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Mapping Solidarity in the Economy in the United States

*Maliha Safri
Drew University
United States of America*

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Abstract

This paper includes the results of five years of National Science Foundation-funded research on three different cities in the US, to contribute towards metropolitan-level methods of analyzing the social solidarity economy (SSE). An interdisciplinary collaborative research team for which I was principal investigator constructed a national US database of multiple SSE entities such as cooperatives, land trusts, credit unions, etc., and generated a more detailed spatial database in New York City, Philadelphia, and Worcester, MA. The database allowed us to see patterns and differences across central domains of the economy that are structured around solidarity. The research thus aims to contribute to the constitution of the SSE as a new object of research for the US context, since such collective identification is just emerging in the US, and to a better understanding of the challenges of economic solidarity in deeply divided societies. One primary research aim is to examine what new perspectives on the US emerge when diverse SSE initiatives are studied together rather than in isolation from one another. Methodologically, we drew on a combination of geospatial analytical, quantitative, and qualitative methods as well as map-based visualization to outline the economic and social landscapes of solidarity. We make a three-fold argument: 1. In aggregate, the SSE has a significant spatial footprint and economic impact in the US. 2. Racial and class divisions manifest differently across sectors of the SSE 3. SSE initiatives have the potential to overcome/transform divisions.

Keywords

Social solidarity economy, urban studies, mapping, race

Bio

Maliha Safri is associate professor and chair of the economics department at Drew University in Madison NJ. Her published work is in the field of political economy and has appeared in *Signs*, *Antipode*, *Geoforum*, *Organization*, *The Middle East Journal*, and many edited book collections, including *Making Other Worlds Possible*; and *Knowledge, Class, and Economics*. Recent research focusing on the economic geography of social and solidarity economies was supported with a set of collaborative National Science Foundation grants. Maliha has also volunteered in the domain of economic literacy for 18 years with community-based organizations, worker centers, and labor organizations and unions.

Introduction

With dominant approaches to the economy focusing almost exclusively on capitalist firms and markets—thus adopting what Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) call a “capitalocentric” approach—the rich variety of nonconforming economic forms and practices are rendered invisible as credible alternative sources of economic development. Given the larger problem of their relative invisibility within dominant frameworks, it comes as no surprise that enhancing the visibility of the SSE generally and of individual SSE practices in particular has been a central concern of SSE movement-builders. If dominant paradigms render them invisible, the corresponding challenge is to make it possible to see them as alternatives, both in their particularities and as being-in-common-with other practices that fall under similar axioms or principles (Gibson-Graham 2006).

Seeing a diverse bag of processes, actors, and class configurations as having something in common requires a discursive move of distance from singularity, or the qualities that mark each as separate and distinct; enough distance that diversity could be quite literally added up, or aggregated. For example, different kinds of cooperatives, participatory budgeting districts, consumer or lending circles or banks, all of these are in fact particular and subscribe to diverse commitments including equality, shared and sustainable prosperity, ecological conservation, and promoting dignified livelihoods. This is where we can see the importance of axioms, or something as concrete as sustainable development goals (SDGs) as precisely that which binds that diversity together under a common signifier (something we later analyze with the help of the concept of ‘empty signifier’). SSE initiatives are explicitly devoted to particular principles: equity across race and class lines, prosperity that is ecologically and socially sustainable, democratic and inclusive participation that is suffused across governance, production, and consumption, etc. This is inherently fractured though, since each institution or set of actors may have varying political commitments (for instance to the environment, but not necessarily explicitly to the SSE).

At the same time as we seek to look at the SSE as a whole, we also sought to test whether SSE practices are a white, middle class phenomenon, as some of its critics have suggested. Critical voices have expressed concern that SSE initiatives can actually reproduce and exacerbate entrenched racial and class divisions instead of tending towards the aspirational ethical universal of equality. For instance, in many low-income communities, initiatives like artist collectives and co-ops are seen not as sources of empowerment but as harbingers of gentrification and displacement, especially when they are initiated by newcomers to the community who occupy different class or racial positions. Other initiatives, including those associated with the alternative food movement, have been criticized for creating privileged “monocultures” geared primarily towards affluent white consumers and perpetuating whitened discourses and spaces that are alienating for people of color (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Guthman 2008; Slocum 2007). Additionally, long histories of racial and class oppression have generated deep patterns of distrust in many communities that can stymie even well intentioned efforts to reach across racial and class

divides in the pursuit of economic solidarity. As one participant at the 2016 Social Solidarity Economy Forum in Detroit described, “solidarity can be a hurtful word” when declarations of support across social divisions aren’t followed up with inclusive and supportive action.

