



Autonomy in action in Montreal

from the Autonomous social centre to Building 7

Anna Kruzynski

The Subversion of Politics : Les mouvements sociaux autonomes contemporains

7-8 April 2017

Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)

Territorial acknowledgment:

UQAM sits upon the unceded territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka. These lands and waters continue to serve as a site of meeting and exchange amongst nations. I recognize and respect the Kanien'kehá:ka as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we gather today (Wahéshon, 2016).

IMPORTANT: this conference presentation will be published...

- In FRENCH: Kruzynski, Anna (sous presse). *L'autonomie collective en action: du Centre Social Autogéré de Pointe-Saint-Charles au Bâtiment 7, Nouvelles pratiques sociales.*
- In ENGLISH: Kruzynski, Anna (accepted). *Autonomy in action in Montreal: From the Autonomous Social Center to Building 7*, in Francis-Dupuis-Déri & Marcos Ancelovici, *The Subversion of Politics: Autonomous Social Movements Today*. PM Press.

Keep in touch: www.concordia.ca/CED



Emerged during/from episodes of eros effect

The eros effect “is crystalized in the sudden and synchronous international emergence of hundreds of thousands of people who occupy public space and call for a completely different political reality”, based on “their common belief in new values”, oftentimes in several places, at the same time.

- Katsiaficas, George (2011). *Eros and Revolution*. Presentation at the *Critical Refusals Conference* of the International Herbert Marcuse Society, Philadelphia, p. 1.

The SC emerged out of two episodes of the eros effect as defined by Katsiaficas...



- In 2001, here in Québec, activists from all stripes were flocking to and organizing anti-war protests, as well as anti-free trade actions.
- The Quebec City 2001 protests against the FTAA is the emblematic moment of that episode of the eros effect.

In the wake of the Arab Spring and Occupy Movements of 2011 and beyond



In 2012, in the wake of Occupy, the city was the siege of massive student revolt.

- A general strike disrupted the everyday in Universities, Colleges and even some high-schools.
- There were actions every day, from nightly snake marches, to blockades of the port and attacks on symbols of capitalist greed.
- A bill was adopted to contain protest and police repression increased dramatically thereafter.

These moments of Eros were the training ground for many activists who chose to channel our “hate (...) vis-à-vis external forces” (citing Jung) and pour our “human solidarity and love of freedom” (citing Marcuse) into the Autonomous Social Center (ASC) of Point St. Charles.

- Katsiaficas, George (2001). *The Necessity of Autonomy, New Political Science*, 23:4, 547-555.



- These Eros episodes were the training ground for many activists, myself included.
- We chose to channel our “hate vis-à-vis external forces” and to pour our “human solidarity and love of freedom” into the Social Center of Point St. Charles.
- Point St. Charles is a working-class neighbourhood in Montreal that has been struggling with massive gentrification.
- In 2007, my Bookchin-inspired anarchist collective, La Pointe libertaire, put out a call to squat a vacant industrial building.
- We were directly inspired by the Social Center movement in Rome.
- I will begin with a short chronological story of the Social center.
- Then, I will explore the political, cultural and economic practices that were enacted by the SC
- Given time constraints, I can’t go into too much detail. I invite you to ask questions during the Q&A... and to read the chapter that will be published following this event...
- The story of the SC has 4 phases.

Phase 1: the squat

2007-2009



- We organised a public assembly in 2007 which led to the squat of an abandoned candle factory in 2009
- Prior to that and building up to the squat, for 2 years, we organised activities in our neighbourhood
- We mobilised hundreds of people who participated in bike repair workshops, open-air film screenings, dumpster-diving and food transformation, poetry readings and concerts.



- On May 29th 2009, 500 people participated in the demonstration that enabled the opening of the squat,
- The squat was officially supported by 70 organisations across Quebec.
- Within 24 hours, we had set-up a kitchen, toilets, dormitories and a stage.



- Just before the opening concert, the police force, snipers and all, evicted us *manu-militari*.

Phase 2: peoples' expropriation of Building 7

2009-2012



- After the eviction, we joined forces with grassroots community groups and more mainstream cultural organisations to form the Collectif 7 à nous...
- We ran a campaign to expropriate a 90,000 square foot industrial building on the CN rail yards, from capitalist developer Vincent Chiara (Mach Group).
- In the end, Chiara was forced to donate Building 7 to us, decontaminated along with \$1 million for renovations.



This peoples' victory was the result of a combination of factors:

- the outrage in the neighbourhood at the sale of the CN rail yards for \$1 and
- the convergence of a diversity of actors, able and willing to engage in a diversity of tactics, but who shared a common goal... from negotiations, to symbolic actions, to more confrontational direct action.



Phase 3: holding down the fort while waiting for the keys

2012-2016

- From 2012 until the end of 2016, the *Collectif 7 à nous* valiantly held down the fort during the long and tedious negotiations involved in the transferring of the property.



