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Mutual Aid, Cooperatives, and Abolition: Reimagining Economics through, for, and of Racially Marginalized Communities

Tadashi Dozono

California State University Channel Islands, Camarillo, California, USA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tadashi Dozono

I am Assistant Professor of History/Social Science Education at California State University Channel Islands, located on the traditional lands of the Chumash people. My ultimate goal is to change how LGBTQ and BIPOC students experience social studies classrooms by centering knowledge formations from LGBTQ and BIPOC communities. I am interested in how students' racialized experiences transform what historical inquiry looks like, by bringing student thinking in conversation with critical, queer, critical race theory and related theoretical spaces. My own professional development efforts have focused on balancing a burgeoning researcher identity with my teacher practitioner self and learning to center my own experiences of marginalization as assets within research spaces. Before becoming a professor, I taught social studies in New York City public high schools for twelve years. Outside of my professional pursuits, I remain engaged with various LGBTQ and BIPOC community-based organizations, and try to balance my hobbies of baking and cooking with running and hiking outdoors.
Contact: Twitter: @tadashidozono

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INTRODUCTION

My research reimagines economics education based in the material realities of marginalized communities of color, and building upon the strategies arising from those communities

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to thrive and survive. Three of these strategies include mutual aid, cooperatives, and an abolitionist framework, which all emphasize marginalized groups working in solidarity to meet the needs of everyone in the community.

Contexts

Across the last two decades, I taught in New York City public schools adjacent to public housing projects in low-income Black and Latinx communities. Alongside teaching, as a queer Japanese American cis-male I am sustained by various LGBTQ BIPOC community organizations (such as Audre Lorde Project, Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and FIERCE) which serve the needs and grow from the strengths of community members. Economics in these communities largely means that capitalism has not simply failed to meet the peoples' needs, but has actually succeeded by exploiting these very communities. Under a White supremacist capitalist system, Black and Brown bodies are expendable because they are deemed less valuable. Teaching culturally-sustaining curricula (Paris, 2012) in this context means grounding economics in the material reality of my students' communities. For communities of color marginalized by systemic racism, the problem of capitalism is that it prioritizes profits over people.

I teach economics as solving the problem of inequality, directly addressing the problems created by capitalism in students' communities. For example, how are resources currently distributed? What does fair distribution look like? I also frame economics as inseparable from government. Both government and economics are concerned with the distribution of power and resources. Democracy is just as much an economic concept as it is political. Thus, if the US espouses to be a democratic country, what does the democratization of economics look like?

THE RESEARCH

Democratization of economics knowledge means looking to the knowledge of the people to solve economic problems. Through teacher practitioner inquiry (Camangian, 2015; Houchen, 2013), my research develops new economics curricula grounding disciplinary knowledge and skills in students' communities. This current project stems from earlier research documenting students of color's sense of exclusion from world history (Dozono, 2021b), and centering social studies inquiry around marginalized students of color's unique insights and funds of knowledge (Dozono, 2017, 2018, 2021a, 2021c). I reconceptualize teaching economics through democratization of economics knowledge, reframing economics education through, for, and of marginalized communities.

My approach builds on several concepts I learned from organizing work within racially marginalized communities of color. The first concept is mutual aid, which names how people in community provide aid to one another, to collectively pool resources to meet economic needs as they arise. As Dean Spade's (2020) recent book attests, mutual aid networks are a vital strategy for marginalized communities confronting current economic crises. Mutual aid can include programs like community food pantries, although as clari-

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fied, mutual aid is not charity, but solidarity. Historically, groups such as the Black Panthers and Young Lords created a range of mutual aid programs including free breakfast programs and health clinics to meet community needs.

The second concept, cooperative, overlaps with mutual aid. A cooperative is another means of pooling resources, often involving on-going collective action for sustained redistribution of resources. Cooperatives include cooperative businesses, housing, grocery stores, and banks (Akuno & Nangwaya, 2017). These cooperative models apply democratic practices such as consensus decision-making, horizontal power structures, and equitable distribution of resources/benefits. Cooperatives serve a practical middle ground that confronts the reality of living in a capitalist system by prioritizing community needs in order to survive in spite of the overarching violence of capitalism.

