

**Swimming against the current:
Social relations and self-subsistence in the market economy**

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Creative



Effective

Practical



Rigorous

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Abstract

The market-centric development is driven on the belief that social orders can be most efficiently achieved by individuals pursuing self-interest in a self-regulated economy (Gill 1995: 55). This paper challenges this belief by contending that individuals are not strictly self-interested and the self-regulated economy is actually regulated by corporations instead of the state. In reaction to the dominant narrow view of economic development, social struggles have taken the form of everyday self-subsisting activities, altruistic and non-monetised reciprocity behaviours driven by social relations, as well as international movements that aim to transfer the market regulation power from corporations to small and medium-sized farmers. These struggles suggest that alternative ways to development besides the market mechanism are possible and, to many people, may prove better than the current concentration of resources.

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Background

After the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the 1990s, neoliberalism has enjoyed impervious domination all over the world (George 1999: 13). Liberalisation swiftly took place in most countries under the belief that the self-regulating market offered improved well-being for all. As neoliberalism expands, it crosses over the national boundaries and creates an increasingly interlinked system, in which countries attempt to specialise based on comparative advantage. Trade among countries has increased substantially over the past two decades with raw materials, natural resources and cheap labour from developing countries and processed, high-tech products from developed ones (Barndt 1997: 68). Trade has been further facilitated with the emergence of the WTO, the NAFTA, the ASEAN, and other free trade zones, which promise lower economic protection among member countries. Neoliberalism and the resulting globalisation seem to be embraced by all corners of the world.

Neoliberalism is the re-emergence of classical economic theory, which was particularly glorified during the Thatcher/Reagan administration and continues to live on until today (Schuurman 1993: 95). The order of neoliberalism is created based on individual choices made within structural constraints. The choices are driven by self-interest and argued to be sufficient in creating an “efficient social order” if operated under “the facilitation of spontaneous exchange processes and the effort to create [...] a self-regulating market order on a world scale” (Gill 1995: 55). In other words, social order could be optimally achieved with individuals pursuing self-interests in a free, global market. Accordingly, competition and free trade should be encouraged to maximise efficiency. The role of the state, as Hayek argued, is simply to create the Rule of Law that protects and ensures the freedom to private property (Gill 1995: 55).

As Vietnam transforms from central planning to the market economy, the spirit of neoliberalism is increasingly evident in the country's policies, development projects as well as research papers. Privatisation has taken place at a swift speed, gradually transferring the regulation power from the state to the market, a supposedly more efficient mechanism. Economic policies focus on individual and household interests rather than those of the community as a whole. International trade has increased substantially as Vietnam joined trade blocks, such as the ASEAN and the WTO. Domestic production has moved to a larger and high-tech scale to meet the new competition associated with international integration.

In this paper, I would like to question the desirability of the neoliberal development model in Vietnam by breaking down the key assumptions of neoliberalism and considering the experience in other parts of the world. Despite many features that undeniably render neoliberalism superior to central planning, the expansion of neoliberalism and globalisation has led to puzzling paradoxes that not only ignite many movements among the losers in economic liberalisation but also raise questions among the 'developed countries'. Inequality has grown at a startling speed, where “the world's top 200 companies have twice the assets of 80 percent of the world's people” and the trickle-down effect that world leaders promised was invisible compared to the rapid expansion of the corporations (Hawken 2000). “(O)ver 850 million people go to bed hungry in a world that produces more than enough food for all” (Pimbert 2007). The environment is destroyed faster than ever before and disproves the belief that the ‘tragedy of the common’ can be solved by privatisation (Hawken 2000). The list of criticisms against globalisation and neoliberalism goes on and begs Vietnam to be more prudent and skeptical when applying such a development model.

