

The Neoliberal State And The Depoliticization Of Poverty: Activist Anthropology And “Ethnography From Below”

Vincent Lyon-Callo

Department of Anthropology
Western Michigan University

and

Susan Brin Hyatt

Department of Anthropology
Temple University

ABSTRACT: The idea of a politically engaged or activist ethnography has received increased attention in recent years. Yet, such social and economic processes as globalization and neoliberalism would seem to militate against the efficacy of an engaged anthropology. In this article, we argue that, although systemic restructuring and related discursive conditions have fundamentally altered the social and political landscape of cities in the United States and around the world, there still remains much potential for carrying out locally based activist ethnographic work. In fact, we argue for a particular type of ethnographic encounter we refer to as an “ethnography from below” which is built on the notion that studying

localities means simultaneously “ethnographazing” and thereby demystifying the nature of the neoliberal state. Using examples from our own involvement in activism and in ethnography, we suggest that through long-term collaborations with community-based activists, engaged ethnographers can contribute to creating a space for the realization of new policies, new subject positions, and the emergence of new political possibilities beyond what the global economy and its neoliberal rationalizations have set for us.

Re-Engaging Local Politics as Anthropologists

The idea of a politically engaged or activist ethnography has received increased attention in recent years. One cannot pick up a copy of *Anthropology News* since the turn of the century without coming across an article extolling the merits of such work. It appears that the notion of a more engaged ethnography, within North America at least, resonates with many anthropologists. Some anthropologists feel that our work offers particular insights that should be considered in producing informed social policies. Others appear to understand politically engaged work as a means toward reducing the marginalized status for anthropology both in the academy and in the public consciousness. What is often missing from these arguments, however, is a critical discussion of both the possibilities and problematics of doing activist ethnographic work in today’s world. In this article we begin such an exploration.

As work by many scholars illustrates, in recent years systemic restructuring and related discursive conditions have fundamentally altered the social and political landscape of cities in the United States and around the world. These conditions have produced significant changes in localities as well, altering the very notion of what now constitutes a community. As much ethnographic work has traditionally been focused within specific geographic spaces, these transformations would seem

to suggest a need to rethink the methodological issues entailed by a commitment to an engaged ethnography.

Drawing on the work of the geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham (2002; 2003), however, we believe that despite pessimistic prognostications regarding the disabling effects attributed to both globalization and neoliberalism, there still remains much potential for carrying out locally based activist ethnographic work. In fact, we argue for a particular type of ethnographic encounter we refer to as an "ethnography from below" which is built upon the notion that studying localities means simultaneously "ethnographizing" and thereby demystifying, the nature of the neoliberal state.

We suggest that one goal of ethnography from below is to collaborate with activists by using our work to unmask both the material and ideological effects of neoliberalism, not as abstractions but as a very real set of interventions into local settings which produces the effect of limiting the spectrum of political possibilities activists are able to envision (Goode and Maskovsky 2001; Maskovsky 2001b). By revealing the machinations of neoliberalism as "the wizard behind the curtain," as it were, ethnographic research can offer at the very least a way to help people in the communities most disadvantaged by contemporary social policy to see in a new light the ways in which their struggles and their histories have been "disappeared." Goode and Maskovsky (2001:10) describe this *regime of disappearance*, in their phrase, as "a mode of governance, economy, and politics in which the poor are not so much vilified as they are marginalized or erased by the institutional and ideological aspects of work, social welfare, and politics that are dominant under neoliberalism." Building on this idea, we suggest that one contribution of our ethnographic work is to make visible the concrete programs and policies that have been used to create a single narrative in which poverty and inequality are made to seem the natural and inevitable upshots of evo-

lutionary processes, rather than the conscious and planned outcomes of a very deliberate set of human interventions.

To us, the very notion of a politically engaged anthropology would seem to be predicated upon the existence of an actively engaged citizenry. Otherwise, with whom would anthropologists be engaging? Yet, over the past several years, at the same time that many anthropologists have rededicated themselves to carrying out politically meaningful work, policy-makers, politicians and political scientists have bemoaned a loss of public engagement among the citizenry, an outcome which they attribute to a decline in "civil society" or, in the language used by Robert Putnam in his well-known work *Bowling Alone*, a loss of "social capital." Putnam (1995:666) claims that there has been a drastic decline in "social capital" over the past 20-30 years, which he measures in terms of a documented drop of 25% to 50% in the membership rolls "of such diverse organizations as the PTA, the Elks club, the League of Women Voters, the Red Cross, labor unions and even bowling leagues." Putnam's assertion that Americans had become completely disengaged from their communities has inspired a number of other scholars and think tanks to jump on the bandwagon of his assertion that it is the absence of civil society and social capital that is primarily responsible for so many social ills, including increased crime, a decrease in voter turn-out, divorce, falling attendance at religious services and a host of other disabling conditions. A report issued by The National Commission on Civic Renewal was even more explicit in its charge that Americans had become almost pathologically apathetic. As the authors of that report put it:

Too many of us have become passive and disengaged. Too many of us lack confidence in our capacity to make basic moral and civic judgments, to join with our neighbors to do the work of community, to make a difference. Never have we had so many opportunities for participa-

tion, yet rarely have we felt so powerless (National Commission on Civic Renewal 1998:6).

