Chapter 3 New Cultures of Connection in a Boston Time Bank

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If the watchword of global capitalism is greed, as declared by Wall Street’s Gordon Gecko, the mantra of the plentitude economy is share—as in sharing one’s car, one’s home, one’s food, and one’s time. These practices, once unthinkable in a middle-class America obsessed with privacy, acquisition, and protection of property, create what Forbes magazine called “an economic revolution” (Geron 2013) as millions of people are learning new ways to access goods and services as well as deploy the assets and skills they already possess. The sharing economy is growing at an estimated 25 percent annually and is predicted to exceed $3.5 billion in 2013. It’s an opportunity for changing how people spend, earn, and live that should enable the expansion of plentitude lifestyles.

The sharing economy is conventionally defined as including a wide range of initiatives, from those that represent marginal twists on business-as-usual offerings to radical alternatives.¹ Zipcar, an early example of car sharing, has evolved into a conventional car rental that offers services by the hour rather than the day. Owned by Avis now, it is not a true example of sharing. By contrast, another early
initiative, couchsurfing, is a network of couch lenders and the travelers who stay with them (without payment) that has remained closer to its origins. Couchsurfing is one example of what anthropologists call a gift economy—there's no price or formal market involved. People offer their homes to strangers—that is, they share them—mostly for the purposes of meeting them and doing them a good turn. It's a stark alternative to a conventional market exchange.

The sharing economy includes traditional cases in which assets or goods are literally shared among peers, such as land sharing (which matches landowners with prospective gardeners) or neighborhood sharing, in which people lend the proverbial "cup of sugar" in whatever form is needed, such as lawn mowers or photographic equipment. It also refers to shared ownership of goods, a less common but expanding practice, which usually involves peer-to-peer relationships. The Internet has been key in the rise of peer-to-peer economies because it simplifies the logistics of sharing goods and ownership and provides mechanisms such as ratings systems that help build trust and reputation among strangers. Craigslist and eBay are early examples of online peer-to-peer initiatives that specialize in the resale of used goods. Couchsurfing uses a peer-to-peer structure, as do AirBnB (a for-profit lodging service), Relay Rides (people rent out their own cars), and Sidecar (people offer rides in their cars, donations suggested). The sharing economy also emphasizes reuse of goods rather than buying new, and it is remaking modes of service delivery. The options range from low-cost concierge-style services such as Zaarly and TaskRabbit, which facilitate errands or other services done by nonprofessionals (peers), to time banks, which are service-exchange communities that operate without money according to principles of equal time exchange. Members trade equal hours of work deployed for different tasks in time banks.

We use the term connected consumption to describe many of the initiatives in the sharing economy from the consumer's side. Connectedness refers to both the digital and the social aspects of these practices. For consumers, these practices make it possible to access a wide range of quality goods and services much more cheaply than in the BAU economy. They also facilitate local, face-to-face connected relationships. From the provider's side, these innovations open up a variety of ways to earn cash income or access to goods or services through barter. People are renting out their cars, homes, and other assets to make ends meet. They are selling and trading their time for cash and services. They are swapping food and used goods. They are saving money by
not having to buy things. Taken together, this new set of initiatives and practices is enabling people to work less by choice, to take a chance on a new career, small business, or a start-up, or to live a life of lighter ecological impact.

The sharing economy and the connected consumption portion of that larger entity attract participants via three main motivations. The first, just noted, is economic. Peer-to-peer economic activity shifts value away from middlemen toward consumers and producers, making alternative lifestyles possible. As Schor predicted in Plenitude (2010), underemployment and falling or stagnant incomes have affected growing numbers of people. For them, sharing is a way to live well on less money or to earn money with assets they already own. A second motive is ecological. These initiatives aim to reduce carbon footprints: through sharing transport, reducing waste, increasing the utilization of existing assets (which reduces the demand for building new), and reusing goods. Third, many participants are interested in meeting people, creating social connections, and deepening their ties to social networks (Belk 2010). Nostalgia for an earlier era when people knew their neighbors and could rely on them permeates the sharing economy. Some sharing initiatives, such as the time bank, the subject of this chapter, explicitly attempt to re-create those informal social ties. We have found that while the sharing economy is by no means confined to young people, they have been its innovators and early participants. They’re more digitally connected and more open to strangers and lifestyle experimentation. Many have not yet constructed normative middle-class lifestyles, and they are among those most affected by precarious economic times. In our time bank case, we focused explicitly on members who are under thirty-five years old to understand how they experience and participate in the sharing economy. Finally, despite the discourse of innovation that surrounds the sharing economy, mutual aid and asset sharing are long-standing activities, especially in low-income communities (Stack 1974). In this sense the sharing economy is a remix of already existing practices rather than a recent invention. What is different is that the digital environment allows strangers to establish these kinds of relations. Its popularity among highly educated, higher-income groups is also new.

In this chapter we present findings from a case study of one sharing institution—a large, volunteer-run time bank—that embodies a mix of these old and new dimensions. As we explain in more detail below, time banks are membership organizations in which people trade services with each other. Started in the 1980s, they predate the Internet and the start-up culture of the sharing economy, but they reflect many of its characteristics. No money exchanges
hands, but there is a currency of hours: earned by providing services and spent by receiving them. Unlike many of the start-ups in the sharing economy, time banking has an explicitly egalitarian structure that assigns equal value to each person’s time and skills, situating it at what Viviana Zelizer, in her discussion of local monies, has called the “ideological extreme” (2010, 325). While this structure may be “extreme,” we have found that it is an important part of what draws people to the bank, a related finding to that of Gowan and Slocum (chapter 1 of this volume), who identify adherence to the anticapitalist ideology of 1968 as one of the factors that has led to the success and longevity of the alternative economy in the Aude. Because the time bank has an explicitly critical ideology, and because it is so devoted to a transformative and antimarket discourse, it is an interesting U.S. case for examining the opportunities and obstacles faced by plenitude-style institutions that attempt to undermine the foundations of neoliberal capitalism. If time banks result in robust trading economies, their members can opt out of or minimize market-based provisioning of services. They can also reduce their income requirements, build social capital, and help members acquire new skills. Therefore, key questions we address in this chapter are whether the trading economy of our bank is robust and whether it conforms to the ideological principles on which it is based. We expect that robustness will be hard to achieve because there is a large chasm between the egalitarian trading ratio of the time bank and standard market valuations for many of the services being offered.