This paper challenges the key assumptions of the neoliberal model to demonstrate that the social order driven by self-interests in a self-regulating market is imperfect and provide the rationale for alternatives that react to these flaws. The alternative I will examine is economic development based on social relations (alongside with self-interest) and self-subsistence (alongside with trade). By exploring these alternatives, I am by no means suggesting that they should replace neoliberalism, but rather, I aim to widen the 'imagination' of policy makers and development practitioners that economic development can be achieved in diverse ways other than via the self-regulating market. The paper first argues that the behaviours of human beings are more than strictly self-interested because human interactions are not only market-based but also driven by social relations, morality and cultural values. These social relations reveal an ‘economy of generosity’ that exists alongside the market economy but has been overlooked by mainstream economics (Graham 2001: 110). They protect the individuals from market forces and create ‘cooperative advantage’, which strengthens the local against the global (McMichael 2008: 220). The paper then argues that the market is not self-regulatory but, rather, regulated by corporations through the manipulation of price. Given the unfair nature of the competition, the paper suggests that trade is not the only means to development and explores non-monetised, self-subsistence daily economic activities that protect the individuals from market dependency while ensuring social and environmental harmony.

Social relations in the economy

Under neoliberalism, social relations are viewed as embedded within market relations (Munck 2006: 179) and human beings are seen as either self-interested consumers, producers, or labour (Smith 1986: 119). The belief that self-interest is the principal driver of behaviour is particularly confirmed by the collapse of central planning in the late 1980s. In Vietnam, the failure of the old cooperative system put in doubt the efficiency of cooperative efforts and highlighted the importance of individual motivation in economic activities. Today, the market economy thrives on the pursuit of self-interest and inadvertently downplays the importance of cultural values, morality and personal relations as possible drivers of behaviours.

Yet the view of neoliberalism and communism, or self-interest and communal interest as a binary denies the complicated nature of human interactions. Just as the old cooperative system is flawed in solely relying on communal interests, the market mechanism is flawed in focusing only on individual interests. In reality, the interests of human beings, rather than standing on their own, are always intertwined with communal interests, moral orders, cultural values, and even altruism. The best example is probably altruism within a household, where the parents' love for their children, spouses' love for each other, brothers' and sister's love put the other's interests above their own. At a slightly larger relationship sphere, kinship and friendship are also networks where the "logic of the market" does not dominate (Munck 2006: 179). Similarly, community relationships are based on the local cultural values, in which the blind pursuit of self-interest may lead to social sanctions that cannot be measured in money terms but are nevertheless painful to the violator. Finally, in our everyday life, there are still random acts of kindness, such as helping strangers on the street without expecting any kind of reciprocity. These behaviours exist even in corners where the market flourishes the most. They reveal the fact that self-interests and communal interests, which are enabled by social relations, should be viewed as a spectrum rather than a binary. The reliance on only one end is unrealistic and fails to make use of advantages specific to each end.

In the economy, these social relations produce activities that do not contribute to GDP but serve the immediate needs of those involved (Graham 2001: 80). Examples range from students volunteering, a friend letting another stay at his/her place during travel, community members helping each other prepare for feasts, take care of the ill, or simply exchange labour during cultivation. Thus, instead of participating in the market and purchase these services, the individual relies on the help of another person. These actions, while to some extent are

driven by reciprocity, cannot be measured by money terms because they challenge the altruistic purpose of social relations; nevertheless, they are still productive, economic activities.

A day of mine – Non-market interactions based on social relations

I woke up this morning at 7 am. I prepared breakfast for my family rather than eating out (thus participating in the market and contributing to GDP). As a Vietnamese wife, I tend to do a larger share of the housework because of the Confucius teaching on me as a child. Hence, my husband and I developed a division of labour based partly on our self-interest, but also on our cultural values and the love for each other.

As I drove to work, I stopped for an old woman to cross the road even though it meant I would be late for work. I did so to be 'nice' because I was taught to respect the elder. In a sense, this moral value synchronised my interest with that of the old woman because it gave me a better feeling to be respectful to her than to be on time for work.