Our move is to take a step back, and ask 2 questions: 1) how large is SSE as a whole, and where are SSE initiatives located in major US cities? 2) how might SSE initiatives be marked by race and class faultlines? Mapping actually gets at both questions.

SSE movements have turned to visibility-focused efforts for multiple reasons and with a variety of approaches. One prominent policy approach has been to create public inventories of SSE entities. Gathering, enumerating, identifying and publicizing SSE entities helps to make these entities visible to one another and to the broader public. The process of inventorying has often led organically to initiatives to generate public or interactive maps of the SSE, locating entities in specific neighborhoods.

The prevalence of mapping speaks to its ontological function to not only reflect but also produce economic and social landscapes. Traditional maps assert, “This is how the world is,” and expect you to see and agree; alternative maps countermand that.¹ Participatory action research fully demonstrates the ontological power of mapping—that is, the ways maps help to make specific human landscapes real by making them visible, and the ways that participatory mapping can lead to subjective transformation (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013; Pavlovskaya 2006; Pavlovskaya and St. Martin 2007). Not being indicated within the mapped territory leads to conceptual obscurity and marginalization, whereas being on the map requires articulation in theory, policy, and practice. Participatory mapping reframes activities and allows people to see themselves as economic actors, not just acted upon or subjected to the economy. As a consequence, solidarity economy practitioners and scholars around the world are turning to mapping as a way to help constitute this economy, making it visible and including it in our social imaginary. In our work, too, we seek to put the solidarity economy of the U.S. “on the map,” constructing it ontologically and opening up a terrain for theoretical examination and political action (Safri et al. 2017).

In part 2, we map for difference, and we disaggregate the SSE by type, by race, and by class, in one of the sites (New York City) examined in our long-running collaborative project. It does no service to social and solidarity economies to deny challenges, and fractures, especially those that show divergence from stated goals such as commitment to inclusivity, pluralism, and a world that is less marked by class and racialized inequality. Disaggregating by race and class allows us to see how social solidarity economies, and all of their diverse constituents, exist in relation to the problems and contradictions of

¹ In explaining why the Boston school curriculum finally switched from the Mercator to the Galls-Peter projection in 2017, Colin Rose superintendent of public schools said aptly: “So this is about maps, but it isn’t about maps. It’s about a paradigm shift ... we’ve had a very fixed view that is very Eurocentric. How do we talk about other viewpoints...” (Johnson 2017). We wonder how such a paradigm shift could apply to the economy, also through mapping.

racialized capitalism, or the ways that capitalism exacerbates racial inequalities in multiple directions. SSE and capitalist actors and spaces are articulated together in any economy, and the types of racism and class inequality that capitalism produces or exacerbates mark solidarity economies, meaning they may end up perpetuating inequalities at the same time as challenging other forms of inequality. To the point of the current project, we need to also examine whether and how SSE contribute towards sustainable development goals revolving around decent work and livelihoods, the end of poverty, ensuring that production and consumption are responsible and sustainable, and producing more green cities.

Mapping part 1: Aggregating the SSE through participatory mapping

Social movements and organizations have turned to mapping the economy for different reasons and strategies. Some groups map to reclaim the commons and make visible to all what belongs to all, for example Fallen Fruit is a worldwide participatory online map for gleaning fruit trees/orchards that are public or on public land. Other groups map to support what are called postcapitalist supply chains, or at least create the potential for such chains as in the case of Brazil or Italy above, and much more germane to our work SolidarityNYC's (a group of local NYC activists) map which was undertaken with this strategy as a goal (Safri 2015).

Mapping entails examining and enumerating cities, regions, and nations, a process that actually refers to the specific constituencies of social and solidarity economies around the world. One of the most comprehensive efforts towards mapping social and solidarity economy networks has taken place in Brazil starting in 2005, under the aegis of the Brazilian Forum on Solidarity Economy. The criteria that were used to include an entity on the solidarity map stipulated that it should have an economic nature, be constituted by more than a family, and be formed, run, and collectively managed by its workers. The map and database finally included worker-managed cooperatives dedicated to the production, commercialization and provision of goods and services, solidarity funds and community banks, cooperative networks, and organizations providing direct support to solidarity economy enterprises, such as training and technical assistance. Multiple iterations of the SSE survey have been conducted since 2002. The 2014 national Brazilian SSE census confirmed 19,708 formal and informal SSE entities and 1.42 million people engaged in the production or buying/selling of goods and services, or provision of credit (Gaiger and Grupo Ecosol 2014).