The third concept is an abolitionist framework, premised on the notion that no one is disposable (Gossett & Spade, 2014, February 7). An abolitionist framework counteracts the systemic violence of capitalism through prevention, intervention, reparation, and transformation strategies. Abolitionist economics rejects capitalism because it inherently prioritizes profits over people, and instead works to heal from the violence of capitalism by prioritizing people over profits, imagining a world otherwise through community networks of care and healing. Groups such as the Black Panthers and the Young Lords understood that the capitalist system functions through the exploitation of BIPOC communities; they responded by envisioning a different world through programs for mutual aid and cooperative economics to serve their community needs in spite of capitalism's failures.

FINDINGS

These three concepts helped me develop economics curricula centering the needs and assets of my students' communities. Below are some strategies central to this work.

Contextualize local economic problems within global capitalist exploitation

In order to ground economics in students' communities, I begin class by assessing local economic contexts, and opening discussion with students' lived economic experiences. Through capitalism, poverty gets rationalized as the fault of poor people, rather than a necessary component of capitalism's exploitation of people for profit. Thus, students' localized economic contexts must be contextualized within global capitalist systems of exploitation. For example, my students in Brooklyn linked the displacement of families from the neighborhood due to gentrification with federal policies designed to marginalize racial minorities, including redlining, and other discriminatory housing, loan, labor, and urban renewal programs. Gentrification is further linked to patterns of settler colonialism, displacing communities of color to the margins of municipal services. The portrayal of Black and Brown communities as criminal and corrupt in need of policing is also linked to the prison-industrial complex, which further exploits Black and Brown bodies for capitalist profit.

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Locate economics knowledge within marginalized communities

The term economics can provoke feelings of intimidation and anxiety of a field too complicated to grasp. There is an aura around economists who wield great power and authority; markets fluctuate at the Federal Reserve chair's words. Mutual aid, cooperatives, and abolition disrupt that authority through their commitment to dismantling power hierarchies for the sake of democratization. Grounding economics education in racially marginalized communities means reframing economics knowledge as arising from within those communities. Capitalism has succeeded in making poor people appear too dumb to know how to think economically, when in fact those who are economically marginalized develop innovative approaches daily to maximizing their resources. Thus, in developing new economics curricula, I centered the wealth of resources produced by organizations' programs arising from within students' racially marginalized communities, including Make the Road, Causa Justa/Just Cause, Right to the City, MayDay Space, FUREE, and community-wealth.org. Such organizations create curricula for their communities, such as the documentary Own the Change (Flanders, 2015, February 9), in which community members instruct how to create a worker cooperative.

Contextualize Knowledge within Racially Marginalized Epistemologies

For racially marginalized communities, shifting where knowledge comes from also means shifting the epistemic lineages that frame the discourse. Epistemology refers to the lineages we trace for how we know things. Although some BIPOC scholars link their work to Marxist or socialist practices, it is important to contextualize those economic practices within their own epistemic lineages, and not subsume such practices under a European dichotomy of capitalism or communism.

For example, mutual aid networks are not a new thing. Although mutual aid networks have become more prevalent in the recent economic crisis (Spade, 2020), mutual aid simply name a practice that marginalized communities have turned to in the face of dehumanizing capitalism across centuries. Jessica Gordon Nembhard's book Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice (2014) documented early examples of mutual aid societies within African American communities, to farm small plots of land, buy a relative's freedom under slavery, care for the sick, or bury their dead. Documents such as the Black Panther's 10-Point Program (Newton, 2009), and the Young Lord's 13-Point Program (Morales, 2016) outlined their social vision based on humanizing practices. These were mutual aid strategies that arose out of economic necessity, and represent culturally sustaining lineages of economics knowledge.