At work, my computer broke down and I asked one of my male colleagues to fix it instead of calling our IT person because I was too lazy to go to a different floor. My colleague still fixed it for me even though he was busy doing something else himself. He did it because we have worked together for a long time and have supported each other through many tasks. I was also older than him, thus, slightly more superior in a social sense. Besides, being a male and supposedly better at technical issues, he felt more inclined and responsible for the mishap.

In the evening, it was raining hard and the water started leaking into our house. Seeing my husband and me struggling to patch up the roof, a neighbour offered us a hand. We have developed good relations throughout the years not only because we have supported each other during difficult times but also because we have shared stories, gossips, jokes, which are not materialistic but benefited our spiritual well-being. Getting help from our neighbour meant that our family chose not to participate in the market (by hiring help), but it saved us money and built a stronger sense of solidarity in the neighbourhood. Later on, we might ask the neighbour to have a meal with us to thank him even though the money value of the meal might not be equal to the value of hiring help.

Unpacking the economy into smaller activities as above exposes the other side of the coin, which co-exists with the market economy but has often been overlooked by mainstream economics. In fact, if one takes a look at his/her daily life, the extent to which s/he relies on the help of another might be much larger than the extent to which s/he participates in the formal market. This 'economy of help' or 'economy of generosity' has been studied by researchers of many disciplines, including

“feminist economists who have problematized the **household** and **voluntary sectors**, theorists of the **informal sector** in both the ‘third’ and ‘first’ worlds, economic anthropologists who have focused upon **indigenous kin-based** and **‘gift’ economies**, economic sociologists who have problematized the cultural and social embeddedness of enterprises, those interested in the **social economy** and its ‘alternative’ **social entrepreneurs**, economic networks and organizations, and marxist political economists who have pursued a **surplus-oriented** economic analysis of different (non-capitalist) enterprises and households, including worker cooperatives and other communal forms.”
(Gibson & Graham n.d.: 3).

This non-market side of the economy reveals an alternative way of development that puts forefront the social relations that cannot be embedded in market relations. They not only protect the individuals from market fluctuations but also put a human face back on development. They exhibit social struggles that, interestingly, take place under activities “so ordinary as to be invisible.” (Graham 2001: 13).

Today, many community development initiatives have successfully mobilised the unrealised power of social relations and non-monetised economic activities. There are community groups that provide public services, such as neighbourhood security or environmental protection. There are social enterprises which use their profit for social objectives. There are cooperatives banding those of common interests together to combine their resources, monetary or otherwise, and utilise their community economic practices that advance ‘cooperative advantage’ rather than comparative advantage (McMichael 2008: 215). While they certainly pursue profit, they leave autonomy for the local to decide what to produce to best suit their natural and cultural conditions, how to increase their negotiation power and what working mechanism best suits their traditional values.

Community economic practices in Jagna – Philippines

Jagna is an isolated area of Bohol island, Philippines. Before 2003, it had low income per capita and experienced a high level of out-migration of workers into the big cities. In 2003, a project called “Negotiating alternative economic strategies for regional development in Indonesia and the Philippines” took place in an attempt to draw out local economic practices that can increase the community’s wellbeing.

After looking at the hidden potentials of the local economy, the community was able to establish four sub-projects, namely Ginger Processing, Dressmaker, Small Coconut Farmers, and Porters. The Dressmaker group was of particular success and demonstrated enormous community power. The group faced many difficulties at first because they did not have enough capital to set up and faced scepticism from the community as well as the members themselves. However, a few members persisted through the difficult times, volunteered an enormous amount of effort to set up the group and looked for resources to start up the business. After long endurance, they finally got the local school to provide half of the start up capital to make their uniforms. The group also received huge support from the parents and have grown until today. An astonishing fact was that as more demand for dresses grew, the group members did not take on full time positions to get more income for themselves but left the employment opportunities for other people in the community. The example of this community group demonstrates that social relations (among group members, from group members to the rest of the community who had not got employment, and from the parents, the school administration to the group) exist along side with market relations and prove powerful in the formation and development of the group. Social relations have fairer redistribution ability and enable ‘cooperative advantage’ that has mobilised individual efforts exceeding market expectations

(Cahill 2008)

Self-subsistence in the economy

Ricardo (1817 cited in Chang 2008) contended that trade, in which each side involved specialises in his/her comparative advantage, would create a win-win situation for everyone. This belief has led to a phenomenal increase in the amount of goods flowing across borders in the past two decades. Small producers are encouraged to upscale their production to take

advantage of economies of scale and participate in the global market. There is a widespread belief that free trade will eventually benefit everyone through the trickle-down effect.