The time bankers we studied express a high degree of ideological support for the stated goals of the time bank. They like that every member’s time is valued equally and that the market does not determine the “worth” of someone in the community. Members are passionate about creating local alternatives to impersonal global markets in which knowing the people who provide goods and services is the norm. They are resistant to the trends of outsourcing or professionalization of services. Yet participants come to the time bank with highly variable levels of cultural, social, and economic capital and different levels of engagement with the market economy. They have different expectations about the quality of the services they are to receive and varied levels of comfort with the idea of nonprofessionals providing services. As we shall see in the ethnographic data, these standards are sometimes eroded in actual trading situations. We discovered that the socially transformative aspects of time banking were inhibited when members used conventional market criteria to dictate with whom and how often they traded. Furthermore, the volume of trades in the time bank is not always robust. The divergence between
the economy of the time bank and that of the market can erode members' interest in trading, their satisfaction with the trades they make, and the extent to which trading breaks down class and other inequalities. There is a trading economy, but in various ways we find that it is falling below members' expectations and actual capacity in terms of the volume and variety of trades. On the other hand, an ideology of social and economic transformation set the tone for most exchanges, and any market mentality that remained was residual.

THINKING ABOUT MARKETS

Time bank members have well-articulated views about both market and nonmarket provisioning of services. Many see the market as cold and impersonal, counterposing it to the intimate relations of family, neighborhood, and community. This separate-spheres reasoning is a common trope within popular discourses of capitalism. Zelizer (2005), arguing that it is also the dominant formulation among scholars, terms it the "hostile worlds" approach: the market is the realm of cold, greedy calculation while the family and community are ruled by altruism and friendly feeling. Arlie Hochschild's ethnographic work (2003) also investigates this boundary, looking at incursions of commercial spirit into family affairs and gendered relations and, most recently (2012), the outsourcing of tasks that have previously been done within the family. The hostile worlds perspective argues that the trend of employing market labor and logic in the domestic sphere undermines authentic social relations and degrades human connections. In the clash between what we can simplistically define as economics versus culture, the hostile worlds view cautions that economics eclipses culture and will remake private life in the image of the market. The opposite view, represented by the Chicago School within economics, denies the existence of culture, understanding all spheres of social life as what Zelizer calls "nothing but" economies. There can be no hostility between the spheres, because in both we find only rational economic men (Becker 1978). This view can be understood as a case of the imperialism of economics, in which economists miss the complex mix of self-interest and altruism present in all sites of social life (Folbre 1982) and cling to a discredited model of über-rationality. Zelizer herself rejects these poles in favor of a "connected lives" perspective that highlights complex negotiation of legal and social responsibilities when monetary exchange occurs in the context of intimate relations.
Institutions such as the time bank aim to go beyond the "hostile worlds" or "nothing but" approaches to construct transformational alternatives. We argue that they create what Zelizer calls a circuit of commerce (see 2010, 302–53). Circuits of commerce are not standard markets, household economies, or even social networks. They are special types of economic relations that bridge markets and the household. She defines them as "distinctive social relations among specific individuals" consisting of "shared economic activities carried on by means of those social relations" that have "common accounting systems . . . shared understandings about the meanings of transactions within the circuit" and "a boundary separating members from non-members" (304). The time bank is what we call a circuit in construction. It has a number of features of a circuit of commerce, such as clear boundaries and distinctive social relations among its members. However, members do not all have shared understandings of how trades should function, and some struggle with the accounting system (that is, how to value labor time). Many are actively developing those shared meanings in an attempt to locate their time bank relations between the market and friendship or family provision. They aim for egalitarian exchange practices with fair social relationships that have the feel of those they have experienced outside the market. More broadly, this project of remaking economic relations in the image of intimate relations is also being undertaken in other initiatives of the new economy. The relations developed at farmers' markets, CSAs, fair-trade stores, and local businesses frequented by our respondents also mimic the tone of time bank exchanges (Brown 2013; Willis and Schor 2012; Thompson and Press, chapter 4 of this volume). As we shall see, creating those shared meanings and accounting values may be the key to ensuring that the time bank is a robust alternative institution capable of assuming a major place in members' lives.

RESEARCHING THE TIME BANK

Time banks are barter networks that allow members to offer their services in exchange for a time currency that entitles them to the services of others. For example, a time banker lists her "offer" of statistical tutoring online, another time bank member selects that offer, and together they complete a trade. The statistics pupil then "pays" the tutor in a time currency based solely on how long the exchange lasted. The tutor can then draw upon the currency she has earned to obtain services from a different time bank member. A key feature of time banks is that regardless of the market value of the service rendered,
all services in the time bank are valued equally. One hour of legal advice is equal to one hour of babysitting is equal to one hour of dance instruction.

Though some time banks are housed within organizations, most, like the Greater Boston Time Trade Circle (TTC), are run as community-based nonprofit organizations with both online and offline components. In recent years, the Internet has helped expand time banks by facilitating and recording offline trades between members. Time banking’s digital presence is an important factor that allows strangers to swap services and that distinguishes it from kinship or place-based barter networks.

In the fall and winter of 2011–12 we conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation among time bankers in the TTC, an eight-hundred-member volunteer-run time bank. In this chapter we discuss the results of thirty interviews with male and female participants aged twenty-four to thirty-four. Table 3.1, on the following page, displays detailed demographic information. Respondents are predominately white and female (twenty-one of the thirty are women), a gender proportion that reflects the composition of the membership. All but one of our participants has a college degree, and 53 percent hold graduate degrees. Generally, our participants are professionally employed and identify with the middle class. Though our sample is for the most part not composed of people who aim to maximize their incomes, many referenced their economic privilege relative to others during our interviews. Notably, our participants are from very well-educated families; graduate education among their parents was the norm. This also means they are quite high in cultural capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). That is, they have high-status tastes that have been cultivated through family upbringing, schooling, or both. While our population does not reflect the most elite groups who possess both high economic and cultural status, quite a few went to elite schools. More generally, they display what we have elsewhere called an “ecological-habitus” (Carfagna et al., 2014), which we believe is an important emerging taste pattern among high-cultural-capital groups in the United States. They represent a segment of the elite that has more cultural than economic capital and that is leading a turn toward ecological lifestyles.

There is some literature on time banking, but it is not large. Most articles are from the popular press, where coverage of time banks has increased significantly over time— from 10 articles in 1997 to 140 in 2012. There is also a literature that lies between the academic and the popular. Early accounts, especially writings by the founder of time banking, Edgar Cahn, defined a moral imperative to time bank, described the possible organizational forms
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of time banks, and laid out plans for establishing local branches (Cahn and Rowe 1996; Cahn 2000). Later reports detailed the inner workings of time bank exchanges and hypothesized about the social benefits time banking could offer should the practice become mainstream (Aldridge et al. 2001; North 2003; Seyfang and Smith 2002). Some articles, especially those within gerontology, found that time banking yields positive physical and mental health impacts for adults, as measured by improvements in self-efficacy and community engagement (Bailis and Chipperfield 2002; Collom 2008; Collom, Lasker, and Kyriacou 2012; Seyfang 2003). More recent academic studies on time banking have moved from descriptive to analytic accounts. Carfagna et al. (2014) explore the emerging taste regimes of high-cultural-capital time bankers. Zelizer (2003) discusses time banking within her analysis of circuits of commerce to highlight both the potential benefits to members and possible pitfalls of participation. Seyfang (2006) and Fenton (2013) discuss the role of time banking in building social capital. This chapter provides insight into the ideological motivations that lead people to join time banks, detailing the interplay between ideological motives and utilitarian approaches to trading and the complex class dynamics that characterize participation.

