

The Unemployed Exchange Association (UXA) Nineteen Thirties' Grassroots Economic Development

an Introduction to John Curl's *Living in the U.X.A.*

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The current scramble to resuscitate the economy offers no assurance that the patient will recover swiftly, or at all. No matter the outcome, the precarious rehabilitation has damaged the appearance of good health. And appearances are all important in an economy based on speculation.

Furthermore, a threshold of legitimacy has been passed in the public discourse on the economy. Words like socialism, the working-class and even Marx – references previously seen only in the indexes of academic books – are hesitantly formed on the lips of Media celebrities.

And Keynes, like a relic of another age, is recalled from his museum case to appear in Op-Eds.

And next we have, striding across the stage mouthing lines we can't hear, the complete cast of the Depression led by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Long suppressed as irrelevant, the current performance is not meant for our edification, but for our confusion. And keeping us befuddled is Plan B when they can't keep us distracted and shopping up a frenzy, Plan A.

What we are experiencing here is not a replay of the 30's. OHB is not FDR. His advisers are not a retread of Roosevelt's Brain Trust. The hordes of bloggers are not the angry, unemployed masses. And sadly today's workers are not yesterdays.

Hello! Remember manufacturing went South, or East. All that remains are hollowed out brick-built carcasses, formerly known as our economic base. The lucky few of these abandoned sites have been transformed to provide chic-chic shopping experiences. And probably facing a new demise as the economy tanks.

I get the sense that we are slowly groping our way through a fog, a mental and emotional fog. At times a light appears like from an auto or a street lamp and we rejoice. The surroundings make sense for a moment. We know where we are, but then that passes and again we are uncertain of where we are headed.

The bank bailout was like that. The Republic Windows workers sit-in was like that.

What's the story? Deep down many hope this will all pass and we'll emerge on the other side. To what? New credit card debt? New hybrids to ride on the re-built highways and bridges? A new "investment opportunity" in alternative energy?

That may be the dream on offer; however nightmares are the more likely prospects.

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In times of economic collapse, like often during natural disasters, protective shells are discarded and solidarity emerges and social creativity erupts. No money, barter. No food, grow it and share it. Need help, people pitch-in. Most recently in Argentina, during their economic collapse in 2002, neighbors in Buenos Aires held daily outdoor meetings to discuss how best to survive and teams were established to look after the needs of the local people.

Closer to home, throughout California during the Depression, unemployed workers formed associations to bring food from farms, repair housing, and create a modest economy based on labor exchanges, not money. Thousands of Californians spontaneously established these democratic associations. There were so many of them that they began to form networks of convenience

to lay a deep foundation of survival. They were creating out of devastation a new society based on social needs not individual profit, self-help not charity.

The short history of the local Unemployed Exchange Association (UXA), written 25 years ago by John Curl (author of the forthcoming “For All The People: Uncovering the Hidden History of Cooperation, Cooperative Movements, and Communalism In America,”) provides a snapshot of this grassroots economic revival by focusing on the form it took, over 75 years ago, in the neighborhoods of Oakland.

He recounts how desperate people, many unemployed for several years, found the means to recreate livelihoods without money, but with the better currency of cooperation. These people took what had become valueless in monetary terms and transformed it into common wealth. As if moving from one dimension to another, things found social uses where before they had been junk.

The old economy of the market, private ownership and individual pursuit melted away to reveal a previously under-utilized treasury of human creativity and a capacity to recreate, through solidarity, an economy based on needs.

The UXA story may read like a utopian tale only because the history of mutual aid, of self-help ventures,

is largely untold. And yet the rhizomes of cooperative, grassroots endeavors reaches forward to The Intercollective, the cooperative economy of the 70's and 80's in the SF Bay area, that John mentions at the end of this essay.

And from there the influence reaches to the present where we have in the SF Bay area not only the largest concentration of worker cooperatives in the country, but also a fast growing network of alternative economic ventures of all sorts. From urban agriculture to eco-friendly transportation, from land trusts to locally controlled alternative energy start-ups, a new society is taking root. And none too soon.

This vast diversity of mainly volunteer-run projects has the dynamic to demonstrate another way of living – an infrastructure of a new society. They are the stepping stones from a waste-filled, stressful and joyless present to a future where abundance is defined by more than material possessions. Faint glimpses of that richer society appear while reading John Curl's "Living In the UXA".

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