Unfortunately, the reality is not as simple as classical economic theories make out to be. Rather than regulated by the 'invisible hand' or the state, the market is increasingly controlled by corporations who benefit tremendously from globalisation. To illustrate an example, I will examine specifically the determination of price in the food sector and demonstrate this corporate interference with price. In the Northern globe, where most 'developed countries' are located, the “‘corporate food regime’, base(s) (on) subsidies which reduce farm prices by as much as 57 per cent below actual costs (People’s Food Sovereignty 2003), constituting a ‘world price’ through trade liberalization, with devastating effects on small farmers everywhere (McMichael 2008: 209). Thus, while Southern states are discouraged from protectionism, Northern ones are challenged by lobby groups and only exercise free trade when seen profitable. Such selective protectionism has led to increased food dumping associated with the ‘free trade’ fervently advocated in the South. As Sharma (2004 cited in McMichael 2008: 209) demonstrated:

Indonesia was rated among the top ten exporters of rice before the WTO came into effect. Three years later, in 1998, Indonesia had emerged as the world’s largest importer of rice. In India, the biggest producer of vegetables in the world, the import of vegetables has almost doubled in just one year – from Rs92.8 million in 2001–02 to Rs171 million in 2002–03. Far away in Peru, food imports increased dramatically in the wake of liberalization. Food imports now account for 40 per cent of the total national food consumption. Wheat imports doubled in the 1990s, imports of maize overtook domestic production, and milk imports rose three times in the first half of the previous decade, playing havoc with Peruvian farmers.

Thus, countries that have more than sufficient ability to produce certain products now find themselves importing them. Small farmers struggle against cheaper imported goods while they grow increasingly dependent on expensive, corporate-produced inputs as well as daily necessities. Consequently, by reducing self-subsistence among individual farmers and communities, the neoliberal system has now encouraged a vertical value chain, in which corporations control the accumulation, dissemination, and price of the final products.

Price is further distorted by the false scarcity of resources in the Southern globe (Friedman 1978 in McMichael 2008: 208). The below case study of rice production in Thailand demonstrates how price is actually controlled by corporations, helps them skim profit, and transfers most risks to small farmers.

Hunger on the land of rice

Before the Industrial Revolution, Thai farmers were self-subsistent. They were not rich, but neither were they hungry. When the Industrial Revolution happened, Thai farmers started to grow rice intensively for export and were expected to benefit substantially from the trade. According to the Thai Office of Agricultural Economics, from 1995 to 2003, the values agricultural exports doubled. Today, Thailand is the largest exporter of rice in the world, with 60% of its production exported.

Ironically, the people benefiting from this export are not farmers but large corporations. While agricultural exports went up consistently, farmers' incomes from agriculture dropped by 3000 baht per household from 1996 to 1999. Meanwhile, the debt per household almost doubled from 1995 to 2001. The number of households in debt also rose from 2.8 million in 1995 to 4.7 million in 2001. The contradiction forces one to wonder where the profit goes.

The answer is corporations and middlemen. The farm gate price that farmers receive is only 50% of the export price and had decreased by 10% between 1994 and 2003. Corporations force price down during cultivation period, when the supply soars but farmers have to sell the rice anyway due to the lack of storage ability. After this peak supply period, corporations sell rice little by little to the export market to keep the price high and create an illusion of the scarcity of resources. Accordingly, the risks associated with price fluctuations mainly go to farmers and middlemen while benefit corporations when prices are pressured down.