WHY BARTER WHEN YOU COULD BUY?

THE MOTIVES OF TIME BANKERS

We have noted that members are drawn to the indirect barter of time banking because they find its egalitarian values and ideological commitments appealing. In that sense we can say that all the people we interviewed are “ideological” time bankers—they believe in the equal value principle, they embrace its promise of enhanced community, and they are hopeful that it can provide economic value for unemployed or cash-constrained members. Virtually all of our informants discussed time banking’s appeal in these or related value, moral, or ideological terms. Even time bankers who adopt a transactional approach, by which we mean that they aim to extract as much value as possible when they trade and who expect efficiency and professionalism, report that their membership was motivated by the egalitarian ethos of the time bank.

At the same time, the meanings of time banking are polysemic, that is, members understand what the practice symbolizes in a variety of ways. Most like that it is an alternative to “business-as-usual” economic arrangements in which a conventional market calculus governs social relations, although their
views range from full-blown critiques of capitalism at one end of the spectrum to a few who treat the time bank more as a way of “giving back” to mitigate the worst outcomes of the market. Some are unhappy with the long commodity chains of global capitalism, preferring a smaller-scale, face-to-face economy in which they know where, from whom, and the conditions under which products originate. Many tie the BAU economy to ecological degradation, discussing how suburban living, excessive consumerism, or other factors are destroying the environment. For these members, the local boundaries of the time bank are an antidote to a resource-intensive lifestyle. The equal trading ratio is also a strong ideological draw. It matches the everyday humanistic values that many time bankers articulate and represents a stark alternative to the hegemonic valuation of people according to what their labor can command on the market. Some believe time banking can be a solution to personal financial distress. Others, considering themselves relatively privileged, gravitated to the time bank out of a sense of empathy and ethical responsibility toward others as well as the belief that it is part of an institutional alternative to a destructive economic system.

One of the most commonly expressed sentiments was the disintegration of social connection and a lack of place-based social networks. Time bankers often talked about getting back to the way America “used to be.” As Sonia, a freelance copy editor, explained: “I actually really miss that sort of southern way of treating your neighbors and things. . . . I’m used to knowing my neighbors and helping them. And you should help your neighbor. It’s kind of a religious idea.” Others echoed Sonia’s sentiment, calling time banking a “holistic approach of taking care of life and communities” or drawing a connection between that holistic approach and the “self sufficiency . . . trend going on where people want to be off the grid [and] more into local community.” Respondents began their explanations of time banking by pausing to articulate a community orientation that almost without notice had slipped out of their lives. For a few, this sentiment led them to relate to the time bank largely as a volunteer activity or community commitment, becoming the kinds of members who often don’t redeem the hours they’ve earned, favoring giving back over cashing in.

Our respondents fall into two broad groups in their ideological orientations to the time bank. Many exhibit what we term “market fatigue.” A smaller subset expressed more coherent anticapitalist politics either rhetorically or in terms of their actual lifestyle practices. They see the time bank as part of an emerging alternative economy that they can participate in and
thereby reduce their exposure to the BAU market. There are also a number of members who are drawn to the time bank for economic reasons: it allows them to have a higher real standard of living than they could manage through cash purchases alone.

THE MARKET AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The creep of marketized services was something that two-thirds of our time bankers resisted, in part because they are critical of paying for services that there are other ways of accessing. Many expressed a weariness with the market and were put off by the requirement to earn never-ending flows of cash to “live life” in an outsourced world (Melissa). They complained about the rising trend of paying for “professionals” to provide the same services that might have been exchanged between family members or neighbors in previous generations. These time bankers represent a backlash to a phenomenon sociologist Arlie Hochschild described in her 2012 book *The Outsourced Self* as the commercialization of everyday practices of social life such as courtship, marriage, parenthood, and elder care. Hochschild’s research finds that a carousel of attractively packaged services assembled by paid providers is replacing the home-crafted, unpredictable, and flawed service relationships of the past. Her respondents expressed a mix of attitudes toward the marketization of services—most were relatively comfortable with well-established forms of market provision such as child care but regarded the frontiers of outsourcing (for example, paying people to visit loved ones in nursing homes, paying to have someone scatter the ashes of a dead relative, renting wombs for surrogate pregnancies) with ambivalence. However, Hochschild’s informants are participating in these new markets, unlike time bankers, who actively reject them. Our respondents prefer “insourcing” through exchanges that are casual and personal. Their desire for professionalized services is weak and their preference for local provisioning is strong. A do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic guides their desire to contribute to a robust local economy in which nonprofessionals come together to make and do for each other in relationships of reciprocity and connection. Consider Mandy, a twenty-eight-year-old Asian American time banker who grew up in a small southwestern town. The daughter of a chemist, Mandy majored in neuroscience in college, first worked as a genetics researcher, then shifted career tracks to pursue a degree in social work. Now a coordinator at a nonprofit that pairs foster children with mentors, Mandy touched upon several of the dimensions of market fatigue we observed.
Mandy considers the functionality of goods over their form, prefers meaning and personal connection to the status value and professional quality of service exchanges, and is guided by an ethic of egalitarian relations. Her experience in the time bank helped her appreciate the value of "two-way" exchange, which "seems to be a much more balanced and healthy relationship where both parties feel important and valued." In Mandy's view, this "bidirectional" nature of time bank exchange creates "a lot of mutual respect for everyone and it's not as hierarchical as the economy system . . . of regular financial markets."

Her preferences became clear as she discussed the planning of an intimate yet typically outsourced event—her wedding. She explained that for her and her fiancé, "ultimately what's important . . . is that it's meaningful." Of course the rhetoric of meaning swirls around most outsourced weddings as well, but Mandy's case is unusual in its allegiance to the DIY ethos. She and her future husband have "really foregone a lot of the formalities." She explained, "We're not having wedding parties . . . we don't have a color scheme . . . we're not doing centerpieces . . . the dress code is 'be comfortable' . . . [and] it will be a backyard wedding at a personal family friend's." Unable to find a wedding dress that was both personal and that she could be assured was ethically produced, she turned to local talent to "time bank her wedding dress." Mandy and her fiancé both "like the time bank concept anyway of the dress" because of the relationship she has developed with the dressmaker, her assurance of its fair production, and because it "felt like" her. Unlike a dress plucked off of a rack at Kleinfeld's (an upscale Manhattan wedding dress shop), Mandy's dress will be valuable because it will be a product of local hands and of the contributions to the community she has made earning the hours to have it sewn. Mandy preferred a "simple linen dress," reasoning that it would not "make our wedding feel more meaningful if I have another layer to this dress, or some fancy embroidery." Unsurprisingly, Mandy appears genuinely puzzled by the appeal of "brand-name" labels and feels thankful that the time bank decelerates exchange and, in doing so, allows her to spend time developing relationships of gratitude and respect as she pursues a life that "feels good."

