notion on the need to surpass categories, but also a more general notion on the importance of social interaction in producing value. Services should be thought of as means to generate social wellbeing through interaction between human beings. Co-production practices are seen to contribute not only to making use of idle skills but also to rebuilding the social fabric. What makes economic activity valuable is that human beings meet, talk, and use common spaces. Therefore, notions such as ‘community’ should be part and parcel of what the economy is seen to consist of. Indeed, the conception of value which can be derived from timebanking incorporates notions such as combatting the evil of loneliness into the realm of economic value: the economy is fundamentally a process of social interaction, instead of merely mediation. (Seyfang 2004). This social nature of production cannot be grasped by either labour theory nor subjective theory of value, both of which see the lone producer or the lone consumer as a sufficient construction to represent the economic agent.

The production of services should not be seen as only a field for highly specialised professionals. Rather, to some extent, everyone should be recognised as an expert on their own life and surroundings, even if obvious differences between professions

exits. If services are informed by the mainstream value model, it appears rational to organise them in highly specialised large units to benefit from economies of scale. The coproduction model completely reverses this idea, arguing that better services are created out of value produced on the community-level,<sup>6</sup> through the active involvement of the ‘recipient’. This notion is not only a part of the community economy discourse but has revolutionary implications for the production of public services as well (Boyle and Harris 2009; Parks et al. 1981; on the effectiveness of coproduction in healthcare, see Boyle and Bird 2014; Lasker and Collom 2011).

### *Trust*

A theory of value based on social interaction should take the virtues of the community as a starting point. Yet, community economies seek to push this even further. Such economic communities are not just any communities, but they are communities which are formed around a purpose. The embedded understanding of the economic practice is that it ought to create and sustain spaces for deliberation, political processes, and collective learning. Community economies have given shared values and promote social practices on the basis of these values.

This has implications for the given notion of generalised social trust. Based on social interaction, trust is not merely borne out of given transparent ‘rules of the game’. Rather, trust is based on participation and attachment. It is not created by the stability of the system but rather negotiating its future. This is what almost all economic theories are quick to miss. Certainly, all tools and subjects of action are transformed by the very process in which they get involved (Stavrides 2016). This holds true for timebanking too, where the procedures of exchange emerge from the economic process and evolve within it.

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6 On the significance of distance, see Stavrides 2016, 260.

Community economies should be seen therefore as *processes* rather than *institutions*.

Trust-building is fundamentally a function of qualities of social interaction. Upholding a given identity or an expected kind of personality associated with the members of a given community can itself be trust-enhancing. For example, one timebank member argued the benefits of timebank to include, for example, that ‘you tend to feel more secure asking for childcare through the timebank, having a timebank member there, instead of having just anyone’.<sup>7</sup> The sense of community implies a sense of belonging. Typically, belonging to the same scheme creates a psychological bond between people. Community economy schemes are often described as having the feeling of an extended family (North 2007).

The notion of extending mutual trust is well aligned with (or is a way to express) the points on empowerment and interaction mentioned above: trust within a group is generated by creating a sense of belonging. Interestingly, several timebank activists emphasise trust as an ideal, as exemplified by the title of a timebanking blog *Trust is the Only Currency*<sup>8</sup>.

### *Democratic dynamism*

As a last point, the conception of value in community economies resists fixed ideas of value. Therefore, it needs to be emphasised that part of this value conception is a given dynamism: community economies are venues of learning and experimentation, in which the system develops through trial and error, conflict-solving, and other microdemocratic procedures. A central aspect of the idea of value is therefore openness to new value forms. It is naturally a challenge to explicate a value conception while maintaining this openness: as a point of self-criticism, to some extent, the discussion above risks describing the community economy value

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7 Quote from a Helsinki timebank member survey carried out by the author.

8 <http://trustcurrency.blogspot.com/>

form as ontologically fixed.

The difference between processes and institutions also emphasises the contrast between community economies and the capitalist mainstream. Again, trust as participation is different from trust as stability. A similar point can be noted in relation to dynamism. While capitalist dynamism is thought to derive from profit-seeking and competition between individuals, with all implied inequality, the dynamism of the community economies is the quality of systems to be open to democratic change, reaction and reflection, in other words thinking and learning together.