On the contrary, in our work, we see many citizens engaged in activist endeavors. To us, the focus on civil society or on social capital as conceptualized in the manner described above has encouraged a microanalytic perspective among researchers, which has produced a decontextualized tallying of formal organizations and their memberships at the expense of considering the larger political economic environment within which such organizations are lodged. This telescoped perspective has diverted attention away from the need to consider the changing nature of the state (and its relationship to the market) as the primary forces which either promote or suppress community activism. In other words, a consideration of what we have called "ethnography from below" really points us toward the need for a kind of ethnography of the state, in which it becomes clear how neoliberalism and globalization compromise grassroots efforts aimed at structural change.

In order to describe how state-level changes have affected local communities, we first turn to describing a campaign that took place in a neighborhood in Southwest Chicago where Hyatt was employed as a community organizer in the 1980s. Although many of the events described below took place prior to her direct involvement, they illustrate how drastically community-based activism has changed in subsequent years.

Where's the Money? Neighborhoods and "Real" Capital

During the 1970s, one of the most pressing issues that mobilized thousands of neighborhood residents in cities across the U.S. was the prevalence of discriminatory lending practices which contributed to rapid neighborhood resegregation in white working class neighborhoods and promoted economic

disinvestment and decline in minority neighborhoods. Across the country and across racial boundaries, neighborhood groups joined together in coalitions to protest unscrupulous banking, insurance and real estate practices. The outcome of such campaigns was, as Medoff and Sklar (1994:27) note, that "In the mid-1970s, Congress responded to the crisis of redlining and disinvestment with the 1975 Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, the 1976 Equal Credit Opportunity Act and the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act." Although neither the passage of these acts nor the community organizing that preceded or followed them resolved the crisis of urban disinvestment, this is largely because these acts have been gutted by the subsequent move toward encouraging deregulation and privatization, the exact same processes that would make it virtually impossible today for community groups to use the kinds of tactics that characterized what Harry Boyte (1980) has called "the backyard revolution" of the 1970s.

One critical factor in this shift has been the loss of locally based financial institutions. In 1974, for example, in response to rampant redlining, members of the Southwest Parish & Neighborhood Federation in Chicago organized what they called a "greenlining" campaign, whereby 10,000 local residents signed "greenlining pledge cards," vowing to move millions of dollars of their savings from local financial institutions to other banks and savings and loans in order to force disclosure of local lending patterns. In the face of the threat that they would lose hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings, neighborhood financial institutions grudgingly complied, and the data they released confirmed anecdotal evidence that these institutions were investing neighborhood residents' hard-earned savings in lakefront and suburban developments at the expense of serving the mortgage and other credit needs of the local community. (Disclosure of such data was later mandated by the terms of the Community Reinvestment Act.)

Yet, by the early 1980s, deregulation of banks and savings and loans had made neighborhood financial institutions virtually extinct by eroding the differences between savings and loans and banks and by permitting interstate banking, thereby setting the stage for the huge number of bank takeovers and mergers that have become routine since that time. With very few locally owned financial institutions left in urban neighborhoods, it is all but impossible to imagine a community group mounting a similar "greenlining" campaign today. Furthermore, enforcing the terms of the Community Reinvestment Act has become more and more difficult for the same reasons, and over the last 10 years, a Republican dominated Congress has set its sights on repealing this act altogether.

Back in the 1970s, the primary financial institution in Southwest Chicago was Talman Home Savings and Loan, a local establishment that had engendered great loyalty on the part of neighborhood residents as it had been founded by a local family of Slovak immigrants and had provided the means by which most white working class families had bought their first homes. Following another community campaign undertaken in the late 1970s, in which the demand was for Talman to reinvest local savings in the neighborhood, the savings and loan established a Community Economic Redevelopment Corporation. Yet by 1991, Talman had been acquired by AMBRO North America which now owns most of the former savings and loans, and had merged with several other institutions, eventually becoming LaSalle Bank, thereby removing it altogether from the purview of any attempts at neighborhood control.

In addition to the loss of local financial institutions, the disappearance of locally owned businesses and industries has also compromised the vitality of urban neighborhoods. In 1985, for example, Hyatt was responsible for planning and organizing a neighborhood street festival in the same community described above, which was held in conjunction with a Nabisco

factory located on the outskirts of the community where a number of residents were employed. Nabisco sponsored a number of local arts groups who all performed as part of the street fair. Later that same year, however, Nabisco Foods merged with RJR Reynolds Tobacco Company, which was headquartered in Winston-Salem, North Carolina and was seeking to diversify its holdings, and in 1986 it became known as RJR Nabisco. Two years after that, it was the target of a leveraged buyout so venal that it was chronicled in the book, *BARBARIANS AT THE GATE* (1990, written by journalists Bryan Burroughs and John Helyar) which was then turned into a feature film by the same name. This is a typical account of how the loss of locally controlled industries has been an outcome not only of the processes we generally gloss as "globalization" (that is, the movement of production to off-shore locales characterized by low wages, low taxes and lax environmental regulations) but is also a result of domestic economic policies that favor the interests of mobile capital *within* the United States. The volatility of local labor markets also contributes to tremendous residential instability, making sustaining effective grassroots organizing even more difficult.