When we spoke with Victoria, another participant who is pursuing alternative ways to obtain services, she articulated her desire to be a productive member of a local service economy. A recent college graduate whose speech was as lucid as it was impassioned, Victoria contrasted her views to those of her parents, explaining that her modus operandi was unique in a family that preferred outsourcing. She highlighted her dual motives: to obtain services
and goods from local sources and to contribute to the production of local value. She described a recent disappointing exchange she had getting her car repaired by a commercial mechanic: “I didn’t even have to talk to him after he fixed my car. So there was so little interaction there, and there was something very important that happened. I put a lot of money into him fixing my car, and there was nothing really there afterwards. That’s a lot of trust, like I had no real relationship. It’s crazy but it’s actually really normal.” Victoria was bothered by the lack of personal connection to her mechanic and the logic underlying the disjointed exchange. As a result, she reported that she hoped to go the DIY route for future repair projects.

Victoria also described a related shift in how she has begun to take a stand against market-based criteria that focus on the rarity, complexity, or professionalism of a good or service. As with Mandy, her preferences relied on criteria that captured creative intent and connections between producers and consumers. She spoke about learning to whittle as a way “to really create something and put time into something.” Though she admitted that “the things I have carved to this point are not beautiful at all,” she claimed that their social location imbued them with an alternative value: “They are meaningful, and I think that if you give something to someone . . . it’s like, oh, you put all this effort into it, and maybe there are other ways to judge something.” In these and other cases, we found that time banking provided a way for members to self-provision, to access nonprofessional skills, or to participate in a local economy that “felt right” (Mandy). Mandy and Victoria measure value in large part by the relationship between producer and consumer. In their world, the value of a service increases as physical and emotional distance decreases.

More generally, we found that the practice of time banking exists somewhere between the warm, casual connection of an intimate friendship and the reserved, formal connection of market exchange. If time bankers are able to remain flexible in their expectations of professional quality, they can get services they need while building person-to-person connections. Alex, a researcher and data specialist, described the exchanges this way: “Partially [it’s] about particular people, but partially it’s about the context in which it [the exchange] happens. You don’t have an expectation that there’s a level of service that should be fulfilled, that I would when I walked into a store. So it’s a sort of emotional gain I get from interacting with a person that I really like.” Alex explained that while time banking doesn’t provide “the best deal,” peer exchanges often leave both parties “high-fiving and smiling.” Rebecca
articulated the dual benefits of the time bank—it "helps people live" and fills in the gaps for members hoping to build relationships with others in their community while trying to wrangle the logistics of their lives. It's there for "those little other things that it's, like, expensive to pay for... like taking a cab to the airport; it's nicer to have someone drive you, and it's less expensive." Rebecca's appreciation of the realities that tug at busy workaday lives and her dislike of the barriers to socialization are sentiments common to many of the members.

Leslie also expressed dissatisfaction with market options, which in her case was focused on tailoring: "I am quite short, so I have to get every pair of pants I buy hemmed, and I don't have a sewing machine. I don't know how to do it and pay $10 every time I get a pair of pants hemmed... If I found a friend to do it, I wouldn't feel that comfortable asking them to hem all my pants." Like Rebecca, Leslie places time trading somewhere between the market and personal relations. She mused about the reciprocal nature of her imagined pants-hemming trade: "Then there's something like I can bake bread and somebody else might not be able to do that." She also highlighted the way the practice helps individuals recognize their skills as valuable and distinct from those of others. She concluded that, to her, it feels "so much more efficient and friendly to be doing trades like that as opposed to paying a stranger to do it for you." A national past of informal trading among kin, neighbors, and friends looms large in our respondents' imaginations. These young urbanites long to reconnect to those traditions while obtaining services from a network larger than their friends and family.

We found that the requirement to decide which services they should list on the time bank helped our participants think through their existing skills and recognize areas of personal competence. As they worked on their offers, they began to imagine ways they could help other than the services they provided as professionals. Over time, their experiences providing and accepting less-than-professional-quality services helped our participants envision a wider range of exchanges outside the cash market and allowed them to break from the naturalized logic of market exchange.

Bartering, sharing, or swapping skills are market arrangements foreign to most Americans' conceptualizations of economic relations in a world where cash trading is taken for granted. Sonia explained that "people normally think of money, the economy... you get a service and you pay for it." Sighing, she concluded that most "people don't even think another world is
possible.” But our respondents do, while identifying their issues with market ideology. For example, they expressed a strong preference for face-to-face contact with the producers of goods and services they obtained in the market. Aaron, a business developer at a technological company, notes: [It’s] about knowing where your goods are produced, that they’re not produced in some black box and you pay money for it and you get it, and you have no idea what happens in between. I’ve gone a couple times and visited my CSA farmer’s farm. . . . I think knowing the person who is producing a big amount of your food brings up that level of trust between you and them. It’s not going through the extra step like the supermarket.” The concept underlying that “extra step” is key to an ethos of connection that is increasingly characterizing segments of consumers, especially those with high cultural capital and ecological consciousness. As Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) found in their study of CSAs and we found in Carfagna et al. (2014), the embrace of local and face-to-face economic relations is part of a larger shift toward a more material, earthy, and connected sensibility that characterizes not only time bankers but participants in the sustainable local economies that have emerged in recent years.

Alternatives to anonymous and professionalized exchanges were very attractive to the people we interviewed. As Jace explains: “I love the idea of investing in a farm before the season, so they have the security of that, and you don’t get that in a farmers’ market, definitely.” For Jennifer, a full-time nanny, “Economic transactions . . . that involve giving and taking, that don’t involve money, and that don’t involve paying really close attention to time” are preferable. Some of the other alternatives to the cash market she has pursued have grown out of her time bank membership: “Since starting Time Trade Circle . . . I have been doing some barter with friends directly that I wasn’t doing before.” The experiences of face-to-face trading and weighting people more heavily than price have helped her understand that she “really values local economy.” Connected consumption’s emphasis on tangible, local, and offline connection facilitated through extrageographic, online logistical platforms helps explain its rising popularity. To get these elements, time traders are willing to tolerate variable quality in the services they receive, the joint responsibility of the exchange, and place-based scarcity (or abundance) of specific services or goods.