### **Welfare state and value diffusion**

Next, I will turn to questions of how the conception of value in community economies can resonate with the welfare state ethos. As noted in the introduction of this book, this implies two separate questions:

1. How could the welfare state protect the abilities of community economies to operate – in this case, to sustain their value form?; and
2. To what extent can welfare states assume the value conception of community economies?

The distinction between the welfare state ethos and institutions is crucial. The welfare state as an ideal; and as a practice, should be kept clearly separate.

As for the first, a key concept organising the discussion has been ‘the partner state’, as, again, mentioned in the introduction of this book. When it comes to the value form, the partner state assumes a new function: that is to say the state apparatus could aim at protecting community economy ideas and practices from capitalist expansion. As capitalism expands, it transforms ever new aspects of social life into commodities, or functions in assisting

capitalist value creation.

A further step is to ask: What aspects of the welfare state are in line with the value model of community economies described above? And as an accessory question: Could the existing welfare state further assume this value model as part of its functions to produce and deliver services? It is not fully clear, how the welfare state should be interpreted in this context. To some extent, welfare states, as we know them, lean heavily on a ‘commodified sphere’, and even push forward new frontiers of hypercommodification in an attempt to finance the welfare institutions. This function necessarily leans on the mainstream economics conception of value in which the welfare state is seen as merely a vehicle of redistribution. On the other hand, welfare states clearly have a role in maintaining commons through the governance over public goods relevant to the well-being and health of a given population, such as health and education, as long as the governance is sufficiently participatory. Further, welfare state institutions are (at least ideally) human-made and democratically planned structures which uphold a strongly egalitarian and social rights-based conception of the distribution of services.

To some extent the community economies’ value conception is an explicit attempt to rival the welfare capitalist model as we know it, so the two value conceptions can be seen as somewhat conflictual. However, as noted, the welfare state *in itself* is a highly contested terrain. For these reasons it needs to be analysed, what kinds of ideas of values are *inherent* in welfare state institutions, what are *possible*, and what are *impossible*. This will enable analysing how far can welfare states be pushed in the way of the community economies’ value conception.

Yet what needs to be kept in mind as a critical point is, that any activity is potentially vulnerable to commodification. This includes several aspects of the conception of value outlined above. The downside of the fact that ‘the economic’ and ‘the social’ are not ontologically separate is, that many social and emotional



functions can become commodities. Affects, social relations, and generally ‘the social factor’ can be turned into new spheres of capitalist accumulation. So ‘value diffusion’ should be understood as value attached to practices which are distinctly anti-capitalist, and the ideal welfare state as a mechanism protecting diverse value conceptions.

### **Conceptions of value within the welfare state**

I will turn next to debating what ideas and practices associated with the welfare state resonate with the conception of value discussed above. In line with the distinction made in the introductory chapter, my focus here is on the welfare state ethos, rather than the current manifesting forms. It is so that this ethos can be seen to entail ideas resembling the community economy approach more than the currently existing systems of governance.

Firstly, the notion of *trust* is clearly part of the welfare state tradition. Generalised social trust or general trust within a society, which economists prefer to call ‘social capital’ is often used to explain the success of economies with generous welfare systems (Halpern 2010; Whiteley 2000; World Bank 1998). While such findings as clear correlations between trust towards strangers and the economic conditions can indeed be shown, social capital tends to emerge in economics as a category for everything which cannot be explained by the traditional means of economics. This confirms how such economics is devoid of means to develop a theory on trust.

Sometimes the concept of ‘endogenous growth’ is used to refer to the totality including ‘investments’ targeted at the social fabric that reproduces and generates social capital: education being the typical example. Together with low income disparities and the good governance of basic institutions such investments foster a sense of mutual trust and secure social cohesion. It is indeed possible to discern the ‘virtuous circle’ of the welfare state consisting of an entanglement of strictly economic value and social goods as a

single social-economic project (Hagfors et al. 2014).

Secondly, the idea of recognition can be discerned in the welfare state tradition, even if not as an economic quality. It has sometimes appeared in the form of the notion of ‘talent reserve’, which refers to the necessity of egalitarian education to avoid socio-economic disparities leading to wasted talents in the lack of opportunities to develop them. The tradition has also involved some notions of ‘extended community’, such as referring to the welfare state as the ‘people’s home’. Some cash transfer schemes can be seen as mechanisms for recognising everyone’s input and value as human beings. For instance, certain family allowances that allow parents to take care of children at home can be seen to come close to the recognition of the core economy. Future universal recognition might take place through non-conditional transfer schemes in terms of universal basic income. In essence, one argument often made in support for universal basic income is that it would recognise the social contribution of all individuals.