Although the Brazilian case is exceptional given the range of their mapping initiatives, they are far from alone in undertaking such efforts. SSE mapping initiatives are taking place in local and national contexts on six continents. Like the SSE more broadly, these mapping initiatives vary with context. They involve different definitions, mapping protocols, ontologies and inclusion criteria, mapping functionalities, and ways of gathering and processing information, as well as making use of different software often

written in different computing languages. For example, in contrast to Brazil, Italy has no government sponsored SSE inventory to populate the map. Instead, SSE organizations become included in the database and mapping platform through a process of validation by existing members. In Quebec, the mapping criteria are inclusive of a large variety of social economy associations that would not meet the more stringent criteria used by the Brazilians. Given such variation, it would not be incorrect to say that these initiatives are, in part at least, mapping different things in different ways, but they are all nevertheless mutually conceived as maps of the SSE.

An original national dataset of solidarity economy organizations that we put together from many sources (including several national and local datasets provided by US Department of Agriculture, the National Credit Union Association, and other local research partners) formed the backbone of the on-line interactive open map of the SSE (www.solidarityeconomy.us) we launched in the summer of 2015. See figure 1.

Figure 1: Solidarity economy map of US



The mapping platform is designed to be a user-friendly way to search for and find solidarity economy initiatives all across the country. Hence, the platform was designed for both everyday users (consumers, businesses, and organizations) and researchers. Any user can hone in to the street level to find individual organizations in a particular location. For researchers, geographic patterns across various scales can be examined for their social implications. Clusters are represented by circle icons with numbers. The color and size of the icon changes as the number of organizations contained in each cluster increases and when the scale of display changes. Individual organizations are marked with icons that represent the following types of activity: finance & exchange, food, goods & services, governance, housing, collective/community space, and education & support. However, users can search by many different criteria in the simple search box to enable them to view the map with or without those categories.

The map is intended to serve multiple functions: 1) to make visible or visualize these activities to consumers, businesses, activists, and policy-makers; 2) to contribute to the construction of supply chains in which economic actors intentionally source from one another in order to foster alternative development relations (e.g. cooperatives sourcing from one another); 3) to provide comprehensive data for researchers interested in analyzing these organizations and practices; and 4) to enable self participatory expansion of the map as SSE participants can add themselves to the network.

The guiding basis for the US map is a typology (see table 1) produced by the US Solidarity Network (USSEN) and the research team. The typology addresses important sectors of the economy structured around solidarity: production, consumption, finance, exchange, and governance (Borowiak et al. 2018). Under each category there are a number of concrete forms identified. Each sphere of activity contains forms or practices that embody in some way a shared value of solidarity. For instance participatory budgeting can be considered a distinctly different way to plan and disburse government resources, since groups of citizens directly decide democratically how to spend part of the public budget (Lerner and Secondo 2012). Each of the projects we list under exchange and finance seek to re-embed forms of distribution and finance into social relations of reciprocity, rather than pure market principles of money credit (North 2006). The category of production includes forms that both sell and do not sell the goods and services they produce, and the ones that do sell goods and services do so by organizing in self-managed collectives. In all the forms listed under consumption, the collective process is central to their consumption, and either allows members to achieve benefits they could not attain by themselves, or to intentionally place their consumption outside pure market pricing strategies (e.g., community land trusts).

Table 1: Social Solidarity Economy Typology

Consumption	Production	Finance	Exchange	Governance
Consumer cooperatives *	Worker Cooperatives*	Credit Unions*	Fair trade networks	Participatory budgeting*
Co-housing and intentional communities	Producer cooperatives	Community development credit unions*	Community supported agriculture and fisheries*	Collective community management of resources
Housing cooperatives*	Unpaid household labor	Peer lending	Complementary currencies*	
community land trusts*	Babysitting clubs*		Barter networks	
	Collectives of self-employed		Time banks	

* denotes a practice for which we either have partial or full data for NYC and Philadelphia.