Time bankers also favor artisanal and craft practices (Carfagna et al., 2014). The modern desire for distance from manual labor and memories of their
grandparents’ arduous lives as yeoman farmers play no role in our time bankers’ imaginations. Rather, they embrace old-fashioned skills and practices. One middle school librarian jokingly lamented the popularity of manual labor within the time bank by describing her weakening monopoly over expertise in canning: “The thing that I’ve gotten the most successful trades with is canning . . . at the time that I started offering it, no one was doing that, because I’ve been doing that a long time, [but] it’s gotten kind of hip, so there are more people out there and I have more competition now.” Others want to be connected to the goods they consume on a corporeal level. Victoria articulated her discomfort at being physically disconnected from the process of obtaining food, especially with respect to the environmental impact of large-scale agribusiness. She said she had learned about some “meat that is supervised in a particular way and also slaughtered in a certain way.” Taking significant personal responsibility for the act of consuming meat, she explained that she “really want[ed] to learn how to slaughter chickens in this particular way.” Rebecca, a student, articulated three traits that make up this eco-habitus during her interview: the value of face-to-face trades, the importance of localism, and the idea that consuming is about more than money. She justifies paying a higher price by citing the value of interpersonal connection: “You go to a farmers’ market and you get some cheese and you meet the farmer who made it, versus just going to Trader Joe’s and picking up whatever is cheapest. I definitely know I’ll pay more at a farmers’ market . . . even if it’s going to taste similar—because of, like, the experience and the sense of where your money’s going versus, like, it’s way cheaper to go to a grocery store and buy something there.”

Others have idealized historic forms of community and networks of reciprocity. As Sam explains, “I’m really into hunter-gatherer societies, to be honest . . . for me, that’s, like, real community, where you just—you’re always in touch with people, and the community meets your needs, and you help the community through work, through feeding people, through—you know, if anything comes up.” To this group, global supply chains denote ecological irresponsibility and a dangerous obfuscation of the conditions under which goods are produced. Therefore, the time bankers view the professionalization of the service sector and its reliance on cash as outgrowths of the fast consumption fueled by global supply chains. In and out of the time bank, they strongly prefer face-to-face interactions through which they can set the pace and tone of their exchanges.
The rising tide of insourcing and an emerging taste regime that displays an affinity for local, artisanal, and slow-produced goods both offer hope for time banking’s viability as a market alternative.

ANTICAPITALIST SENTIMENT

Thirty years ago global capitalism, especially the nasty corporate-dominated variety, seemed unassailable. Margaret Thatcher famously declared that “there is no alternative,” Francis Fukuyama heralded “the end of history,” and free-market ideology reigned triumphant (Frank 2000). Things look very different today, after the crash of 2008. The Internet boom, soaring housing equity, tight labor markets, and the hyperconsumption of the early 2000s are distant memories. Critiques of capitalism articulated by social movements such as Occupy have been widely legitimated.

This ideological shift, which is undergirded by concern about economic inequality, social disconnection, materialist values, and expanding carbon footprints, has propelled migration toward connected consumption (Schor 2010). Half of our respondents articulated an explicit anticapitalist sentiment. In some ways this is not surprising, given that time banking positions itself explicitly as an alternative to the BAU economy and is one of the most ideologically motivated forms of connected consumption. In some cases we found that time bankers’ critiques are driven by the fragility of their own economic situations or that of those around them. Often the waters of their economic futures are murky, clouded by student loan debt and destabilized by career trajectories that resemble a skipping stone rather than the single arc of the organization worker’s career life. But others have highly valued skills and stable full-time jobs and are engaged in alternatives out of ideological commitment. Micah fits squarely into the latter category.

A twenty-four-year-old software developer, Micah spoke to us from the cooperative home where he lives with “eleven other roommates.” Though he articulated little explicit anticapitalist rhetoric, Micah’s lifestyle implicitly rejects capitalism. His room in a “three-story apartment [with] twelve bedrooms of people, chickens in the backyard and . . . a local CSA [membership]” comes with responsibility delinked from monetary exchange. Micah makes “very few purchases” and “meets [many needs] through cooperative-lish things.” This means that he and his housemates spend time completing chores and cooking, participating “in a lot of other food co-ops that produce food and
buy[ing] a lot of food in bulk, and we also insist on buying local, organic stuff." They run an "informal time bank" within their house, and it was through his housemates that Micah first learned of the Time Trade Circle.

Micah is exemplary in his dedication to exchange that is face-to-face, informal, and outside the well-worn tracks of the cash economy. He considers himself to be "already in a pretty demonetized state." Each week he spends eight hours providing his Web development skills free of charge and another morning he works as a volunteer language teacher at a local community center. He reported that he doesn't "feel a strong desire to earn every single penny I can get for doing my work, so that's why I already do spend a lot of time doing volunteer, totally pro bono consulting." Micah also challenged the typical arrangements for paid labor, wondering, "So if I'm a teacher, and I want to provide students with something that I like to teach, should I be charging them, or should they be charging me? Or if I really enjoy teaching it, like, what basis do I have to charge money on?" He has few things "that are currently monetized" and had to pause to think when asked about the last time he spent money. Already immersed in an extramarket existence, Micah was easily drawn to the indirect barter structure of time banking. While Micah acknowledged that it was his "relative privilege" that allowed him to push against the norms of paid employment, he still expressed hope for an economy centered on people instead of profit: "I think that the mainstream conception is that time is money, and so you invest your time in certain places in order to get enough money to spend your free time other places. So it is a very money-driven thing. But I guess it'd be really cool if the alternative was a person-based thing."

Micah believes that although time banking is focused on skills rather than people, it is a step in the right direction. He rejects "capital calculating to make ends meet" in favor of making "sure I could still survive and eat food" through "a series of relationships that I was building with people . . . whether it be mentoring or skills or sharing." Time banking fits into his plan because it is focused on sharing skills to create strong, long-lasting relationships.

Other members also try to avoid the cash nexus. Jennifer, the daughter of a Marxian economist, articulated sophisticated critiques of capitalism and belief in the view that human value stems from productive labor. Jennifer "was living for a year bartering work for housing and food, and, like, really not interacting with money at all except for health insurance." Similarly, Elaina maligned capitalism and the consumer society it breeds. "I think it just destroyed a lot of culture. I don't feel like it really makes us happy and fulfills us
in any way.” Rachel explained that she prefers to support “people [who] are putting an effort into making something, and I’m paying them for that effort, versus, like, paying for some evil corporation far away who’s never even cared about this product.” Care and intention are two core concepts that surfaced again and again throughout our conversations. Our respondents’ experiences of exchanges helped them think through new ways of assigning economic value.