If the terrain of neighborhood politics seems less vibrant today than it was during the imagined golden era of "civic life" and social capital, celebrated by Putnam and others, perhaps it is because the disappearance of local "real" capital has drastically altered the possibilities for effective political organizing at the level of the grassroots. Rather than mobilizing campaigns that might now result in acts of Congress comparable to those of the 1970s, community organizations now feel compelled to focus their energies on far more limited goals in the hopes that they can attract private investors to their neighborhoods, which is the only realistic strategy for local improvements that they can now envision (see Maskovsky 2001b).

The changing nature of community-based campaigns does not mean, however, that *social* capital is any less present. In

Philadelphia, for example, two large coalitions of faith-based organizations have mounted successful and sustained crusades to pressure the Mayor and the municipal government to move forward on a blight elimination plan (known officially as the "Neighborhood Transformation Initiative") which calls for the city to tear down abandoned houses, remove abandoned cars from the streets, and clean up vacant lots. Community meetings on these issues are generally well attended and citizens have been mobilized to collectively tackle such problems in their immediate surroundings. What we might regard as the deficiency in such efforts does not result from a lack of citizens' willingness to become involved, to give their time or to engage with their neighbors; rather, the shortfall is in seeing all this commitment directed toward a goal that, in the face of the poverty and depopulation hobbling settings like Philadelphia (and Kalamazoo), seems pitifully modest in its aspirations. This outcome speaks to the ways in which the possibilities for "winnable" political action have been reduced to a narrow band on the political spectrum for both community organizers and neighborhood residents alike. What the "Neighborhood Transformation Initiative" is really directed toward is the transformation of peripheral neighborhoods into commercially viable districts, a process Maskovsky (2001b: 221) aptly describes as a shift from "dependent places to productive spaces." Were this transformation to be actually realized, the end result would be the displacement of many of the same people who are now fighting to see this plan become a reality (see Maskovsky 2001b). Furthermore, the degree to which the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative has mobilized residents of Philadelphia also speaks to the sharp decline in the quality of city services now provided by municipalities. In the face of economic restructuring, changes in the tax code that rob public sector entities of revenue, coupled with the revival of federal deficit funding have all squeezed state and city budgets to such a degree that basic public services are rapidly be-

ing cut back or are disappearing altogether, necessitating that residents mobilize to preserve scarce resources that would once have been taken for granted. In a similar vein, several articles in the *NEW YORK TIMES* over the past several months have described a series of neighborhood-based mobilizations directed toward preventing neighborhood fire stations from being permanently closed.

Such processes as privatization, the reduction of social problems to issues of individual pathologies (Lyon-Callo 2000), and market-based strategies have certainly created an altered relationship between citizens and the state and, in the process, have affected the possibilities for collective mobilizations. The hegemonic production of subject positions and imaginings about what are and are not realistic strategies for making local improvements is the second aspect of socioeconomic restructuring we address. To explore this issue further, we turn to Lyon-Callo's current research in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Restructuring Local Employment Opportunities

In April of 2003, the pharmaceutical firm Pfizer announced the first phase of a restructuring plan resulting from their just approved merger with Pharmacia. The merger created not only the world's largest pharmaceutical firm, but also a great deal of trepidation in communities around the globe. One of those communities, Kalamazoo, was already hurting from a loss of more than 2,000 higher paying jobs through a series of plant closings and corporate mergers in the previous five years. Pfizer, the largest employer in the county, would not announce the exact number of planned job losses, but their plans did entail eliminating many of the 1,600 highly paid positions in research and development in the Kalamazoo region. Clearly, such a loss of highly skilled and well-paid community mem-

bers from a city of approximately 70,000 people would have a significant impact.

A few weeks after the announcement, Lyon-Callo and several of his students attended a planning meeting for a citywide celebration of diversity. Through their engaged ethnographic work both with a local antipoverty task force and with the rapidly growing Mexican and Mexican-American population in the region, they had become key players in the planning of this community effort at multicultural understanding. Pulled together primarily by one long-term Mexican-American community member concerned with what he saw as increasing racial segregation and misunderstanding in the city, the planning committee for the diversity celebration was comprised of representatives from the city's African-American, Indian and Pakistani, Islamic, Chinese, Native American, Hispanic, and Russian communities as well as from two neighborhood associations, and the local community college, in addition to Lyon-Callo and four of his students. The Pfizer restructuring plan was mentioned several times in passing at this meeting as the representatives for the local Chinese and Indian communities mentioned that they, and a large percentage of the local Chinese and Indian communities, would most likely be losing their jobs at Pfizer by the end of the summer unless they relocated from the community. It appeared that a decline in ethnic diversity within the region would be another cost of the restructuring.

A city built largely around now-closed paper plants and a locally owned pharmaceutical company, Upjohn, which had gone through three mergers with global conglomerates in the previous six years and had now become Pfizer, was substantially altered. More than 3,000 higher paying, unionized manufacturing jobs had been lost in the region since 1995 as a General Motors plant in Kalamazoo, a Kellogg's plant in nearby Battle Creek, and four paper mills in the county were shut down. In addition, several hundred professional jobs were lost as a re-

gional bank with its corporate headquarters in Kalamazoo was taken over during a corporate merger. New jobs had been created in the county during those years. However these newer positions were mainly lower paying, non-union jobs in food service and retail trade. The city was also the home to scores of brownfields and a heavily polluted river with no resources or plans for effective environmental restoration as the companies who had created those environmental conditions in the first place were now largely gone from the city.