IMPLICATIONS AND PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

The failures of capitalism in students' lives point to the impossibility of indoctrinating students into a system that has exploited their communities, and the necessity to engage economics by imagining alternatives. I encourage teachers to feel empowered to disrupt tradi-

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tional boundaries of economics curriculum and get to know the economic contexts of one's students, their communities, and the school's surrounding community. Students' funds of knowledge are assets that gain value when circulated, when put into currency through classroom inquiry. Economically and racially marginalized communities have been developing innovative economic strategies in the face of dehumanizing capitalism, and that wealth of knowledge is often documented by a range of local community organizations. Find local community organizations embedded within your students' communities, and build curricula from their resources and programming which link directly to economic contexts in your students' communities. Grounding economic inquiry in students' contextualized worlds leads to truly authentic assessments. Doing so can empower students to pursue economics intellectually and practically in ways that directly meet their own and the school community's long-term needs.

Q & A WITH TADASHI DOZONO

Question #1

Teacher's Question:

For teachers, like myself, who have an economics curriculum to follow, it would be helpful to know how you would advise teachers to insert mutual aid, cooperatives, and abolition in ways that interact with the content and concepts that are more typical in economics curricula. How would you advise teachers to do so?

Tadashi Dozono's Response:

To be clear, I taught these courses in public school in a state with an economics curriculum as well. An abolitionist approach to economics is not for everyone or every classroom and cannot simply be folded into the standard economics curriculum. Instead of capitalism's emphasis on profits over people, an abolitionist approach to economics inverts this to emphasize people over profits. Similarly, an abolitionist approach to economics education requires subverting the state's power over knowledge, to teach students and not standards.

That being said, I encounter two scenarios for navigating state standards: 1) Often standards are framed broadly enough that one can include different approaches: even if the standard seems to suggest a narrow capitalist ideology, I am usually surprised at how non-capitalist approaches still fit the standard. 2) If the standard is explicit in its promotion of capitalism, teachers can use examples of mutual aid, cooperatives, and abolitionist economics as critiques that challenge capitalism as the only approach to economics. Worker cooperatives can be introduced in units on private businesses and labor relations. Mutual aid can be introduced when talking about personal finance, balancing budgets, and different types of investments as a way of demonstrating how families and communities work together in times of crisis or when the limits of their budgets might make going it alone impossible.

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Question #2

Teacher's Question:

I appreciate the clarity of your framework, but I am having trouble envisioning what it would look like in the classroom. You offer some steps to begin with in the economics classroom, but I am wondering if you can provide some examples that help illustrate how this approach plays out in the classroom?

Tadashi Dozono's Response:

I admit that the article's convenient brevity means less room for practical elaboration, so I appreciate the chance to offer a few brief illustrations. In place of an economics textbook, I provided students with readers for each unit containing a mix of texts, including community-based organization website content, educational materials and videos produced by local organizations about how cooperatives work, passages from college-level books on community-based economic practices, and passages from theoretical texts.

In a unit on cooperative approaches to land use, students read about Soul Fire Farm in upstate New York, which is grounded in Afro-Indigenous community farming practices (Penniman, 2018). Max Rameau's (2013) *Take Back the Land* offers my students an urban example of land redistribution efforts through a shantytown in Miami. Amanda Huron's (2018) book Carving Out the Commons offers students another urban example of how tenants can organize to create housing cooperatives. Students read about Cooperation Jackson, a city-wide cooperative economics initiative in Jackson, Mississippi, by viewing community materials from their website and passages from Kali Akuno and Ajamu Nangwaya's (2017) book Jackson Rising. These were in addition to texts created by local community-based organizations I listed in the article.

To contextualize local economic problems within global capitalist exploitation, students studied the local Domino Sugar Factory along the Brooklyn waterfront, which was recently turned into a multi-billion-dollar luxury condo development. They examined this site as one that links the global sugar industry and historic exploitation of the Caribbean through slavery, through its use of local Black and Puerto Rican workers in Brooklyn in the 20^{th} century, and on to the displacement of the Black and Puerto Rican communities from the area due to gentrification over the recent two decades. Most of my students' families remain tied to the West Indies, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, so this offered them a tangible place in space and across time that they watched and continue to watch transform over their lifetime in the neighborhood. Doing so helps make visible to them the invisible reach of global capitalism.

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

How did students make sense of this approach? For example, did it change the way they saw their own or their community's economic conditions?