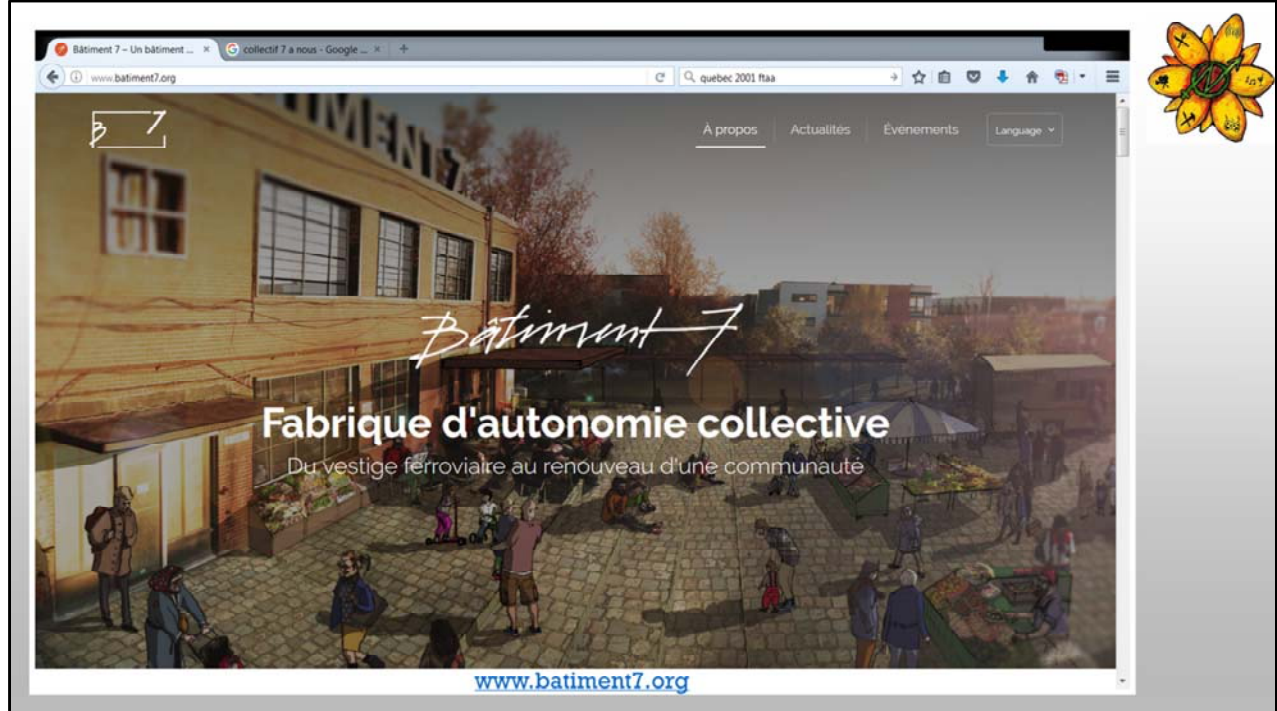
- During this time, most activists involved in the SC became disillusioned, bored or simply fed up, and therefore pulled back.
- In 2013 it was decided to put the SC on hold until we had the keys to the Building.
- A few anti-authoritarians from the inner circle remained involved in the *Collectif 7 à nous*.
- During this phase, architectural plans were drawn up, investments were sought out, a documentary film was made and the property transfer was negotiated.



Phase 4: manufacturing collective autonomy

2016-present

- Winter 2017, \$3 million have been scrounged up and renovations have begun!



- 150 people show up to a general assembly and the excitement is palpable: they all want to be part of this historic moment: the manufacturing of collective autonomy in a space of our own, Building 7.
- In the wake of this, the SC emerges from hibernation.
- Incredibly, three “autonomous” projects carried by anti-authoritarians are at the heart of the first stage of development of Building 7: the grocery store/café Le Detour; the brew-pub Les Sans-Tavernes and the (non-mixt women-only) artistic foundry Coop La Coulée.
- Not to mention the 12,000 square feet of collaborative spaces (bike, auto, wood shops, office spaces, an tool share) and “the commons”, namely a multi-function space, meeting rooms, a kitchen, showers and storage space.
- But that part of the story is still to come
- I am now going to explore the ways in which the SC enacted subversive political, cultural and economic practices...

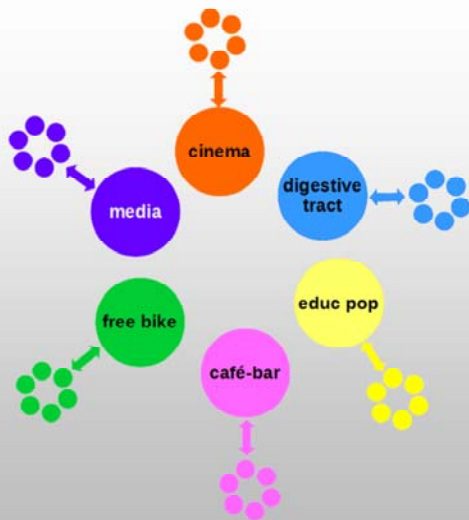


Political processes

« une philosophie organisationnelle basée sur la décentralisation et l'autonomie; c'est-à-dire, la démocratie directe, l'autogestion, l'auto-organisation, reposant sur la responsabilité individuelle et collective »

-Principes du Centre social autogéré

- The SC, true to contemporary autonomous movements elsewhere, has at its core a strong critique of liberal democracy and a political practice based on collective autonomy.