Comprehensive national data on all these forms was not possible with our limited resources; we see ourselves as having begun the project at the national level, and we drilled deeper in two cities (Philadelphia and New York City) to gather more detail on as many forms as possible. In aggregate, we discovered the SE collectively has a larger spatial footprint and a more significant economic impact than one might otherwise surmise given mainstream representations of the economy.

Table 1 makes it clear, however, that social solidarity economies come in many forms. Some of these forms, such as worker cooperatives and credit unions, can be mapped once the data are acquired, while other forms are hard or impossible to map using available cartographic tools. For example, household labour, depending on context, can either express solidarity or not, and it would be virtually impossible to acquire that data for every single household. Yet other forms of solidarity economy do not have a location, such as community lending networks, time banks, and even those that do (especially network-based dynamics) are inadequately captured by their location because of the way that they draw in diverse participants from other neighborhoods. As a result, the database of solidarity economy that we have built is partial and heavily biased toward formal institutions with a precise geographic location because this is what gets counted and mapped with available technologies. Nevertheless, it allowed us to analyze selected geographies of solidarity economy and create a public internet-based platform that incorporates the segment of the solidarity economy for which we found the data (Figure 1).

As mentioned above, we are interested both in studying how the SSE can be understood as a whole and in examining the diversity within it. We draw on the work of Ernesto Laclau to comprehend the relation between the SSE as an umbrella concept, or empty signifier that sutures together diverse entities that fall underneath it. Laclau went to considerable lengths to distinguish an empty signifier from a concept whose meaning changes with context, in other words a floating signifier whose meaning is ambiguous. Empty signifiers do something else. They subvert signification by privileging the dimension of equivalence; they do not signify any one concrete thing but rather draw disparate elements together as equivalents despite the lack of any one common characteristic. Each sign is different from all others, but the logic of equivalence makes it possible to see signs as part of the same system or chain of meaning.

Since the topography of meaning is uneven, some signifiers rise in social importance vis-à-vis others and anchor the social field (Laclau 1996: 43). For example, “Democracy” became a key signifier in the mid-nineteenth century, cascading a series of entailments attached to politics, the nation-state, majorities and minorities, and so on. It became a banner under which many social movements and political processes could find themselves. In this respect, “Democracy” constitutes what Laclau calls an “empty signifier” or “nodal point.”

A nodal point is different from other signifiers in that it quilts meaning for all the other signifiers that gather in immediate connection. It is a privileged element that gathers together differential elements and binds them into distinct discursive formations. The term must be malleable enough to assume new meanings in new chains of signification; the empty signifier/nodal point is significant precisely because the chain of signification can never be definitively closed. It is for this reason that describing a signifier as 'empty' is not to posit its meaninglessness; on the contrary, meaning condenses in knots and clusters around this term through the logics of difference and equivalence (Özselçuk

2009). Its malleability constitutes the site of politics as different actors vie to shape the empty signifier’s meaning.

Returning now to the SSE, a concept that is already being embraced across the world, we find that something analogous to the process of suturing difference above. The SSE, at least in some cases, serves as a nodal point under which diverse economic practices and movements are being linked together. As Miller writes, “the name itself functions as an empty signifier, filled only with the partial and always contested positivity that is granted by the ongoing processes of articulation by and among the initiatives themselves” (Miller 2013: 528). In that contested process of articulation of defining something as elusive as “solidarity”, we can see the interplay of difference and equivalence. The logic of equivalence makes it possible to see different parts of the same system of meaning to be identified as constituents of the social or solidarity economy. In contrast, a logic of difference makes it possible to differentiate, to mark as separate. In the next section, we focus on difference, particularly as we disaggregate different forms to see their class and racialized characteristics.