After Pfizer's announcement, the progressive activists with whom Lyon-Callo had been working were at a loss as to how to respond. With the city facing a severe budget shortfall and an already existing unemployment rate of more than 7% in the county, in addition to the upcoming job losses, attention became focused on how to retain or create any jobs. Discussions began to focus on using tax breaks and other financial incentives to lure businesses back to the region. Support began to build in favor of a plan being advocated by the local Chamber of Commerce and a private conservative economic development agency to invest a portion of the city and county pension funds in venture capital programs being offered to scientists from Pfizer who might be willing to attempt to start up an entrepreneurial business enterprise in the region. This was just the latest in a string of closings and layoffs originating from outside the community and there seemed to be little that could be done locally to staunch the loss of higher paying jobs. As one activist stated, "All I know is we need good jobs. The seven dollars an hour at Wal-Mart can't help a single mother. But, I don't know how to get those jobs." Such sentiments were repeated over and over again in discussions with community members, in newspaper editorials, in Chamber of Commerce statements, and in city commission meetings. Everyone seemed to agree that what was needed was to figure out a way to maintain existing "good" jobs and to create more such opportunities. The only solutions which appeared to even be worth con-

sidering, however, were those that focused on market-based strategies. Despite the irony that it was the same market-based policies based on competitive bidding that had resulted in the proliferation of corporate mergers and in the growth of global conglomerates who could find more favorable conditions elsewhere that had caused many of the problems now facing the city in the first place, it appeared as if there was no alternative to efforts that paralleled those same strategies. What was particularly telling about how common-sensical such thinking had become was that the paradoxical nature of that response was rarely articulated. What was repeated many times was that in a global capitalist economy, there was no alternative for local action other than competing to attract new industries through creating conditions that favored capital over other interests.

A similar argument had been used the previous year to defeat a living wage ordinance for the city as opponents argued that within the context of the global economy, such a policy that would substantially raise pay at the low end of the socioeconomic spectrum would necessarily lead to even more job losses. The opponents of the living wage initiative stated that, while well-meaning, living wage efforts were misguided in that they infringed upon the free market. They eventually offered their own poverty reduction strategy which focused on tax and other incentives intended to lure companies to the city, along with initiating job training, job readiness and job retention programs, that focused on enculturating poor people into behaviors considered appropriate and necessary to render them "hirable" were such businesses to appear on the horizon. Such programs focus on reforming individuals at the expense of addressing broader structural concerns.

The story of Kalamazoo has seemingly been repeated in some version or another in communities all over the United States and across the globe. The rise of market-based reforms and the spread of capitalist hegemony have been accompanied by increased transnational flows of goods and people,

corporate conglomeritization, and a growing militarization which has increased the surveillance and policing of citizens. Even many mainstream economists are now acknowledging that these policies have had profound, often negative, consequences on the lives of working peoples, ethnic minorities, and communities (see Stiglitz 2002, for example) as well as on what entails a "community" itself in profound ways. The shifting social, economic, political, ethnic, and discursive landscape presents challenging and important avenues for anthropologists who are committed to practicing an activist, politically engaged ethnography in the world today. As increasing rates of incarceration, low-wage jobs with little security, homelessness and hunger, segregation in housing and schooling as well as the flow of people and goods across the globe are accompanied by a return to an imperialist United States, we believe that there are still many arenas in which anthropological insights would be politically useful.

However, these same dynamics also pose significant challenges to the traditional ways in which many anthropologists have worked in particular "communities." For example, it appears to make little sense to conduct ethnographic studies focused on specific spaces or places when the issues confronting them are part of a larger web of global interconnections.

Much work within anthropology in recent years suggest how ethnographers might respond to the challenges posed by globalization. George Marcus (1998), for example, has suggested a multi-sited approach to ethnography (1998) while Arturo Escobar (2001) argues for an ethnographic encounter with global activist networks. These, as well as scores of similar arguments, are potentially useful for theorizing local activism within the context of a globalized world. What these scholars do not address are the specific methodological and analytic issues confronting those activist anthropologists committed to conducting activist work focused on issues affecting particular localities. We suggest that "ethnography from be-

low" can be used to produce analyses that embolden the possibilities of locally based, collective mobilizations against inequalities and exploitation and that help to break up the appearance of a hegemonic neoliberal rationality that often seems omnipotent in its disabling effects.

As the ethnographic examples above demonstrate, altered systemic conditions have clearly led to increased inequalities and have produced structural impediments to successfully mobilizing local campaigns to counter the effects of neoliberalism and globalization. However, there is another pernicious aspect of globalization and neoliberalism that also requires anthropological attention. What is particularly insidious about globalization and neoliberalism is their discursive dimensions. Much more than simply a set of political policies and economic practices, they are also discursive means for conceptualizing and imagining the world in particular ways. Particularly troubling, with profound implications for community based activism and ethnography, is how such policies have come to be widely regarded as totalizing and natural. Signs of globalization and transnationalism, for example, are readily apparent to any citizen. It is thus quite a simple step to understand globalization as all powerful and all encompassing. This has the multiple entrapping effects of rendering any locally based, non-market-based mobilizations as ineffectual and misguided, thereby removing the possibility of noncapitalist class processes from the social and economic imagining (Gibson-Graham 1996), and diverting attention from the increasing capitalist imperialism and class exploitation (Ruccio 2003) resulting from neoliberal policies and practices (DeMartino 2000). Many of these obstacles to most just policies, however, are actually the product of domestic policies, which means that ultimately they are vulnerable to political pressures, as Janet Abu-Lughod (1999: 275-76) has pointed out.