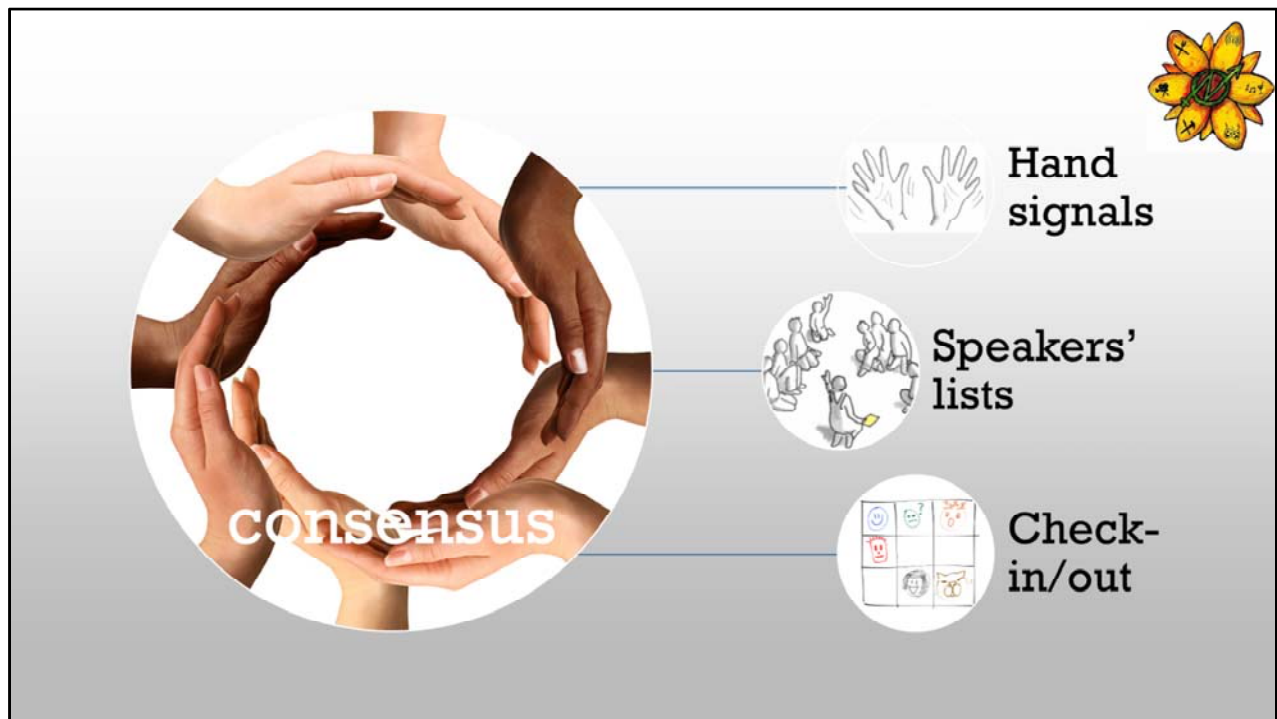


SPOKESCOUNCIL



GENERAL ASSEMBLY

- The organisational structure is decentralised and horizontal.
- It shifts over time, depending on the needs of the moment.
- At times we used the spokescouncil model, at others, the general assembly.



- Like the autonomous movements described by Katsiaficas and many contemporary scholars, whatever the organisational structure of the moment, decisions are made by consensus and internal mechanisms are put in place to manage power dynamics.



Cultural processes

« Nous avons besoin de gens motivés, polyvalents, qui en ont marre d'interagir dans une société patriarcale, capitaliste, raciste et avide de biens matériels. Nous voulons des relations sociales riches, égalitaires, qui nous permettent de remplir à la fois nos besoins vitaux de base et nos désirs d'amour, d'amitié, de culture et d'art »

- Silvestro, Marco (2012). Le Centre social autogéré: une histoire d'expropriation populaire, In *Au cœur de la résistance*, QPIRG Concordia's Working Groups Journal, p.28-29

- Next, as feminists have shown the world over, horizontal structures and facilitation mechanisms are necessary but not sufficient to enable the emergence of non-authoritarian social relations and new subjectivities
- In line with this, at the SC, we experimented with educational, media and kinship institutional arrangements to foster the development of ways of being, thinking and doing that were compatible with anti-authoritarian values.