Mapping part 2: Race and Class

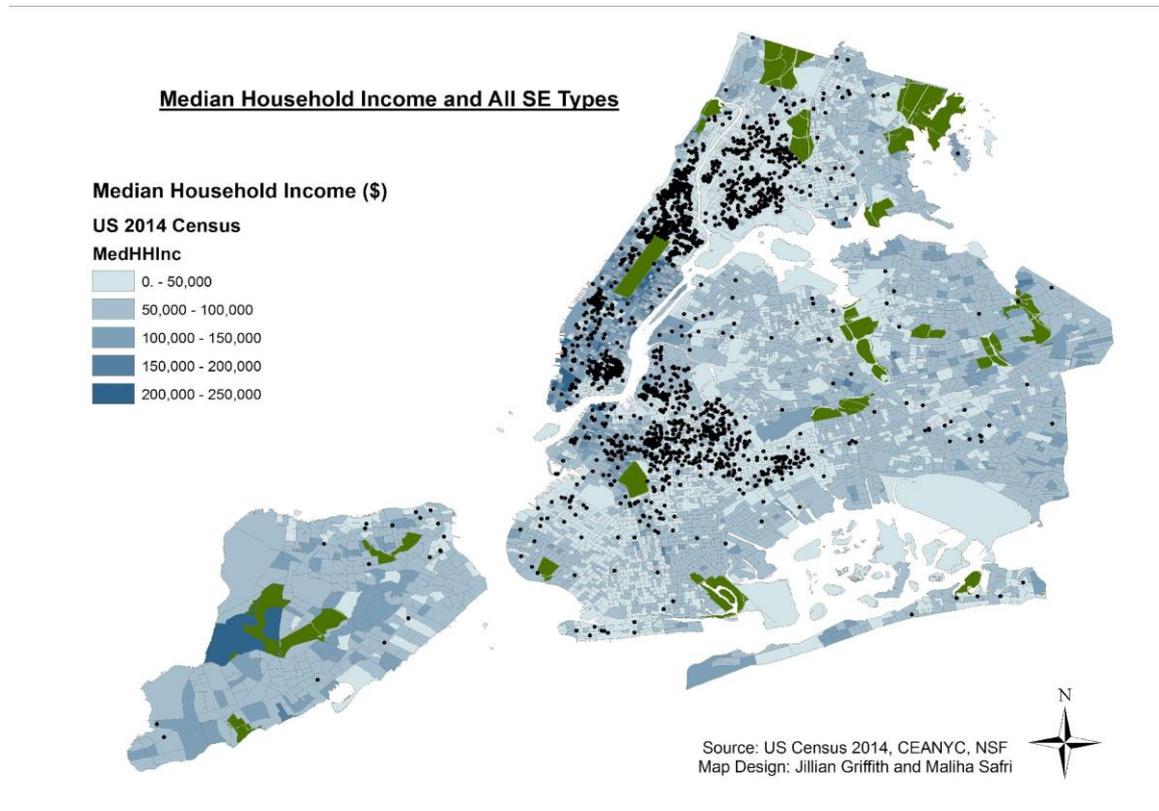
Using the above table 1, in New York City, we identified the following, by partnering with the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, a broad Worker Cooperative Coalition, the activist group SolidarityNYC, the National Credit Union Association, and Urban Housing Assistance Board. We focused on identifiable entities (as opposed to pervasive processes), and we also focused on sectors of the SSE that had identifiable advocacy groups or organizations. In two sectors (housing cooperatives and worker cooperatives) we performed surveys. For food cooperatives, we performed a brief comparison with conventional neighboring grocery stores. And we performed economic impact analysis on two sectors (food and worker coops).

Table 2: Inventory of Social Solidarity Economy Entities in NYC (2014)

Number	Type of SSE practice
18	Community supported agriculture drop-off locations
1439	Housing Cooperatives (1351 HFDC’s with 32,875 units of housing + 88 Mitchell Lama coops with 64,669 units of housing)
36	Childcare cooperatives/Babysitting clubs ^[1] _[SEP]
534	Community Gardens
22	of 51 total NY districts engaged in participatory budgeting, 114 projects.*
3	Community Land Trusts
9	Food Cooperatives
6	Alternative Currencies
22	Worker Cooperatives
186	Credit Union branches (stemming from 85 credit unions)
2275	Total

Using GIS, we mapped the location of all the solidarity economy entities identified in table 2, with the exception of participatory budgeting, since that covers about half the city's districts. Why did we use this method? We have been influenced by critical GIS scholars who focus on revealing, diagnosing, and analyzing the spatial configurations of power. We contribute to that effort by focusing on how class and race run across social solidarity economies.

Figure 2: All SSE entities except for participatory budgeting mapped against median income of census tracts.



Maps designed by Jillian Griffith and Maliha Safri.