The argument that declines in productivity, greater international competition, and relatively unrestricted immigration from "less developed countries" since 1965 account for the growing income and wealth gap in the United States ignores the role played by public policies specific to this country. In some ways, the global cities argument, which has tended to attribute these inequalities primarily to the international system, has basically ignored the effects of national taxation, labor, and welfare policies in radically altering income distribution.

Abu-Lughod (1999: 277-278) goes on to suggest that the effects of "globalization" have not produced nearly as severe consequences for inequality in other western industrialized nations which have, despite being subjected to the same international pressures, sustained at least some of the policies that defined their welfare states. The readiness of policy-makers, politicians, civic activists and, in some cases, anthropologists alike to attribute declining local conditions to uninterrogated globalizing forces has distracted attention from domestic social and political processes which could, given the political will to do so, be addressed within the context of the American nation-state.

Through both our organizing and our ethnographic work with homeless people, welfare recipients, living wage advocates, and anti-poverty activists, we have identified constraints that now hobble the ability of working people to mobilize effective resistance against the systemic conditions impacting on their lives and communities. It is equally as important that we make clear in our work that poor people are neither passive victims of political economic restructuring nor simply the victims of mystification or misguided understandings. In many years of working closely with community members, we have seen scores of people engaged in challenging the conditions of their lives. Many of these people clearly articulate understandings regarding the sharp increase in systemic inequalities that

have resulted from recent policies. Neoliberal social policies and economic practices, however, have had an effect at both the structural and the discursive levels, making it appear that little can be done beyond adopting at the grassroots level the same privatist and market-based reforms advocated by those in power (see Maskovsky 2001a). In the absence of a fundamental transformation of the neoliberal state, both community activists and anthropologists are hard put to see possibilities for action at the local level that might address the systemic conditions responsible for heightening the material inequalities that compromise so many people's lives. This point might be made clearer with another example.

Reforming State Practices

Two of the shelter staff members with whom Lyon-Callo has collaborated in his work on homelessness in Massachusetts had become increasingly frustrated at the ineffectiveness of their efforts to alter the systemic conditions they understood as causing such conditions as a low-wage economy, a lack of affordable housing, inadequate health care, and homelessness. Dissatisfied with the conventional shelter practices of detecting, diagnosing, and treating pathologies within the individualized bodies of homeless people, they decided to try to work on tackling homelessness from a different angle. After several months of planning and grant writing, they eventually formed a collectively run, community-based organization with the vision of collaborating with homeless people to do community organizing aimed at addressing local conditions. The issue which kept coming up in their meetings was the dearth of local jobs that paid a wage sufficient to pull someone out of poverty. Initially, the members of this organization directed their energies toward forming a living wage campaign. However, as it became clear that the potential ordinances coming out of

that effort would not directly affect many of the jobs available to them, all but two of the members stopped actively participating. Instead, with the assistance of more than \$2 million in grants from HUD, they began to focus all the organization's energies on establishing a program designed to teach entrepreneurial skills to homeless people. Believing that it was impractical to address economic restructuring, these social actors embraced a neoliberal strategy aimed at promoting private businesses. Spurred on by the availability of social capital and public dollars that were earmarked specifically to encourage such efforts at the expense of alternative political strategies, they worked to train individual poor people to compete within the market by teaching them to become small business owners. Interestingly, they all knew on some level that this was going to be ineffective (and, indeed it has been a dismal failure in addressing poverty locally). But their collective struggles against systemic conditions were also failures. Without addressing the state, local-level struggles produced few material outcomes as people struggled to resist neoliberal constructions of their problems without ever really managing to escape neoliberal domination.

In his six years of work on homelessness in Northampton, Massachusetts, one of the things which eventually became clear to Lyon-Callo was the ways in which federal funding guidelines helped produce particular practices within the shelters while discouraging other possibilities. As discussed elsewhere, he used that information as starting points for more discussions with the people he was working with as they together pursued new ways of thinking and acting which eventually produced new forms of collective efforts in the local community (see Lyon-Callo 2000, 2001). Similarly, Lyon-Callo has also been working for the last four years with two community groups focused on addressing poverty in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Both the living wage coalition and the poverty reduction task force represent alliances made up of dedicated people who

are deeply critical of recent economic and social practices and policies. These activists spend many hours each week engaged in community efforts aimed at tackling local poverty, trying to influence elected officials, and advocating for what they see as more just local policy and economic development decisions. However, despite these well-intentioned efforts, poverty continues largely unabated in a city undergoing profound social and economic transformations from, in part, corporate mergers, job relocation, middle class flight, a growth of food service and retail trade jobs, and social policies explicitly designed to promote to poor people market-based solutions to poverty. Working closely with both these groups, Lyon-Callo came to understand the frustrations confronting many of these activists. Simply documenting or analyzing the ineffectiveness of their efforts at resistance *alone* was not a satisfactory outcome to him and it certainly would not have been useful to the community members.