While the price of rice fluctuates, input prices imposed by corporations rise consistently. Consequently, many farmers are trapped in the debt circle in which they are dependent on the increasingly expensive agricultural inputs to produce internationally competitive rice. Hunger, ironically, permeates on the land of rice.

(Kwamtong & Samranjit 2006).

Thus, while price is pressured down by subsidies in the Northern globe, it is boosted up by the artificial scarcity of resources in the Southern globe to help corporations maximise profit yet remain competitive when necessary. Such a trade system is in fact not self-regulated but consciously manipulated by corporations to legitimise profit maximisation. It allows for the redistribution of resources from the bottom to the top, rather than the other way around.

With corporations holding the upper hand in trade, a certain level of independence is crucial in stabilising the lives of the majority. This independence demonstrates itself in self-subsistent activities, which take place so ordinarily in our everyday life. If one takes a close look at the economy, one will see that the formal economy is but a small part (Graham 2001: 80). Economic activities still take place under various forms that go against the theory of comparative advantage and trade but prove vital to those involved. Examples could be a self-subsistent farmer who has everything he needs on his farm, a mother who brings her child to the field rather than sends him/her to childcare, a white-collar worker who drives to work rather than calling a taxi, or a doctor who cooks his own meal rather than going to the restaurant. These practices show that self-subsistence and trade are two ends of a spectrum rather than two separate systems. In fact, it would be absurd to think of an economy consisting of only trade and no self-subsistence. People would only concentrate on one activity, be it cooking, type-writing, driving, closing doors, turning on lights, or simply brushing teeth. Given the development of the service sector today, one can find a service for almost anything on the market, yet the fact that each of us still do many things ourselves reflect our own level of self-subsistence regardless of whether we live in the rural poor or the metropolitan. While they do not promote growth for the formal economy, these activities are nevertheless productive, increase one's independence and, certainly, the diversity of life. These activities also reveal a 'self-subsistent economy', which co-exists and is just as vital as the market economy but has often been associated with poverty and underdevelopment.

There are many scales of self-subsistence, be it the individual, household, community, or national level. With the independence it brings, self-subsistence enables internally driven changes rather than a passive acceptance of outside forces. As the locals gain more power over their own future, they are able to build a development path in harmony with their culture, their way of living, and their eco-system. Of course, this harmony comes at the cost of profit maximisation and large-scale, internationally competitive production; however, being the direct targets of the changes happening on their land, the locals will be the best judge on how to weigh the costs and benefits of self-subsistence and trade.

La Via Campesina – The fight for self-subsistence

La Via Campesina, or the International Peasant Movement, first started in 1993 and has now attracted small and medium-sized farmers, landless, and rural dwellers from 56 countries (La Via Campesina 2009). They have organised many conferences for dialogues about food sovereignty as well as many protests against the WTO, the FAO, and other international institutions which are increasingly transferring power from farmers to large corporations.

La Via Campesina put forefront food paradoxes that challenge the price tag supposedly determined by the scarcity of food and its demand (McMichael 2008: 215). For example, in the US, the biggest food producer and exporter of the world, “in 2002, 35 million Americans didn’t know where their next meal was coming from (Nord, Andrew & Carlson 2003 in Ahn 2004: 1). To these hungry people, food has more real meaning than a fabricated price. While food corporations and the WTO contend that the most effective way to provide food and end world hunger is through the market,

(t)he food sovereignty movement argues, in contrast, that ‘family-farm and peasant-based production for domestic purposes is responsible for approximately 90% of the world’s food production, much of which does not even pass through markets’ (People’s Food Sovereignty 2003). Accordingly, social reproduction through the world market is both ineffectual and licenses an ongoing violence against *extant* forms of social reproduction, as well as enlarging spaces of ‘social exclusion’ in the countryside and planet-wide urban slums (Davis 2006; Cameron and Palan 2004)” (McMichael 2008: 216).