education

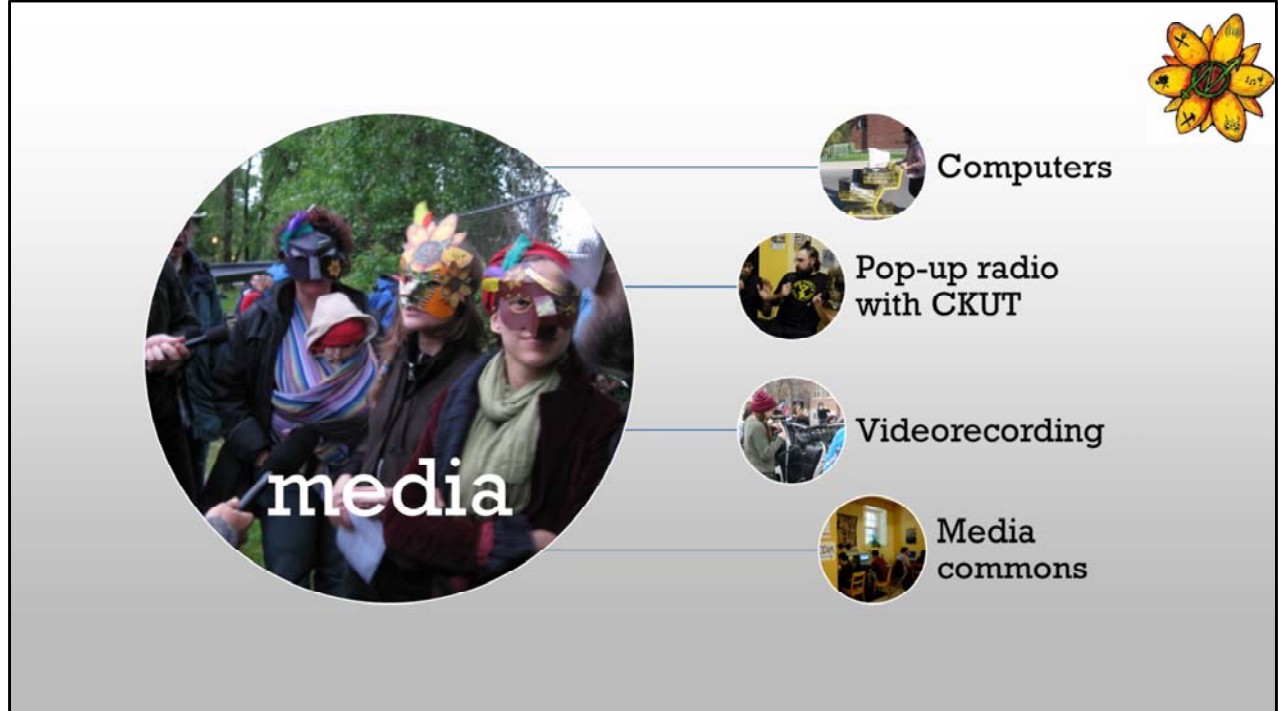
Politics of the G20

Squats elsewhere

DIY candle making

Accompagnement & task rotation

- Both Sitrin and Zibechi stress the centrality of *formation* to movement strength and longevity.
- Self-education was at the heart of the work of the SC.
- We conducted many formal training sessions, but also had in place a number of mechanisms for knowledge/skill sharing



- Autonomous movements the world over are critical of mass media and put lots of effort into self-representation, into being-our-own-media. The SC is no exception.
- Medias libres acquired equipment needed to produce our own media
- They also set-up pop-radio at different events, and a media commons space for people to use
- There were always media activists with a camera to document what we were doing, to prepare videos that were then posted on the web and used to explain our actions to the public, but also to mainstream media. In doing this, we were subverting media... we were controlling the message, and refusing to engage in the media game that most often misrepresents autonomous movements
- For the actual squat, within our media committee we gave each other pointers on how to keep control of the interview with mainstream media... and we were masked, inspired by the Zapatistas... we had funny pseudonyms... all this in order to make clear that this action was collective and horizontal... with no boss!



The personal is political in the SC, and efforts are made to create safe(r) spaces that are welcoming, respectful of difference and accessible for all.

- We eat together, we take care of the kids, we talk about our personal lives, we fall in love, we hurt each other, we disagree, we party.
- We try to be in tune with each other's needs and desires.
- We build a sense of belonging: a group of friends, roommates, an affinity group, a crew, an intentional family.
- The SC is built on relations of trust, attention and mutual responsibility, or, as Marina Sitrin calls it, *politica affectiva*.
- This is about making visible these cultural processes that are being enacted in the here-and-now and that contribute to the expansion of kinship relations that break with patriarchal norms.



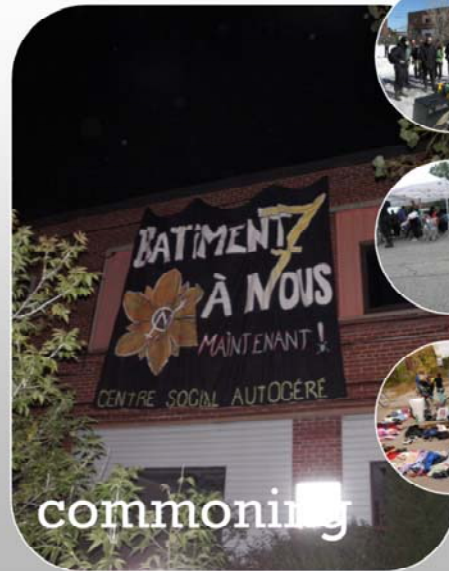
Economic processes

« Nous proposons (...) de concevoir un système économique qui nous 'contraigne' à être libres, qui n'offre pas d'autre alternative que la marche vers la liberté »

- CSA – Marcel et Pascal (18 novembre 2011). *Maintenir et consolider notre culture antiautoritaire (boussole éthique) : en lien avec les impacts du financement de l'État, trouver des mécanismes pour éviter le dérapage*. Document de travail préliminaire, p. 6

- For the SC, collective autonomy is also about emancipatory economic activities, processes that are intertwined with the culture and politics.
- In order to help us understand the economic processes, I am using the community economies framework developed by feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham. I will come back to this at the end of my presentation.
- Suffice it to say that they identify 5 coordinates that are subject to ethical deliberation in community economies; we will explore 4 of these now – property, work, transactions and finance.

1. Taking back property



Sugaring off



BBQ



Public market

- First, in a community economy, enclosed or unmanaged property, irrespective of its legal status, can be commoned.
- So instead of framing commons as a “thing” associated to public or open access property Gibson-Graham suggest that we think about the commons as a process.
- Commoning is at the heart of all SC activities.
- As I mentioned earlier, the SC squatted a factory destined to be transformed into a wall of condos, and, over the years, organized many mini-squats on the grounds of Building 7: sugaring off, a BBQ, a public market, to name a few.
- In doing this, the SC **resisted enclosure** by opening up spaces of autonomy in an unpredictable manner, and in doing so built up a counter-power vis-à-vis both the capitalist developer and municipal authorities.

Commons-community... learning to be affected



- With time, our neighbours came to feel « at home » at Building 7.
- Through these moments of collective appropriation of property, following Bruno Latour, people were “learning to be affected”, a process that is essential to the emergence of a “commons-community”
- We organised many assemblies, charrettes and other forms of popular consultation; in doing so, spaces of ethical deliberation were created in which **access and use** for Building 7 were discussed and agreed upon.
- At the heart of these discussions was the preoccupation that the **benefits** of use be distributed in ways that took into account the wellbeing of all neighbourhood residents, but also the environment.
- Also, the commons-community did not wait until the property was officially transferred to the Collectif 7 à nous to engage in **care** for Building 7. For example, when we noticed that Building 7 was deteriorating, the Collectif 7 à nous organized the “Operation Cadeau”. The commons-community was called upon to come help “wrap-up” the building to protect it from the coming winter hazards.