Instead, while gathering data on the transformations and community responses to it, he has spent most of his efforts at working to develop collaborative relationships through simply participating and providing access to whatever resources he has available through his position at the university. As he and his students contribute by doing much of the mundane work involved in community organizing, such as taking notes at meetings, making fliers, working on grant applications, raising funds, and collecting signatures as part of petition drives, people have begun to see them as concerned community members committed to working toward shared goals. The ethnographic relationship is thus transformed into a collaboration, and genuine dialogue has become possible.

Of course, a collaboration alone is not enough. We have also used our research into the particularities of conditions in Kalamazoo to challenge the sentiment that what has been occurring in Kalamazoo in recent years consists of simply the same set of dynamics that has disabled and demoralized com-

munities throughout the nation and the world. In this manner, we can examine together the operations of power, class, and race in the community and develop possible avenues for making interventions in that particular location. For example, Kalamazoo is the largest city in Michigan without either a city housing authority or a ward system for electing city commissioners. This partly explains why only five commissioners have been elected since 1959 from residents of the four poorest sections of the city where the vast majority of Black and Hispanic residents live. For example, whereas more than 25% of city residents identified themselves as either Black or Hispanic in the 2000 census, fewer than five city commissioners elected over the past 20 years are recognized as members of those ethnicities. A related situation is that only five candidates not backed by the Kalamazoo Citizens Council, an organization largely consisting of members of elite families and the Chamber of Commerce, have ever been elected (Shear and Reames 2002). Other examples of the type of information that we have used to engage with community members include examining data detailing the transformation in types of jobs and average pay in the community and analyzing how that situation compares to other cities. We have also documented the reasons why people who articulate a concern about low pay are also unwilling to support living wage legislation. These conditions have had profound implications for economic, social, and political life in the city.

Discussing those and several other analyses of which particular policies have produced local economic restructuring, thereby altering social relations in Kalamazoo, with interested community members has denaturalized these shifts and has created possibilities for new strategies to emerge. These conversations then unfold into working with community members to explore the particularities of the local situation and to consider how we might together develop new ways to understand and address the local effects produced by neoliberal

policies. For example, after a three-year struggle and massive community organizing effort, most of the voting citizens in Kalamazoo seemingly agreed that a living wage ordinance would do more harm than good, as the majority voted against passage of the ordinance in 2001. The living wage campaign had ended. Activists were not only angry in response to the vote, but were also potentially immobilized, as they could not determine what strategy to try next. Many people, who had spent dozens of hours each week for the past two years collectively struggling together (which, in itself, partly refutes Putnam's and others' arguments about the loss of social capital), were ready to resign themselves to accepting that nothing could be done about systemic inequities locally. Lyon-Callo's response was to urge them to critically examine their practices during the campaign, as well as to begin exploring the complex range of reasons why people actually voted against the ordinance. Some people have remained disappointed and continue to blame city voters for being misled by what the advocates believed were lies by the opposition which was spearheaded by the local Chamber of Commerce and elected officials. Other members of the coalition have indicated by their statements and practices that they have come to believe it is impractical to work against local poverty locally and instead are concentrating their energies on the type of international and national level collaborative efforts advocated by Escobar (2001). For others, however, it has become clear that new strategies and approaches might be necessary and possible.

Lyon-Callo has interviewed many local citizens regarding the living wage initiative. In those interviews, it became clear that while many people agree that low wages in currently existing local jobs are a significant concern, they also fear that a locally based struggle will simply result in more job losses in the city as corporations move elsewhere in search of lower wages and tax abatements. Through those ongoing dialogues, some of the activists as well as the anthropologist now under-

stand that new tactics are necessary and they are beginning to try to imagine new creative approaches to the obstacles that undermine their attempts to counter economic and social restructuring.

Some of the members of Lyon-Callo's research team¹ are working with community members organizing a new advocacy organization in the city. This group, the Hispanic Leadership Coalition, is planning and organizing a potential progressive coalition of city commission candidates as well as working to build coalitions with developed grassroots organizations in the city to develop local strategies for challenging local conditions of segregation, job loss, and housing affordability and segregation. Others are working with a community-based anti-poverty task force which came together in the aftermath of the defeat of the living wage campaign. This coalition is bringing together a broad constellation of community groups, including the Chamber of Commerce, in order to develop an initiative aimed at designing a comprehensive, collaborative approach to poverty in the city. This group is still in a nascent stage. However, it is clear that working with the coalition has created both obstacles and opportunities. Much time and effort have been spent on struggling over the dominant notion that poverty is caused by afflictions within poor people and that the only viable ways of addressing poverty are through the neoliberal strategies of governing poor people, or convincing them to govern themselves, through their participation in education and training programs, and through policing their behaviors. These kinds of measures are usually coupled with tax breaks and other incentives aimed at luring employers to the region. However, what is significant is that representatives of organizations that previously claimed that nothing could be done locally are now engaged in debates about which locally based strategies are most effective. These groups are being prodded and pushed by another newly emergent locally based community organizing effort with whom members of

the research team are also collaborating. The Michigan Organizing Project, guided by organizing principles adopted from the work of Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire, is spending much of its time working and talking with poor people in the community about the conditions of their lives.