Accordingly, La Via Campesina contends that self-subsistence is the more efficient way to distribute food than trade in the world market.

In effect, La Via Campesina advocates for the localisation and the re-establishment of small scale production for the community and domestic market rather than the “current industrialized agribusiness model has been deliberately planned for the complete vertical integration and to dominate all agriculture activities” (La Via Campesina 2009). With decades of experience on their own land, they know how to sustainably utilise resources to fit with their natural and cultural conditions while relying the least on external inputs,

such as corporate-produced seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, and other chemicals. While small scale production cannot take advantage of economies of scale, it allows the community members to enjoy immediate profit rather than waiting for it to circle around the globe to be 'trickled-down', if at all.

Conclusion and policy implications

The market-centric development is driven on the belief that social orders can be most efficiently achieved by individuals pursuing self-interests in a self-regulated economy (Gill 1995: 55). In this paper, I have challenged this belief by contending that individuals are not strictly self-interested and the self-regulated economy is merely regulated by corporations instead of the state. By pointing out economic activities that take place under the mechanism of social relations and self-subsistence, I have reconsidered the market-centric representation of the economy (Gibson & Graham n.d.: 3) and introduced the concepts of 'economy of generosity' and 'economy of self-subsistence'. These economies have always existed alongside with the market economy but have rarely been taken into consideration when formulating economic policies.

While neoliberal policies advocate for a free and global market, the introduction of the 'economy of generosity' and the 'economy of self-subsistence' reveals local opportunities that have not been sufficiently realised. Both of these economic mechanisms highlight the advantages of localised production, such as cooperative advantage, fairer distribution of resources, local economic independence, and the local's ability to harmonise their own development. These advantages urge policy makers and development practitioners to take a different look at the economy and realise that GDP growth and participation in the market are not the only indication of overall development nor can they comprehensively capture economic success. In other words, the economy does not equate the market and economic success measured via only the market is inadequate.

I need to stress again that I am not advocating for an economy based entirely on self-subsistence and social relations as the market, self-subsistence, and social relations each has unique strengths and weaknesses. They should be considered as spectrums that can be adjusted rather than three separate systems. However, by defending self-subsistence and social relations, I am raising caution against the dominant glorification of trade and large scale production in Vietnam as it might lead to increasing concentration of resources and

economic pursuit at the cost of the social and natural systems. Despite the recent policy emphasis on decentralisation, the dominant view that the market is the only component of the economy has led to enormous pressure to have economic growth via GDP and legitimises the tendency for central planning with little consultation with the grassroots. Regarding the agricultural sector, for example, the Party's 10th National Delegation Meeting conceded to

“speed up the restructuring of agriculture and the rural economy, swiftly switch production to profitable and marketable products; focus on intensive cultivation using modern and synchronous technology; plan for stable food cultivation areas; develop large-scale livestock production while ensuring safety and a sustainable environment. Develop specialised and commodified agricultural production regions along with improved processing and production technology, eliminate small-scale, spontaneous production” (Proceedings of the Communist Party’s 10th National Delegation Meeting 2006).

According to this resolution, Vietnam aims at an industrialised, large-scale agriculture, which is strategically planned based on each region's comparative advantage. The ambition is not only to produce enough food to feed the country but also to develop a strong export-oriented agricultural sector. Small-scale production, as the proceedings above clearly pointed out, is undesirable and considered a transitive, backward phase to be passed. However, establishing such specialised agricultural regions requires the rearrangement of not only cultivation methods but also land tenure, division of labour, eco-systems prone to different inputs, and finally, a different way of living. All of these factors have real effects on the overall, rather than just economic, well-being of the local but have rarely been 'plugged' into economic models during policy impact assessments. Even in terms of economic development, establishing such regions put the fates of local farmers in the hand of corporations and might actually redistribute resources from the bottom to the top, as in the aforementioned case of Thailand. Thus, such tendency in development needs serious reconsideration and genuine consultation with the local before any implementation should take place.

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