This research yielded several main results:

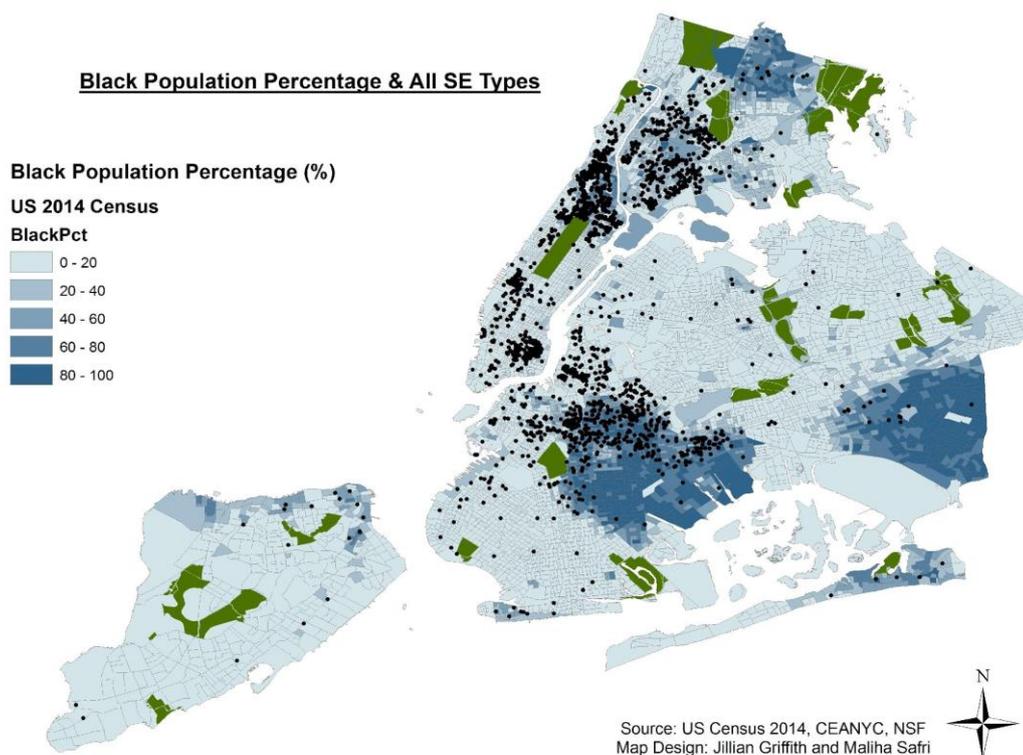
- We find that the SSE practices we examine have a spatial footprint spreading across the Bronx, Manhattan, and Brooklyn, (the three most populous boroughs) but not significantly across Staten Island or Queens. Although there is unevenness in the SSE, it has a relatively large and scalable presence across the city.
- We find that several types of SSE organizations concentrate heavily where poor, Latino, and Black populations live in three boroughs, but there are also wide swathes of those communities in which these practices do not concentrate. There is unevenness to the SSE, per type and overall, but each ensures resilience.
- We do not find SSE initiatives primarily clustering in high-income neighborhoods with concentrated White high-income populations.

Regarding our first finding that there is density of SSE formal initiatives in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn, but the areas of Staten Island and Queens fall ‘off the map’. Since so much of our investigation targeted presence, we can only conjecture on what contributes to ‘absence.’ Absence is in quotes because we are aware that our maps only reveal a particular configuration, formal rather than informal SSE, and we think that informal SSE activities do play important roles wherever they occur. We know that informal activities such as interest-free lending clubs, or rotating savings and credit associations occur in abundance in diasporic communities (Hossein 2015), and such activities are abundant in immigrant communities in Queens. Additionally, many SSE activities (cooperative nurseries, day-care, and schools, thrift stores, volunteer-run funeral services, emergency loan funds, team sports, etc) are organized by churches, temples, and mosques, but all of these processes were beyond the scope of our research. We know no better way to get at some of this but through careful and in-depth ethnographic work. We call for an army of curious researchers to help unravel the ways our own maps have blind spots. This obviously calls for further research and an expanded curiosity about difference across immigrant community boundaries, especially since Queens is marked by a rich Asian diasporic density.

We know that New York City, like Philadelphia, and in fact most cities in the US, are deeply segregated (Borowiak et al 2018). NYC is a deeply segregated city, with homogenously white high income areas, and low-income communities having high proportions of African American, Hispanic, and Asian communities. The fact that formal SSE practices did not concentrate in high-income white areas runs contrary to perceptions that cooperatives and the SSE in general are predominantly geared towards affluent White populations.

In fact, social solidarity economies concentrate in a lot of low-income areas that are Black and Brown, however, not all of them. See figure 3. This obviously indicates some areas that are perhaps being under-served that requires social attention.