Many time bankers reasoned that capitalism was not capable of solving the problems that humanity—and the planet—would be facing in coming years. Kristy, a community organizer and young mother, predicted: “I think we’re going to have to be producing more of our own needs here locally, so we’re going to have to be working collaboratively, because no one person can really do that. We need collaborative food growing, and we need to set up other ways to provide for our needs outside of the current economy.” Throughout her interview, Kristy linked constraints on natural resources to the faltering of an economic model based on continual growth. She cautioned that “we’re running out of resources and . . . it’s creating massive inequalities that are destabilizing our society and our democracy.” Participating in and supporting local, collective production helped solidify her place in the economy and set her family on a path that was achievable, understandable, and ascendant.

Rose represents a different kind of anticapitalist time banker, motivated not by a 1960s-style opposition to the system but a twenty-first-century sensibility that developed as her own career path took an unexpected turn. As she was raised in a wealthy, conservative family, Rose’s break from allegiance to capitalism could hardly have been predicted, and it is largely pragmatic rather than ideological. She attended an elite college and initially went to work in corporate finance. But she left formal employment, explaining that she prefers to “patchwork my career” with several part-time jobs, including a home-organization business. Perhaps because of her unconventional work situation, she relies on time banking to meet many more of her needs than most members, incorporating at least one trade a week into her life. Rose’s parents, especially her father, at first had difficulty understanding her decision to leave what they perceived as the security of one full-time traditional job for several transitory, highly variable income streams. Rose described the generational differences in this way: “I know that when my parents give me career advice they’re coming from an entirely different view. . . . I know it used to be that whenever you would get fired or leave a job you could always switch to another company. Of if you had to switch to another career or industry, but
you took it for granted that somebody else was going to take care of you, that kind of company care towards its employees. That’s so not true anymore." Many of the young adults we interviewed expressed similar skepticism about whether big corporations would “take care” of them in return for loyal service. Despite an almost universal desire to push back against corporatization, the need to generate cash flow and access health care constrained participants’ abilities to transition out of full-time work. Rose noted the importance of her partner’s traditional full-time job, which comes with partner health insurance and a competitive salary. “I know a lot of people could never do what I do because it’s been very risky and very scary. And I probably couldn’t have done this if it weren’t for my partner.”

Within the time bank, Rose most often seeks out pet boarding. She reflected on her experience with ambivalence. She hasn’t found a time banker who she felt cared for her dog well and though she worried about the potential risk she was exposing her dog to each time she tried out someone new, she continued her search because to her the promise of “huge savings” outweighed her concerns. Interviewees with steady employment and secure finances were less likely to repeatedly expose themselves to this type of risk. She mused about her generation’s attitude to their employers and its recalculation of risk: “A lot of adults think that they’re really the babies and the institutions have to take care of them, the big finance, the big banks, the government. . . . I feel that tug of war going nowhere—people need to take more ownership of their own lives.” For Rose, the system of organizational allegiance necessitated by capitalism is broken. Though few other time bankers spoke in such sweeping terms, many echoed her cynicism about large institutions. The face-to-face consumption preferences of time bankers also hint at the appeal of peer-to-peer arrangements and the desire to sidestep the middleman. Localism and noncash exchanges succeed at dismantling some of the barriers to connection that young urbanites experience.

Though few in our sample are currently unemployed, the time bankers who began trading during a period of unemployment were more adventurous in the face of disappointing or “risky” trades. Those who were affected by the market’s downturn via unemployment, heavy debt burdens, or the rising costs of fuel and food were engaged in a process of reimagining economic possibilities. Jace, an office manager who has an active online life as an artist, described the ways he is transforming his lifestyle: “I have a farm share with [a local farm]. I’m a member of a co-op [grocery]. I’m a member of the library. I think there’s a re-
newed interest in farming because of—people feel that food is no longer just going to be there because the environment is in such bad shape.”

For our respondents, keeping up with “the Joneses” has become a crass endeavor made undesirable by media portrayals of wealthy Americans and a belief that the “American Dream” has drifted into the category of unattainable. There is a general resignation to the sense that, globally, “it seems like corporations are running the world more and more and they have more and more power.” Yet resignation does not mean acceptance. Distrust of large organizations and lack of belief in their responsibility to the people they employ loomed large for the time bankers whose market fatigue had turned into a fully articulated anticapitalist sentiment. They are critical of globalized production and of corporate impacts on the environment. However, time bankers are generally optimistic, as they describe how their lives of connected consuming are supplanting the crumbling edifice of global capitalism.

THE ADVANTAGES OF HIGH CULTURAL CAPITAL AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF TIME BANKING

The state of our participants’ finances varied, but regardless of their personal situations they were united by the belief that opportunities for economic stability should be ample and equal for all. However, our findings suggest that there are subtle and not so subtle ways that class reproduces itself in the actual workings of the time bank. Some members with high cultural capital prefer trading with others in that social stratum. Social class homophily (or love of same) is common throughout society, but the ideology of the time bank explicitly rejects this attitude. In light of their ideological commitment to the values of time banking, it was surprising to find evidence of time traders devaluing the skills of members who are not well educated, lack professional credentials in the areas they are offering trades, exhibit poor grammar, or have only rudimentary technological expertise. These sentiments were articulated at least once by almost half (47 percent) of people we interviewed.

Kelly, a self-employed bodyworker specializing in energy healing, valued time banking for the possibilities it provides to “help in different ways that don’t involve money . . . expand[ing] what people have access to, and also expand[ing] the kinds of things that people feel like they can contribute to the community outside of traditional jobs.” Repeating the promise of time banking put forth by its founders almost verbatim, Kelly’s ideology is among the
strongest of all participants we interviewed. However, her actual transactions contradicted her egalitarian stance. Kelly offered hands-on energy healing services when she began time banking but quickly realized that “the exchange ratio felt off.” In the market, Kelly charges $100 per hour for her services but came to feel that it wasn’t “equal to a time bank hour of value, somehow, for me to exchange for that.” Kelly felt uncomfortable offering the full range of her services, given her level of expertise, refined through four years of training in energy healing and her desire to be respected as a serious practitioner. She became frustrated when time bankers seemed to be “testing out” energy healing through her services, although this was one of the potential benefits she had raised earlier in the interview when she mused about time banking’s potential to be economically transformative. Kelly came to think more highly of “the value of my time in regards to the hands-on work, because I didn’t want to be giving it away for free, or just for an hour of somebody else’s time.” While Kelly’s stated values adhere to the egalitarian principle of equally valuable time, her transactions within the time bank tell a contradictory story.