Thirdly, the reproductive is seen to depend on the productive. Currently, this hierarchical order of value creation is quite central to welfare state thought; being inscribed in the very notion of the coexistence of the commodified and decommodified spheres. While reproduction is to some extent supported, the commodified sphere is seen as ‘buying’ the operational space for the decommodified sphere. In order to reflect the community economy conception, there would have to be a recognition of the reproductive sphere as equally or more value-creating. Fortunately, the welfare state tradition, using the notion of ‘the virtuous circle’, could accommodate this kind of idea.

It appears that co-production (of public services) can be integrated into the welfare state tradition if there is political will to do so. Evidently, such ideas already exist within the current discussion about organising public services, even if the wider trend is towards the commodification of services and to economies of scale. It is an open question, which also invites legitimate

scepticism: *To what extent will the co-production approach permeate service provision?* The answer requires transcending several binary categorisations, such as producer/recipient, producer/product, or professional/nonprofessional – yet there is nothing inherent in the welfare state tradition, which would form an unsurmountable obstacle to this.

Of course, it is a difficult matter to change welfare state organisations, and to attempt to intermingle public functions with community economies. The major obstacles stem from path dependency and the deeply assumed preference for centralisation, which have long permeated welfare state practices. Ideas like the ‘virtuous circle’ and realising the potential from a talent pool within a community ultimately have leaned on increased production and hierarchical governance, even if this need not necessarily be the case.

Because of these ingrained tendencies, there is a need to find concrete examples of diffusing the alternative economy value conception. One suggestion in this direction was the call to extend the Helsinki timebank’s ‘time tax’ into allowing municipal tax payments. This initiative was put forward when when the Finnish tax administration declared timebanks to be tax liable (Eskelinen et al. 2017). Taxation on a euro equivalent value was strongly opposed, as timebanks see their time-based currency, materialising the ethos of everyone’s time being worth the same, to be not convertible to capitalist money.

The proposal was to use the timebank’s platform to implement municipal taxation in time currency. Already now, in order to maintain its ‘infrastructure’, the timebank collects a small levy (in time) on each transaction. This levy could be used to pay the municipality of Helsinki where the timebank is based, if the municipality would open a timebank account to receive such payments. According to the proposition, the municipal account, in which time taxes accumulate, could be used by community-level municipal service providers (community centres, day care centres,

parks, etc). While in a timebank no-one is obliged to provide a service, this municipal account would practically be used to reward (in time currency) people for volunteering in community-level service provision. A further function of the ‘time tax’ would be to challenge the category of ‘work’ through the official semi-economic recognition of the value of community engagement.

This suggestion serves as an example of recognising the virtues of the welfare state while pushing the community economy conception of value within the municipalities. More generally, the ‘municipal tovi tax’ would imply a) recognising timebanks as contributing to the community; b) diffusing the commons values into the realm of municipal services; and c) recognising the existing internal time tax model as a legitimate system of self-governance.<sup>9</sup>

A further issue is, if in addition to transforming public service provision this value conception could inform relations in the sphere currently referred as to ‘the market’. Part of the community economy value conception is to cast the user-producer instead of the consumer as the protagonist, which opens more diverse economic subjectivities. While the matter is contested, some optimistic theorists do argue that there is a general ‘move towards commons format’ (Bauwens and Ramos 2018) taking place, and that this would eventually define future forms of the economy. An often noted feature of this shift is a move from possession to access, and while the latter does not automatically guarantee community economy virtues to permeate the economy, it would perhaps more easily allow this to take place. Further, some scholars expect to see a turn into ‘ethical values’ in the broader market, as production tends towards the production of social goods instead of tangibles in the current market (Arvidsson and Peitersen 2016).

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<sup>9</sup> For further practical ideas on municipalities and commons, see Ramos 2016.

### **Conclusions: diffusion and its limitations**

The relation between the community economy value conception and the welfare state is by no means stable. This is both because of the potentially evolving nature of community economies and the ongoing political struggles over welfare states. For this reason, the welfare state should be approached both as an ideal ('ethos') and as a really existing system ('institution'). From the institutional perspective, it is possible to consider, how far could the welfare state ideally go in incorporating and assisting the community economy value conception (keeping in mind that inaction from the state will always be the preference of some community economy organisers). On the other hand, the welfare state can be seen as an ideal as well, or as a (constantly evolving) reminder of the social and egalitarian aspects of value.