2. Taking back work...



+



...surviving well



- Second, in a community economy we take ethical action by acknowledging how our survival is connected with other people and the environment.
- It is about creating the conditions to experiment and value different forms of labour and achieving a balance that feeds personal well-being without hindering planetary well-being or the well-being of other people.

As a space of “solidarity and mutual aid”, the ASC is about the “construction of relations that aim to abolish exploitation in all its forms (human-human, human-nature, other?)”

CSA – Leila, Nicolas (x2), Pascal et Marie-Eve (non daté). *Explorer les possibilités quant à l'application de processus économiques alternatifs*. Document de travail préliminaire, p. 6.



but what about...

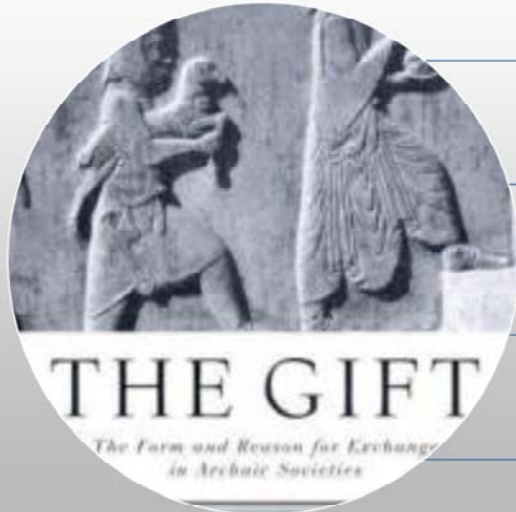


- Within the SC, there is an explicit critique of the capitalist practice of wage labour.
- Instead, we value **household tasks** that are oftentimes hidden from view and make a conscious effort to engage in a **non-capitalist forms** of labour, namely volunteering and self-provisioning.
- But we also consider the fact that for some, it is easier to engage in unpaid labour, because of greater material wellbeing... Some are forced to work many hours for low-pay and have less time to put on this.



- So we discuss what types of practices we can put into place so that people with less financial resources can make some money within the SC or be paid in-kind, while others volunteer.
- There is also a conscious effort to share/rotate tasks that are oftentimes taken on by women, namely cleaning, cooking and childcare.
- Without a doubt, the socialisation of housework enabled women to free up time to take on interesting and visible tasks that are most often executed by men.

3. Taking back transactions... encountering others



Voluntary
contributions



Dumpster
diving



Agreements
with
merchants



Generosity
of allies

- Third, in order to take back transactions, Gibson-Graham encourage us to experiment and expand the diverse ways of transacting goods and services that break with capitalist markets.
- They make visible a diversity of types of transactions that are more direct; in which there is less distance between the consumer and the producer.
- In keeping with this, from its inception, most of the SC's transactions are gift-based
- People who attend events are encouraged to contribute what they can in the form of voluntary contributions
- We get most of the supplies for the meals we make from local merchants and by dumpster diving public markets
- We have also established protocols with allied organisations who share/gift their means of production with us, enabling us to DIY instead of renting/buying what we need on capitalist markets: this includes access to silk screening & button making machines, color copiers, industrial kitchens, to name a few.

And as we move forward...



Reciprocal transactions: « Une monnaie alternative peut-elle jouer le rôle d'outil d'échange au sein du CSA? »

Ethical markets: « peut-on imaginer la mise sur pied d'une fédération de coop autogérées? (...) Concrètement, les achats privilégiés aux allié.es – directs (qu'on connaît) et indirects (par proximité idéologique et de valeur)? »

CSA – Leila, Nicolas (x2), Pascal et Marie-Eve, Op. cit., p. 7

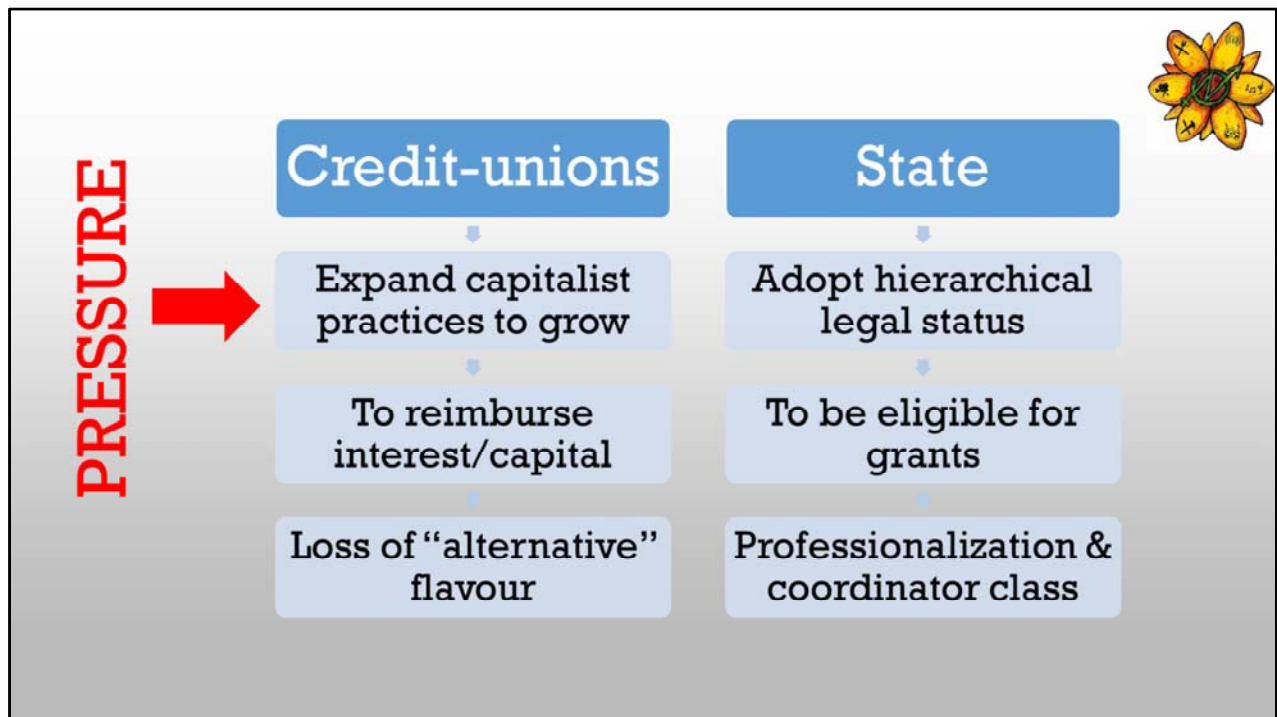
- Although these types of gift-based transactions have been flowering over the years, we are keenly aware that we cannot depend on them for the long-haul.
- As the SC projects finally set-up house in Building 7, there is a need to engage in other, more durable, forms of transactions.
- The SC is keen on developing encounters with suppliers that are reciprocal, and, when needed, to purchase on ethical markets