Tadashi Dozono's Response:

My students were centered in my classroom as the experts about their communities' economic conditions, so they always taught me more about those dynamics than I could ever offer. I tried to match their expertise with ideas and practice-based solutions developed by communities facing similar conditions, in hopes of providing new approaches for thinking about their communities' economic conditions. This approach also linked students to local resources, such as tenants' rights and legal aid organizations, which increased their awareness of existing local supports. For example, United for a Fair Economy's (2016) Trainers Manual offered succinct explanations of the history of economic racial inequality.

Many of the twelfth graders had jobs, so teaching about worker cooperatives directly related to their experiences of not having a voice in their places of work. Some students who struggled to keep up with their academic work due to increased demands from their jobs wrote enthusiastically in their final papers about what worker cooperatives might offer them in the future. Studying specific examples of worker cooperatives provided them with practical examples for creating democratically-run businesses within a larger capitalist system.

My students commonly live in public housing projects. Studying housing cooperatives allowed students to reimagine options for public housing by critically engaging various levels of government policy, regulation, and support programs including the Mitchell-Lama Housing Program at the New York state level, and 80/20 policies at the New York City level that set aside 20% of units for low-income housing.

Question #4

Teacher's Question:

Much of what you are advocating, as you point out, runs counter to how students are taught to view capitalism. In your experience, what forms of resistance do you see from students to your approach?

Tadashi Dozono's Response:

In the communities where I teach, students consistently share an understanding of capitalism's failures and understand the inhumane results of capitalism's focus on profits over people. So in my experience, my students do not argue that capitalism has functioned well and especially not to their benefit. But some students challenge the cooperative approach by remaining hopeful that capitalism could ultimately serve their interests. For example, some of them will request resources on starting private businesses on their own, which I oblige, while also offering examples of "buy Black" campaigns and readings about Black Wall Street in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and programs including the Minority Business Development Agency. I appreciate students' desire for a range of possible solutions and approaches.

Students also resist cooperative economics' emphasis on relying on each other. Some of that resistance might be related to the social context of high school where by twelfth grade their social circles have changed, as have their views on who they can rely upon and who

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they are close to. Pedagogically, I cultivate cooperative structures in the classroom where they must rely on each other as a community, beyond who they are friends with. When it came to writing final essays, I had students reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, and cultivated a classroom atmosphere where students felt comfortable asking for help with APA formatting at the start of class, for example, and someone who knew it well would work with them for a bit. Based on student input and preferences, I put students into peer support groups with whom to meet on non-seminar days at the start of class to check in on progress through readings, set goals for the day, and debrief with at the end of class. I encouraged students to select groupmates outside of their friend networks, to focus instead on who they feel would best support their skills and study habits, and who they might be able to support. These groups often met outside of class for study sessions, and they would have group texts to give each other reminders and motivations. This structure had varying degrees of success, depending on the class's group dynamics.

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

I teach in an affluent, largely White community. Capitalism appears to work really well for my students' families and community. I'm aware that structural change also requires people who benefit from the system to be willing to give up their inequitable advantages. How would you advise teachers in my position to integrate your approach meaningfully in similar contexts?

Tadashi Dozono's Response:

To be honest, I myself have limited experience teaching White students in k-12 settings, so that is a context I do not pretend to know well. I have a hard time answering this question, in part because I feel there is a normalized expectation for non-White people to translate this work for a White population, whereas the reverse expectation is rarely addressed for providing adequate approaches that serve my students' needs. As the title of the article expresses, this is an attempt to reimagine economics through, for, and of racially marginalized communities. It is intentionally not written with the needs of affluent White communities in mind. I put the burden of translating this work on teachers in affluent White communities, who know their student contexts well enough to gauge what their students will be receptive to, and how to gently guide their students to be challenged through exposure to very different economic realities beyond their own. I also understand that my approach is not appropriate for all settings. I caution against dampening a radical assertion such as abolitionist economics to be palatable to affluent White communities, as that only negates an abolitionist framework. An abolitionist approach to economics requires a willingness to transform economics curriculum and pedagogy to serve the assets and needs of the most marginalized, not the most affluent and privileged. With this in mind, others like Rethinking Economics out of the UK or Rethinking Schools out of the US might offer you a meaningful starting point.

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