Figure 3: Black Population percentage and all SE types



Each SSE practice might be considered a response to the ways that racialized capitalism exerts conditions and powerful effects on SSE. Each response shows a particular form of resilience. And above all, evidence indicates the powerful effects of inequality across social axes. For the sake of brevity, we touch only on one lesson we learnt in examining SSE housing, and discuss how that might be seen as a template for the kinds of questions that need to be asked for every form we examined individually. In other publications we discuss results on credit unions, worker cooperatives, and other sites (Pavlovskaya et al. 2016; Pavlovskaya and Eletto 2018; Borowiak et al 2018; Healy et al. 2018).

Housing plays a paramount role in the political economy of New York, given the large size and high cost of city real estate. It is also interesting to note that housing cooperatives play such a large role in NY's SSE. The lack of affordable housing obviously generates displacement of long-term residents by expanding waves of gentrification. Limited equity cooperative housing is one of the few affordable options falling under community control (Huron 2015; Defillippis 2004; Leavitt and Saegert 1990). In NYC, there are two primary types of limited equity housing cooperatives: housing development fund corporations (HDFC), and limited profit housing companies (Mitchell Lama cooperatives). Both are designed to keep housing affordable by instituting income limits on residency specified in each coop either at or below area median income. Some of the HDFC's, and all of the Mitchell Lama housing coops, also have price limits on housing units (specified either by number of bedrooms or on a price per-square-foot basis). In total, there are approximately 1300 HDFC's in New York City, comprising 31,000 units of housing (with an average size of 24 apartments per coop) (Roesch 2015). The 88 current Mitchell Lama

cooperatives (which tend to be much larger cooperatives than HDFC's) comprise 64,669 units of housing.

Our work elsewhere (Safri et al. 2017) demonstrates the geographic distribution of HDFCs in Northern Manhattan and the Bronx in the context of median income at the census tract level. Clustering of HDFCs in low income areas is clearly visible. Most of these cooperatives came into existence during the 1970's and 1980's, primarily through three city programs (Tenant Interim Lease, Community Management Program, and Third Party Transfer) in which the city turned over ownership of the buildings to collectives of tenants who could demonstrate capable self-management. UHAB was the primary organization helping residents navigate this transition, sometimes becoming an interim landlord itself. The collectives not only self-managed their residences, but invested 'sweat equity' to bring buildings up to code (Leavitt and Saegert 1990; Defilippis 2004). Hence our map could be read as areas that experienced serious disinvestment during the 1970's and 1980's and against which collective self-management arose as a survival strategy.

The current inhabitants of HDFC housing cooperatives are largely the people who formed these initiatives during the height of 'white flight' from New York City. The inhabitants of HDFC's are largely people of color, who now live in neighborhoods that otherwise experienced rapid gentrification. The only reason that those people could stay put in those now highly priced and predominately white areas, is because of the cooperative housing structure coupled with constraints on the ways that markets could shape coop housing prices.

Conclusion

Methodologically, we drew on a combination of geospatial analytical, quantitative, and qualitative methods as well as map-based visualization to outline the economic and social landscapes of solidarity. These include creation of inventories and spatial databases from disparate sources and surveys, conducting scores of qualitative interviews, administering economic impact surveys and surveys of organizations and businesses, designing a national mapping platform, and using GIS to spatially analyze patterns of solidarity economy together with census data on race, ethnicity, and income. Doing so allows to contextualize our accounts of solidarity economy by broader geographies of class and race.

We have often felt some special kinship to those proverbial blind men asked to describe an elephant by touching and reporting on different parts of the elephant. As a team of researchers, we examined something as multifaceted as the SSE in NYC. We present in this piece our methods (open-source mapping, and GIS spatial analysis), as well as our methodology (i.e. the reasons guiding our methods), because we think that this is a powerful new way to analyze and map metropolitan cities in the context of SSE research that could be replicated in many other places around the world.

Especially in the context of our brief discussion of housing as a sector of the SSE in NYC, these practices can represent multiple and even at times conflicting experiences and

aspirations. At a basic level, this practice has long provided marginalized communities with the means to collectively resist racial capitalism and other conditions of oppression. But because it exists in relation to one of the most powerful sectors of real estate markets in the world, it is constantly under pressure to de-mutualize, or sell-out. These economic spaces are bound to bear the imprint of the dominant social relations of racial capitalism and this needs to be recognized and grappled with by the SSE movement.

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