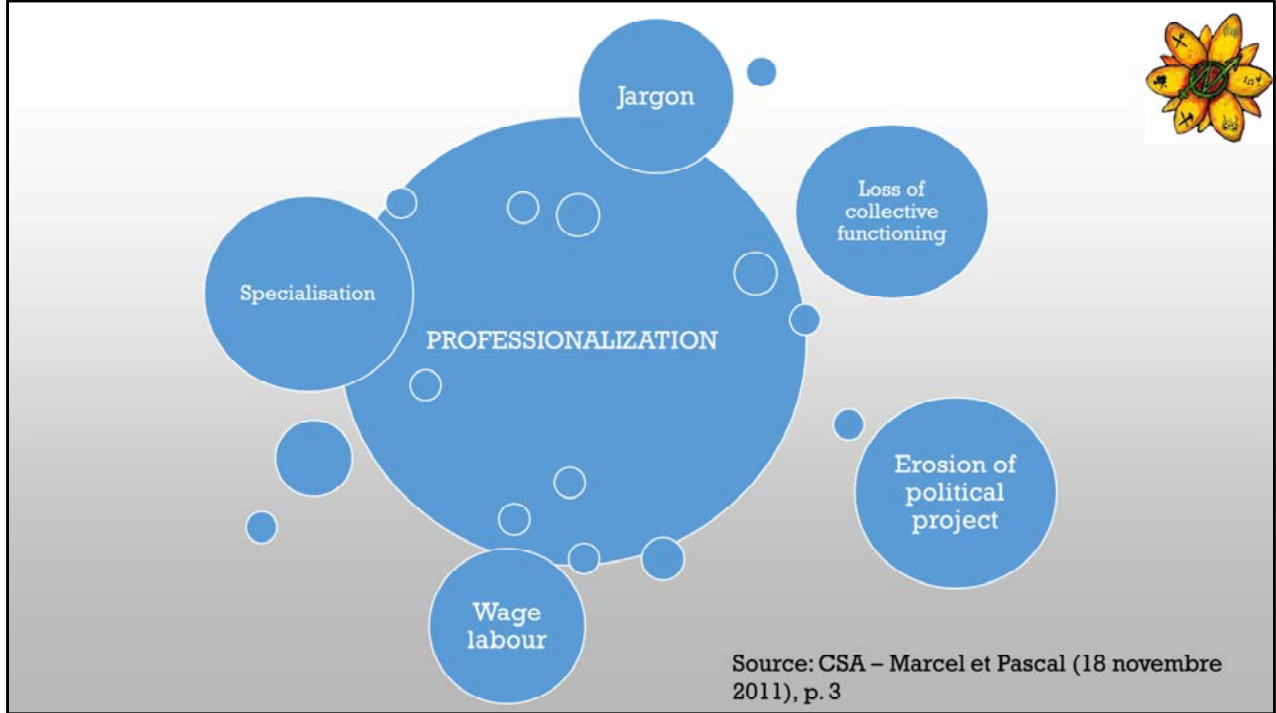
4. Taking back finance... investing in better futures...

Ethical deliberation re constraining conditions attached to investment needed to renovate Building 7 and to start-up collective enterprises...

- Fourth, following Gibson-Graham, in order to reclaim the economy, we need to reframe financial institutions and instruments.
- We need to find ways for funds to circulate that take into account individual and collective interests of humans and the planet
- Investment is an important challenge within the SC and is the subject of lively debate.



- Mainstream market investment is out of the question, but even alternative market forms of investment – from credit-unions and the state - are considered potential threats to collective autonomy.
- We discuss how loans from a credit-union end up putting pressure on organisations to engage in capitalist market practices and to grow/expand at all costs in order to be able to reimburse interest/capital... which then oftentimes leads to a loss of its alternative flavour.
- Or, in the case of state-funding, there are pressures to adopt a legal-status or hierarchical organisational form in order to be eligible for grants... which often leads to professionalization and the creation of a coordinator’s class.



The SC is not against institutionalisation per se, defined as consolidation and longevity; but against professionalization and its negative effects...