While it is important to analyse the capacity of welfare states to be informed by the value conception from the community economies, it needs to be noted that to some extent the value form of the community economies is bound to the immediate community. Therefore, at least to some extent it will not be institutionalised outside the community level, even though some commons activists note that commons need to be seen as having a unique form of upscaling (Helfrich 2013, 14–15). 'Scaling up' (Utting 2015) would then potentially imply diminished social value, as systems reach such a large scale that they no longer facilitate community-level interaction where people know each other personally.

For example, a major question is, whether the welfare state is able to recognise the generation of trust as within its mission. Within many social services the generation of trust and sense of participation can be quite explicit goals, yet economically, the capitalist conception of value situates trust as 'exogenous' to the theory of value. It is plausible that the community economy conception of value could demonstrate ideas on what economic value fundamentally consists of to influence welfare state praxis in

the future. Another key issue is, whether trust is seen as primarily generated by quality institutions (see Ingham 2004 on ‘assigned trust’), or by participatory virtues.

Any diffusion of the community economy conception of economic value to the welfare state is unlikely to happen in the form of a sudden transformation of state governance. Rather, this change could most plausibly take place on the operational level of community economies, namely local or municipal levels. A number of services provided by municipalities already operate as forms of commons, and they could be easily reorganised so as to reflect the above-mentioned values of core economy, empowerment, co-production, trust, and democratic dynamism. Yet a further and more complex issue is how to transfer this conception of value to the sphere of the economic from the sphere of non-economic services.

Practically, government policies are substantially informed by some value conception. While a value conception is not explicit or conscious, it largely dictates, what is seen as worth doing. A labour-oriented value conception will lead to attempts to maximise commodified labour and to interpret a high labour force participation rate as the key indicator of success. It will also lead to social policy solutions that consider participation in the labour market as a goal in its own right. Demand-based conception will lead to maximising market spaces and market transactions, creating a thorough marketisation of large spheres of life. In terms of social services, a demand-based value conception sees always more value in services which have been acquired by the means of market choices, rather than for instance political engagement. Thus, the result will easily be a hypercommodified reality.

Based on timebanking, as an illuminating example of the community economy value conception, I have argued that included in this conception are five specific spheres of value in addition to the general use-value of services: recognition of the core economy, empowerment, co-production, trust, and democratic

dynamism. These ideas herald a significant move forward from the ostensibly exhaustive dichotomy in the economic literature, which is comprised of labour and subjective theories of value. The conception of value sketched here is a challenge to economic thought at large, as it grounds value in a way which is incompatible with major economic theories. This conception is particularly important as it insists on value being based on human interaction and recognition. Furthermore, the community economy value concept should be treated as a call to recognise and protect the unique spaces of community economy. As social interaction, culture and care; which are beholden to human interaction, are often threatened with commodification, they are bolstered in the demands to be handled outside the sphere of capitalism by the existence of community economies.

Seeing these value conceptions as mutually exclusive easily leads to the perception that the only future choices for welfare states are productivism or marketisation. Clearly, political manoeuvres dismantling the welfare state are often made in the name of saving it, in reference to the need to increase the general employment level by disciplining the workforce, or to increase economic transactions by privatising public services. That these kinds of policies can be derived from the mainstream value conceptions as pro-welfare state policies, shows the high importance of questioning such value conceptions and suggesting more sustainable alternatives.

The value conception of the community economies should be understood as *reminding* the welfare state of its normative basis, which is not merely about redistributing money and organising services. For instance, public services should always involve an element of local and democratic control. Most aspects of the community economies' conception of value could be accommodated within the welfare state tradition: co-production

and participatory approaches in public services could expand, categories of productive/reproductive and professional/volunteer could be reconsidered, and trust could be seen as a participatory virtue. Finally, the welfare state can also intermingle its functions with community economies, allowing itself to learn from these systems and more deeply incorporate their logic of operation into itself. The key question is then if the welfare state institutions are able to recognise this approach not only as instrumental or complementary to value production, but as the very definition of value. This will not happen without political struggle turning the tide.