Bringing poor people together in a number of forums and actions in recent months has helped produce a new awareness of the possibility of poor people as social agents. New strategies are unfolding towards making quality housing, health care, and employment a possibility and a reality for all people living in the city. In the process, they are challenging social policy priorities set by the city and guided by neoliberal assumptions. As just one example, after examining the city budget in detail, activists uncovered evidence that several million dollars are allocated by the city each year to private economic development agencies. They are working on a campaign to redirect some of those funds towards establishing a housing trust fund in the city to develop high quality affordable housing whereby all residents, not just the privileged, would be seen as deserving of quality housing. As Lyon-Callo and his students are engaged in working with each of these groups, they play a role in helping foster coalition-building among the protagonists of these various endeavors. No simple answers have emerged and each of these efforts entails ongoing attempts to expand the possible responses beyond solely individualistic and market-based solutions, but an initiative has begun to explore how to overcome the changing nature of the state as well as how to tackle the common sense perceptions about globalization's uniform domination and about what might be considered reasonable alternative social policies.

Denaturalizing Social and Economic Policies

As is the case with globalization, "neoliberalism" also has the potential to serve as another totalizing discourse. In a recent paper, John Clarke (2003) cautions us not to overstate neoliberalism's successes, acknowledging that it has been, at best, an incomplete project or what he calls a "would-be hegemony." Indeed, part of our vision of ethnography from below is to locate and highlight the interstices where neoliberal policies confront their own contradictions. For example, local ethnography can reveal the ways in which the transmutation of vulnerable "citizens" into "consumers" has been used to mask the transference of basic public services to private interests aimed at making a profit by providing for basic human needs that were once regarded as the rights of all citizens. For example, the takeover of large swathes of the Philadelphia public school system in 2002 by for-profit corporations like Edison Schools, Inc. has provoked a series of widespread debates in the city that is bringing together unlikely allies and that has the potential to turn into a more broadly based mobilization against one of the most pernicious examples of privatization. Revealing the multiple and complex effects of local-level mobilizations discloses not only neoliberalism's weaknesses but also the ability of people to see their communities as more meaningful places than merely the detritus left behind by the frenetic sprint of industry and capital around the country and around the world. As Gibson-Graham (2002:54) have written: "Globalization appears to call for one form of politics—mobilization and resistance on the global scale. But we believe there are other ways of practicing transformative politics—involving an opening to the local as a place of political creativity and innovation."

For anthropologists hoping to address poverty and public policy, we all do this work out of a commitment to work for equality and, indeed, for enfranchising marginalized people

into broadly democratic processes at all levels. We have little interest in simply documenting or analyzing the conditions confronting poor people. Nor can we find satisfaction with an illusion that some benevolent policymakers will be so moved or enlightened by our work that they will "do the right thing," whatever that might mean. How, though, can our work begin to be helpful in overcoming some of the obstacles to effective mobilizations as described above? What we are advocating is a decolonized anthropology (Harrison 1991) that takes seriously the potential political implications coming out of our work and that sees the people we work with and ourselves as well as emergent policymakers who, given a broader scope for action and a widening of the political possibilities available to us, might work to bring about the kinds of broader legislative remedies that inspired a fluorescence of neighborhood activism as recently as the 1970s and 1980s.

An effective politically engaged ethnography, therefore, must account for those multifaceted effects of neoliberalism, both at the level of the local and at the level of the nation-state. Just as neoliberalism and globalization affect groups of people both materially and discursively, so must an activist ethnography operate in both domains as well. Through our work, we have come to believe that an anthropological engagement which simply documents the structural impacts of policies and practices is not in and of itself sufficient for crafting challenges to systemic inequities. Rather, to both understand and to work against neoliberalism, it is imperative to also engage with community members in exploring the subject-making effects of dominant discourses and to unmask how such discourses produce particular ways of thinking about and acting in the world that then come to seem inevitable and beyond the power of human intervention. In short, what we are proposing is a dialogical ethnographic encounter with a focus on denaturalizing assumptions about both globalization and neoliberalism in an effort to expand the parameters of both what is imagin-

able and what is doable in response to social and economic restructuring. To accomplish this, we believe that it is essential for engaged anthropologists to both develop close, collaborative relationships with the people with whom we are doing ethnographic work and to engage in critical dialogues with those same people about the incompleteness of the neoliberal project (Clarke 2003).

By documenting ethnographically the local effects of state action, we can work with community activists to develop new ways of thinking and acting that might make possible new strategies of resistance aimed at a transformation of the neoliberal state and at challenging the hegemony of the neoliberal imaginary. What Putnam and others have characterized as a recent decline in social engagement in civil society can be understood as a reasonable response to a world in which it appears that individualism and market-based strategies are the only reasonable possibilities for action. In order for new possibilities for collective mobilizations to emerge, we must challenge those common sense understandings about what is reasonable and feasible through our ethnographic encounters (see, for example, Lyon-Callo 2001). Again, what we are calling for is an "ethnography from below" in which our ethnographic insights about how state-level transformations have constrained the ability to carry out grassroots campaigns at the local level are used as a starting point for engaging in dialogue with interested community members. Such work demands a long-term ethnographic relationship through which community members begin to see the ethnographer as a colleague working in collaboration with them rather than some expert who is going to do a study and provide "answers." What we are suggesting is that "the answer" lies in doing work in such a way that we promote more democratic grassroots activism through our work.