Non-market forms of investment



Monetary investments from allied organisations with more resources



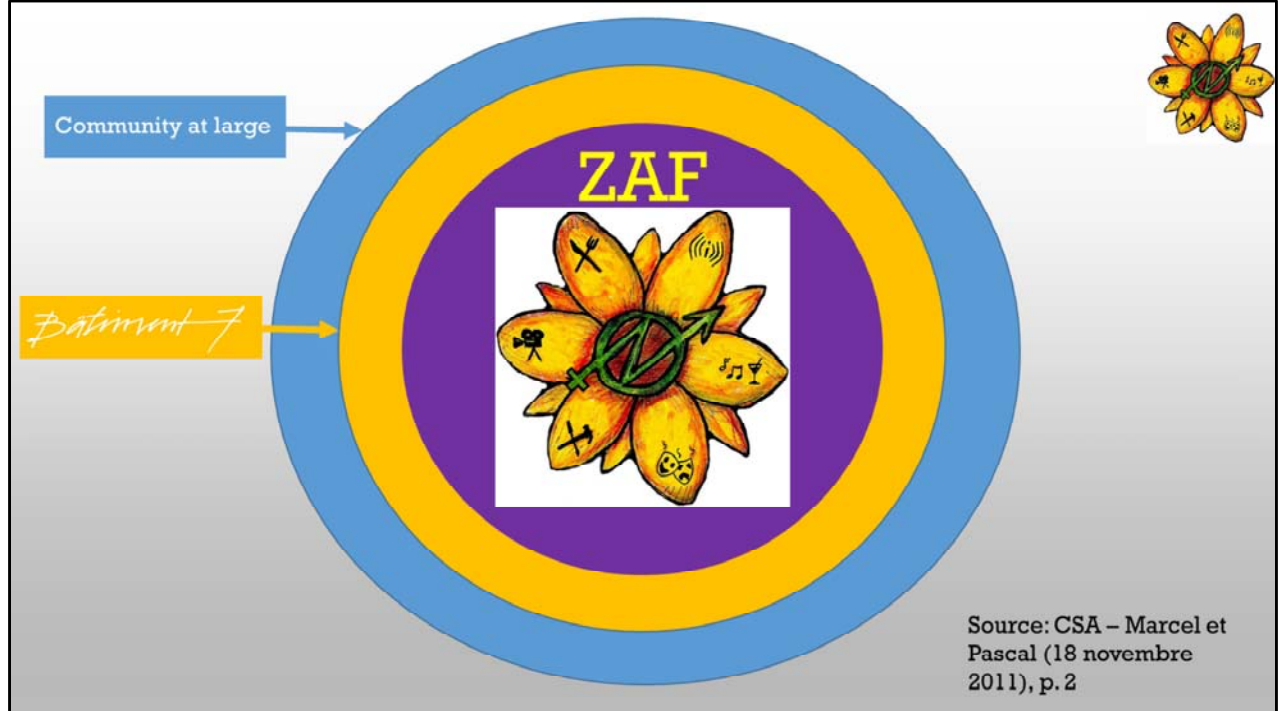
Members invest time, energy and creativity



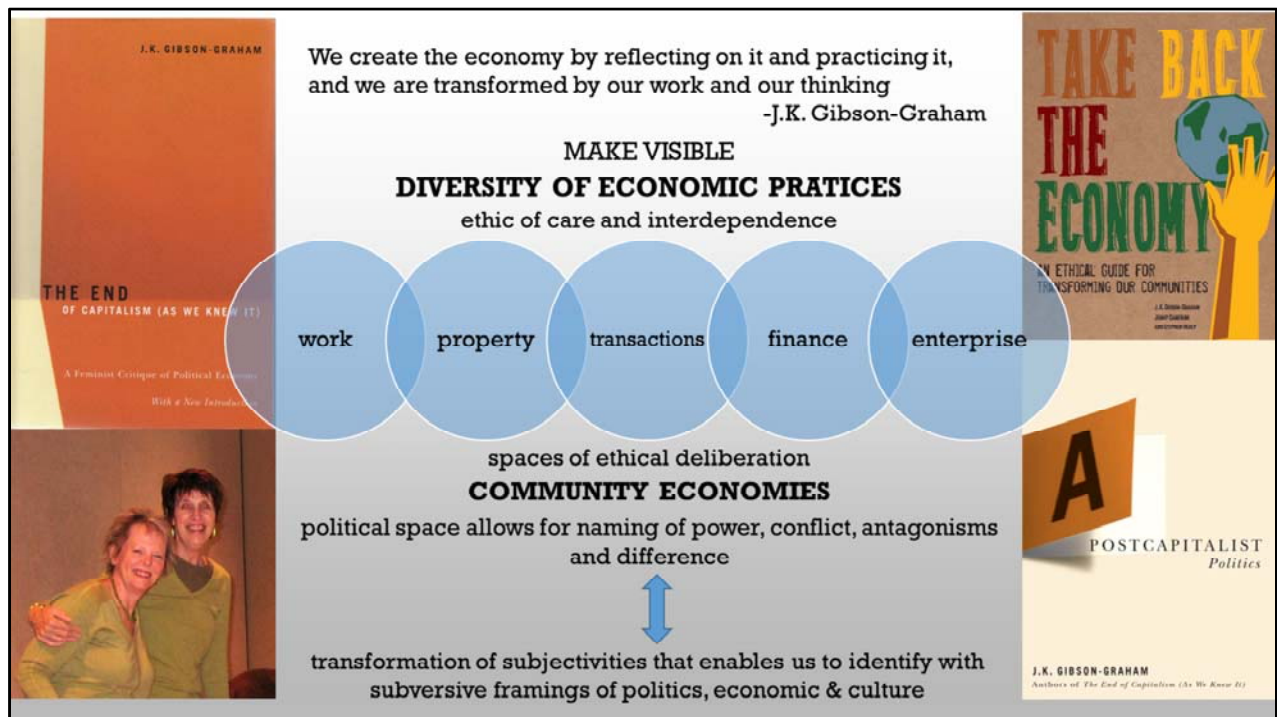
Know-how invested is accumulated and shared = re-investing in community

But we were/are keenly aware that once the time came to develop the ASC within Building 7, it would not be possible to depend solely on non-market forms of investment...