Through experimentation, Kelly discovered one limitation of time banking’s egalitarian structure. For her, trading increased the imagined difference between the value of her time and that of others in terms of what both are able to yield on the market. As a compromise, in exchange for time bank hours she offers free introductory attendance in some of her classes and workshops for which paying clients are charged $15 to $20 per hour. Although Kelly may lose revenue by offering spaces in her class, she reasons that the value the time bank members add through their presence increases the quality of her classes enough to make up for this potential loss.

Melissa, a suicide prevention counselor, also adheres to egalitarian rhetoric but simultaneously exhibits market-driven valuations. Although she acknowledged the time bank’s potential to help people transition into new careers and even offer services they are not formally trained to give, she reported that she avoids this type of service by vetting the credentials of the members she trades with. When she wanted to “test out” a meeting with a career counselor, she didn’t want to receive services from a practitioner who was also testing out his skills. Melissa remarked, “I found someone who was career counseling for twenty years, and he had this certificate or this degree, so he looked pretty legit.” She continued, “I’m probably more likely to do something if it’s what they do for a living, even though it doesn’t have to be like that. . . . But for something like counseling or massage, acupuncture,
you want them to have a degree or something like that.” Melissa does not trade with uncredentialed service providers for “high-risk” trades, but she does believe in the benefit of others doing so.

Even if they avoided contracting certain services from providers without credentials, almost all of the interviewees maintained that time bank participation gave them a more multidimensional sense of value. Though some of the white-collar workers in the time bank shy away from receiving uncredentialed services, they are happy to offer such themselves. Karen, a software developer, explained that time bank membership allowed her to diversify her skill set through the tasks she performed. She often offered manual labor but not programming help. “I program all day. I don’t want to program more. Changing thermostats makes people happy. It’s kind of doing something physical, which I really value.” Karen’s focus on “making people happy” by performing manual tasks implies that software development could not make people equally happy. The services offered in the time bank, then, are subject not just to market negotiations such as Kelly’s, but also to the choices of traders who withhold their credentialed skills based on their beliefs about the needs of other time bankers.

Most of the participants who enjoyed the variety of tasks membership allowed them to practice also highlighted physical activity. Others also reflected on offering services other than those for which they earn money. Corie, a full-time lawyer and social worker, said time banking was a reminder of the diversity of her skills. After posting her first offers, she was pleased that the structure of the time bank gave her the opportunity to think of skills in which she has considerable but not professional-level expertise. She explained, “It reminds you about all the areas of your life that you’ve actually learned things in, like gardening or home repair stuff. Things you never think of as skills because they’re not on your résumé.” In this way, time banking can expand an individual’s sense of personal value beyond the labor he or she is able to offer in the marketplace.

Most of our participants have professional expertise backed by the appropriate credentials. Their upbringings were enriched by cultural capital, which slotted them into certain educational opportunities which, in turn, resulted in their current positions in the labor market. One might assume that this wouldn’t matter in the time bank, especially when they are offering nonprofessional services. However, highly credentialed time bankers enjoyed a number of advantages that operated in subtle and extramural ways. We found that trading is partially segregated by cultural capital, and that there is higher demand for those with formal credentials and more extensive schooling.
she doesn’t offer to trade the skills from her day job as a speech therapist: “Actually, no, I’m realizing the reason I don’t offer that is because I think it’s worth more, that I could get more money. That didn’t occur to me.” Many professionals who have put years of training and heavy capital investments into their careers felt that they had more to give than what was already offered in the bank. Among all of our interviewees, Jill best situated her understandings of inequality within a structural framework: “I guess I think it would be complicated to figure out how to weight more valued things. I think that would probably result in a lot of, I guess, discord. That lawyer maybe had better opportunities when they were young and a better education or maybe more money so they can be a lawyer. And it’s not people’s fault if they didn’t have those opportunities and now aren’t a lawyer.”

While almost all of our participants were quick to praise time banking as a way to recognize people who were being undervalued in the market, they couldn’t hide their residual belief in market preferences, which operated in taken-for-granted ways when they invalidated members who lacked professional legitimacy and credentials. Most of our participants talked about time banking as a way for unemployed people to feel they have value and something to contribute. However, the ideal of reciprocity did not always work out in practice, as more privileged members sometimes seemed to believe they had more to offer than others. While egalitarian ideology led many to time banking, participants could not always sustain that ideology when they actually got down to the business of trading.

In all cases, we found that the nature of a participant’s contribution was structured by his or her relationship to the cash economy. Some members who were tired of outsourcing their lives to professionals had a more flexible rubric for the quality of services they would accept. For nonessential services, especially while learning new skills, peer-to-peer help was sometimes even preferred. However, there were limits on the quality of services time bankers tolerated. For example, the level of risk and variability of quality members were willing to incur depended on whether they had had an experience with unemployment or financial insecurity. Some experimented with time banking when they were wholly or partly without work. During those periods they were able to invest extra time into figuring out the service quality of the time bank alternative to the cash service marketplace, and these respondents now tend to take more risks when they trade. They are willing to expose themselves to the variable quality of some services offered. Rose, with her unsteady income, is willing to try out new, potentially risky dog sitters because of the savings the time bank affords.
On the other hand, interviewees with steady employment and secure finances were less likely to expose themselves to this type of risk. Jill has significant personal savings and was in the process of buying her first home when we met over tea in a local deli. She snapped her cell phone closed, apologized for repeatedly checking for her realtor’s messages, and explained, “If it’s a more detailed service that could be screwed up, I do feel more of a concern that I don’t know if I would be able to fully surrender to that. [If] I knew they were licensed and working as a licensed plumber that would make a difference.” Jill contextualized her expectations of professionalism by placing herself within a specific socioeconomic context. During our talk, she admitted that she had never directly experienced unemployment or financial insecurity. She said she would be happy to receive amateur help “learning how to garden,” but that she preferred a guarantee of quality to a low price in the case of “electrical work, plumbing work, home repair, car repair.”

Although they believed in the principles underlying time banking, the majority of our participants echoed a sentiment similar to Trish’s: “If I’m looking for a very professional job, if it’s something that I wouldn’t ask my friends to do . . . I don’t bring it to Time Trade.” Others agreed with this line of logic and grouped their time banking hours together with their other volunteer hours. Many members lamented that the TTC lacked a formal review process like many other connected consumption initiatives. A few years ago the TTC leadership circulated a question to the time bank: “Would you approve of a ratings system for TTC trades?” Many of the younger people did want a rating system, while many of the senior members did not. Online reputation metrics are found on many Web sites where quality control is important, and young adults expect that ratings systems will be attached to peer-to-peer sites. Some of our respondents were like the majority of members who turned down the innovation, saying that a ratings system was “un-timebanky.” They were afraid of the implications if hierarchical valuations were introduced. Karen feared that the spirit of time banking would fall apart if a rating scheme were implemented. She’d had a negative experience with a time bank member who said he could do something that he actually couldn’t, but she was gracious in describing this experience and seemed unconcerned that she had spent hours on something that didn’t work out. Karen, however, is highly motivated by connection and is one of the participants who views time banking as a volunteer activity. Others weren’t so generous in their discussions of failed trades, with one of our participants
Because there is not always robust demand for offers, these advantages translated into more opportunities to trade.