To us, ethnography is only worth doing if we think that such a change is possible and that we might be able to help

facilitate such transformations through our work. Such transformations are only possible, however, if we engage in critical, dialogical discussions and debates with the people we encounter in our fieldwork, rather than only documenting the realities that hamper their best efforts and serve to narrow the political possibilities for bringing about real structural change in the nature of the neoliberal state. Many community activists clearly understand neoliberalism and its effects, but cannot figure out ways to escape it. Perhaps through engaging these activists in critically reflecting upon both their practices and the constraints they face, engaged ethnographers just might be able to contribute to creating a space for the realization of new policies, new subject positions, and for the emergence of new political possibilities beyond what the global economy and its neoliberal rationalizations have set for us.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank Jack Rollwagen for encouraging us to edit this special issue of *URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY* and the anonymous reviewers who helped us to strengthen our arguments. The ideas for this article were first presented at the session, "Critical Anthropologies of North America: Negotiating Politics, Place and Policy," which was organized by Sandi Morgen and was held at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans in November 2002. We thank Sandi for inviting us to participate in that session and are also grateful to the discussant, Karen Brodtkin, who provided us with feedback that spurred us onward at an early stage of this writing. And, as with any collaborative venture, we thank one another for sharing intellectual and political commitments that date back to our days as members of the same graduate school cohort, and that have continued to sustain us into the present.

NOTES

- 1 A number of undergraduate and graduate students at Western Michigan University, including Brooke Smith, Adriana Rosas, Boone Shear, Beth Pesta, Michael Robertson, Peter Lawson, and Mira Ptacin, have participated in the ethnographic work in Kalamazoo. Several of these students have been supported by Western Michigan University's College of Arts and Sciences Research and Creative Activities Awards Program.

REFERENCES CITED

- Abu-Lughod, Janet (1999). *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America's Global Cities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Boyte, Harry (1980). *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Burroughs, Byron, and John Helyar (1990). *Barbarians at the Gate: The Fall of RJR Nabisco*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Clarke, John (2003). *Unfinished Business: Neo-liberalism and Welfare Reform*. Unpublished paper presented at the 2003 meeting of the Canadian Anthropological Society / Society for Anthropology of North America Conference, May 9, Halifax, Canada.
- DeMartino, George (2000). *Global Economy, Global Justice: Theoretical Objections and Policy Alternatives to Neoliberalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Escobar, Arturo (2001). *Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Globalization*. *Political Geography* 20(1): 39-74.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. (1996). *Querying Globalization*. *Rethinking Marxism* 9(1): 1-27.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2002). *Beyond Global vs. Local: Economic Politics Outside the Binary Frame*. **IN** *Geographies of Power: Placing Scale*, A. Herod and M. Wright (eds.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 25-60.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2003). *An Ethics of the Local*. *Rethinking Marxism* 15(1): 49-74.
- Goode, Judith, and Jeff Maskovsky (2001). *Introduction*. **IN** *The New Poverty Studies: The Ethnography of Power, Politics and Impoverished People in the United States*, J. Goode and J Maskovsky (eds.). New York: New York University Press, pp. 1-34

- Harrison, Faye V. (1991). Anthropology as an Agent of Transformation: Introductory Comments and Queries. *IN* Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology for Liberation, F. Harrison (ed.). Washington, DC: Association of Black Anthropologists/American Anthropological Association, pp. 1-14.
- Hyatt, Susan Brin (2001). From Citizen to Volunteer: Neoliberal Governance and the Erasure of Poverty. *IN* The New Poverty Studies: The Ethnography of Power, Politics and Impoverished People in the United States, J. Goode and J Maskovsky (eds.). New York: New York University Press, pp. 201-235.
- Lyon-Callo, Vincent (2000). Medicalizing Homelessness: The Production of Self-Blame and Self-Governing within Homeless Shelters. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 14(3): 328-45.
- Lyon-Callo, Vincent (2001). Homelessness, Employment, and Structural Violence: Exploring Constraints on Collective Mobilizations against Systemic Inequality. *IN* The New Poverty Studies: The Ethnography of Power, Politics and Impoverished People in the United States, J. Goode and J Maskovsky (eds). New York: New York University Press, pp. 293-318.
- Marcus, George E. 1998. Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *IN* his Ethnography Through Thick and Thin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 79-104.
- Maskovsky, Jeff (2001a). Afterward: Beyond the Privatist Consensus. *IN* The New Poverty Studies: The Ethnography of Power, Politics and Impoverished People in the United States, J. Goode and J Maskovsky (eds). New York: New York University Press, pp. 470-482.
- Maskovsky, Jeff (2001b). The Other War at Home: The Geopolitics of U.S. Poverty. *Urban Anthropology* 30 (2-3): 215-238.
- Medoff, Peter, and Holly Sklar (1994). *Streets of Hope: The Fall and Rise of an Urban Neighborhood*. Boston: South End Press.
- National Commission on Civic Renewal (1998). *A Nation of Spectators: How Civic Disengagement Weakens America and What We Can Do About It*. College Park, MD: National Commission on Civic Renewal.
- Putnam, Robert D. (1995). Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, December 1995: 664-683.
- Ruccio, David (2003). Globalization and Imperialism. *Rethinking Marxism* 15(1): 75-94.
- Shear, Boone W., and Benjamin N. Reames (2002). Sleepy Cities and Social Capital: How Local Institutions Prevent Political Activism in

Kalamazoo. Unpublished paper presented at 2002 Small Cities Conference, Muncie, Indiana.

Stiglitz, Joseph (2002). *Globalization and its Discontents*. New York. WW Norton & Company.