- In light of this, the SC privileges non-market forms of investment, in the form of sweat equity and donations.
- From its inception, the SC has gathered monetary investments from allied organisations, such as student associations.
- Also, members invest time, energy and creativity in the projects.
- As this know-how is invested over the years, it is accumulated and shared with others; in doing so, we are re-investing it in the community.



- But, members of the SC were keenly aware that once the time came to develop the SC within Building 7, it would not be possible to depend solely on non-market forms of investment.
- The SC thus creates tools to facilitate ethical debates on the matter.
- The SC is conceptualised as a zone of financial autonomy – a zone open to the rest of Building 7 and the wider community, but at the same time protected from outside forces that can push the SC off course...



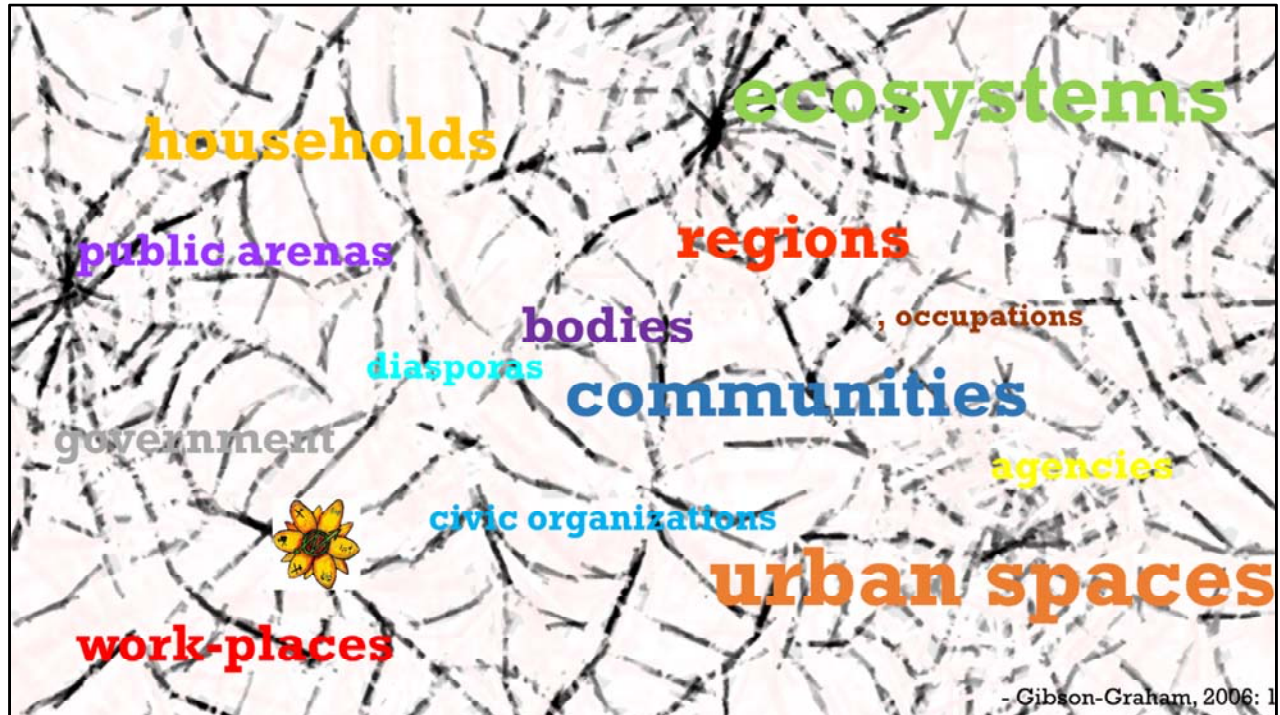
- Following Gibson-Graham, we create the economy by reflecting on it and practicing it, and we are transformed by our work and our thinking.
- They offer us a language that helps us make visible the **diversity of economic practices** that exist in the here and now and that are based on an ethic of care and interdependence.
- They offer us the concept of **community economies** to refer to that space of ethical deliberation around five coordinates – work, property, transactions, finance and enterprise.
- This space is coherent with Chantal Mouffe’s understanding of radical and plural democracy; a political space that allows for the naming of power, conflict, antagonisms and difference.
- All of these are elements that are inherent to human relations, yet undecidable.
- And through that process, a transformation of subjectivities occurs, that enables us to identify with subversive framings of politics, economics and culture.
- And that enables us to act accordingly.

Preguntando caminamos

- Asking we walk



- In this type of revolution, there is no master plan, no grand narrative, no before, no after.
- It is revolution as process. It is the Zapatistas' "asking we walk".



- And, importantly, what is happening within the SC and Building 7 is happening simultaneously across the planet.
- Gibson-Graham refer to a ubiquitous process that ties **“a vast set of disarticulated ‘places’ (...) without a common platform, without a formal federative structure, into a web of signification** (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 18).

“as the present world system crashes down amidst us in the next 50 years, we must have a substantive alternative to offer that is a collective creation. In my view, autonomy is that collective creation, and we should study its already existent forms and seek to apply them to our own situation”



- Katsiaficas, 2001, p. 555

- Katsiaficas writes: “as the present world system crashes down amidst us in the next 50 years, we must have a substantive alternative to offer that is a collective creation. In my view, autonomy is that collective creation, and we should study its already existent forms and seek to apply them to our own situation” (2001, p. 555).
- This is exactly what the Community economies research network seeks to do, following in Gibson-Graham’s tracks, as myself and other engaged-researchers engage in **thick description of the diversity of economic** – and I would add political and cultural – practices that already exist, oftentimes invisible to the untrained eye.