One result was that some high-cultural-capital participants became confident not only that they could offer professionalized services (if they wanted to), but that they could successfully offer services that they didn’t go to school for or have much practice at. The trading potential of these members was based on their advertisements. Advertisement, we learned, was the primary medium that allowed members to communicate their legitimacy and credentials. This, we believe, leads to the relative advantage of those high in cultural capital within the time bank.

The Time Trade Circle has explicitly rejected a formal rating system of the type that is now standard on many peer-to-peer sites. In the absence of such a system, members have come up with creative ways to select and exclude potential trading partners. The vetting process our respondents described sometimes advantaged high-cultural-capital time bankers. We found that people looked for key signifiers of professionalism—personal Web sites, good grammar, external references, and even testimonials from other members about the superior service being provided. The administrators of the time bank do not object to members advertising client references on their profiles and encourage people to get in touch before a trade to ask for references or credentials. The people who can best signal their professionalism are those who have had access to professionalized lifestyles. For example, one participant explained that she negatively evaluates offers from “people who, like, didn’t have basic grammatical skills,” stating that she is “turned . . . off [by] people [who] don’t write in complete sentences.” She reflected that maybe she was “being a snob,” but she believed “you could write [an offer well]” and avoid “a lot of typos or writ[ing] poorly.” Our high-cultural-capital members, who have college degrees and work professional jobs (and come from families with the same background), are adept at this type of signaling. So while theoretically $1 = 1$, one high-cultural-capital hour has the potential to be a lot more attractive than one ordinary hour.

We found that the ideological breakdown of equally valued time was expressed in covert ways, such as the valuing of well-advertised, professional, and credentialed services. To the surprise of many of our participants, it was also challenged in more overt ways. In our interviews, about three-quarters of those who had previously made lengthy ideological statements about the power of such an egalitarian system then unwittingly negated those statements by saying that their time was worth more than one hour of someone else’s time. Jill caught herself in this contradiction when she explained why
sounding a bit scarred by a failed and "creepy" massage experience. Thus there is a structural barrier to ensuring service quality within the time bank because there is no formal way to evaluate the services provided within an exchange. This leaves many young time bankers looking for clues written into offers. Though some time bankers are in favor of a formal rating system, the majority in this time bank sides with the ideals the founders of time banking put forth: the fundamental product of a time bank is increased connections, not services exchanged.

Interviewees' high levels of cultural capital influence their views of other time bankers, their own modes of participation, and their ideals about who should be involved in time banking. While these are understandable and sometimes automatic modes of evaluation, class position set limits on the extent to which time banking can break down inequalities. High-cultural-capital time bankers who profess allegiance to building alternative market relations that do not follow the value judgments of the cash market sometimes falter as they work to build new valuation schemes.

Overall, we find that cultural capital is functioning as a limit on the potential trades available in the time bank. Our respondents have particularly high levels of cultural capital and many come from backgrounds of relative privilege. On the one hand, their habitus is a spur to participation in the bank. They value authenticity, localism, environmentalism, holistic wellness, and self-reliance. They reminisce about being able to rely on a place-based local community while keeping a global and class-conscious outlook on life (Carfagna et al., 2014). However, in practice they sometimes prefer the professionalized services they would expect in the market. For example, market-based thinking was taken for granted by most of our participants. At the same time, they believe in time banking, especially as a way for unemployed people to feel valuable in a culture that defines work as a dominant dimension of identity. However, our findings that are most closely linked to disparities in cultural capital challenge the potential of time banking to alter the dependence of identities on market practice and success. Our participants say they believe in this transformative power, but their accounts were sometimes contradictory. While they expected professionalized and credentialed services from others, many did not offer their own professionalized and credentialed services because they believed that their work was worth more than one hour of someone else's time. This is one example of a larger phenomenon we discovered: time banking can actually enhance differences in cultural
capital, as participants use it as a low-cost way to learn new skills and gain experiences that are at the cutting-edge of high-status cultural capital markets. In the most pessimistic interpretation, these authenticating practices and projects are themselves important sources of status, and the time bank comes to serve as a means of cultural reproduction.

CONCLUSION: CAN THE TIME BANK TRANSFORM MARKET RELATIONS?

Capitalism constructs and normalizes unbalanced economic relations in which those with more access to capital most often control the nature of exchanges. The time bankers featured in this chapter often bristle at these distorted power relations. Discontent or sometimes even hostility to market exchanges whose terms and conditions are set by standard practices have led many to connected market alternatives. In this case study, ideological motives drove economically secure and highly educated participants to try time banking. Participants prefer do-it-yourself exchanges to those set by commercial interests. They seek out connection with others through trades and come together to create a web of connections designed to support local people. The equal valuation of time within the bank sets the conditions for some innovative exchanges to occur. Sometimes these informal exchanges lead to participants’ altered standards of professionalism and taste. Often time bankers refer nostalgically to a time in America’s history when they believe relations of reciprocity between neighbors and kin were the norm. Though the founders of time banking maintain that the 1:1 ratio is common sense, its potential implications for dismantling the benefits of socioeconomic class, institutional credentials, and professional wage are radical. But as with the constant mental work of learning to speak a new language, participants had to remain mindful of the syntax of informal exchange relations. In many cases, they subconsciously reverted to capitalist logic and evaluated potential trades using the metric of market value. However, the institutional conditions set by time banking overcame the naturalized logic of capitalist exchange when participants actively recalled their initial motivations and ultimate goals. Although the transformational potential of time banking was inhibited when participants reverted to internalized habits of capitalist exchange, the presence of innovative exchange logics suggests the emergence of new economic relations in which interpersonal connection is central.


NOTES

1. The sharing economy also goes by the term collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers 2010), a designation that emphasizes exchanges or collaborations that do not flow through a middleman or business entity such as a hotel, car rental service, or resale shop, and focuses on the consumer rather than the producer side of the market.


3. Time banking has been able to move beyond a core of true believers into community-based organizations and mainstream social service groups in areas such as ex-offender reentry (National Homecomers Academy), aging in place (Reach CareBank of Vermont), and the integration of recent immigrants (Visiting Nurses Association of New York Community Connections Time Bank) (Collom 2012).

4. These numbers were generated by a LexisNexis media search detailing the annual English-language press coverage on time banking from 1997 to 2012.

REFERENCES


