

**Davina Cooper**

Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice  
Thought Paper

## **SEXUAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE WORKSHOP**

### **QUESTION: WHAT OPPORTUNITIES DO ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL SITES OFFER FOR EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES FOR SEXUAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE?**

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My comments here are based on a research project I have been pursuing for the past six years, exploring alternative social spaces – what I call “everyday utopias”. These are spaces, material and imagined, which seek not only to *realise* a more just, equal or democratic mode of operation but to prefigure or inhabit it in the here and now. Unlike communes or intentional communities, these spaces and networks do not depend on people quitting mainstream life, but rather are articulated to the mainstream in multiple ways. While some everyday utopias are discrete places, others exist as networks or mobile and multiplying sites. I should say I call them “utopias” to *reflect* their social and political aspiration – realised to varying degrees – not because I see the spaces as necessarily just or as reflecting my own political ideals.

The spheres of life and particular case-studies I have undertaken (largely in Britain) relate to utopias of practice, system, belonging and change. The two I will focus on here as most relevant to the workshop are: exchange (Local Exchange Trading Systems) and sex (Toronto Women’s Bathhouse). The other four sites, which more indirectly inform my analysis here are: public speech (Speakers’ Corner), religion (progressive Jewish community organisations), politics (LGBT local governmental partnerships), and education (AS Neill’s Summerhill School). The notes below draw on my field research and interviews as well as a wider theoretical, conceptual and empirical literature.

**LETS** exist internationally, since the 1980s, as small-scale, localised networks of trade, labour and exchange in which people (and sometimes firms or public bodies) access goods and services through payment in local currency (by means of a cheque). The key economic characteristics of LETS are that people can go into debit (“commitment”) without incurring interest, and financial markets and investment don’t exist; balances are transparent and available to all members to view, and thresholds, ceilings and rates for hourly work may be imposed by the scheme or determined through negotiation between members; in the main, while payments are not fully equalised, rates are less unequal than in mainstream economies.

**Toronto Women’s Bathhouse** was established in 1998 in Toronto as a periodic bathhouse event for women and transpeople interested in casual sex. TWB is striking both for its explicit approach to creating a pro-sex, “raunchy” environment, and for its educative and pastoral attitude towards participants. So, attendees can receive from volunteers a range of free services – from sexual massage and counselling to lap-dancing and G-spot orgasms; they are also encouraged to learn how to provide such services to others.

What I am interested in exploring here is the relationship between the practices and structures of these spaces, on the one hand, and wider sexual and economic inequalities, on the other. In short, do these spaces primarily reflect mainstream inequalities, do they counter them, do they practically counter some but not others, and do they proffer or institutionalise alternatives? In addressing these questions, my focus is on what is *done*; while this includes internal and external arguments, rationalisations and other forms of public speech, I am not principally interested in these spaces as campaigning spaces *per se* but rather as materialising at the level of social form, the values and principles they advocate.

Addressing these questions goes beyond the problematic of change within micro-sites to wider issues, namely:

- a] what potential, if any, do such sites have to shape or imprint upon mainstream life and wider social relations, and what policies, practices and structures (“internal” and “external”) impede their having wider effects; and
- b] what do everyday utopias tell us about structures of inequality (and norms of justice) more generally, at least in countries, such as the UK.

Some strands of the project have been published as articles and in my book, *Challenging Diversity* (2004). However, the relationship between everyday utopias and inequality is at a preliminary stage. Below are some of the issues I am considering which seem to most closely intersect the themes of this colloquium.

1. The spaces I am exploring are interestingly ambivalent and diverse in the extent to which they recognise or respond to “external”, institutionalised inequalities. I do not want to suggest that people’s wider sexual or economic positioning is irrelevant to their experience of everyday utopias – far from it. But I am also interested in how these sites sometimes bracket, sometimes negotiate, wider forms of inequality, offering different conceptions of justice and power. This is illustrated by LETS which is concerned both with wider socio-economic inequalities (it is seen by some as an economic development tool) as well as with the form and infrastructure of production (its enjoyability), consumption (its sustainability), and exchange (its neighbourliness).
2. The Toronto Women’s Bathhouse also decentres sexuality as a hierarchical set of identities based on orientation – even as it recognises wider inequalities of gender, disability and race. It is open to women (and transpeople) of any sexual identity and embraces sexuality as a mode of expression, exploration, interpersonal connection, adventure, confidence-building, and self-fulfilment. Thus the work performed by the sexual within the space is different, and sexual justice is more likely to be read along the lines of “the good, active sexual life” than as equal treatment between different sexual identities or orientations.
3. Intersectionality also works in varying and different ways when inequality is not read through a group identity model. So, at the Toronto Women’s Bathhouse, the economic is the condition for having a sexual event (ie, its economic viability), provides the means for communicating sexual interests and desire (as clothing, sex toys), and, it is argued by some, provides its

aesthetic/ ethos (Nash and Bain (2007) suggest TWB's sexual ethos is based on eroticising working-class lesbian sexuality). In the case of LETS, by contrast, the sexual is bracketed away from economic exchange (as a thing that cannot be traded), and as irrelevant to LETS (to the extent sex constitutes a form of personal, intra-household activity) since LETS is concerned with *inter*-household activity. At the same time, some people join LETS to find romantic/ sexual partners, and attraction may be a basis for deciding who to trade with. More generally, the marked aversion within LETS to linking sex to economic relations says something significant about the relationship between the two.

4. To the extent inequalities are recognised as occurring within these everyday utopic sites, how does their presence here relate to their wider societal organisation? In some cases, there may be a deliberate convergence (for instance, in the case of homophobic speech at Speakers' Corner), but exclusion or distinction also arise *despite* organisers (and even participants') explicit intentions. Desire, humour, and the dynamics of community formation can contribute to lines of exclusion and marginality, as can the articulation of interests. So, at Toronto Women's Bathhouse, despite the organising committee's explicit prohibition of transphobia, several attendees thought trans participants would find it harder to attract casual bathhouse partners. Likewise, in LETS schemes, norms and interests in comfort, security, ease of travel, and prior acquaintance or friendship caused members to veer towards trading with others that socially resembled them rather than following the logic of complementarity and trading with socially different others.
5. But I don't want to suggest that social inequalities only come from the "outside". I am also interested in the part the social structure (and dynamics) of an everyday utopia play in *producing* inequality. And the extent to which these spaces produce (or perform) inequalities in distinctive ways as a result of the co-constitutive relationship between the space's social structure (and dynamics), and the inequality in question.
6. More normatively, I want to ask, in considering these different everyday utopias, what balance is (sought to be) struck between redistributing economic and sexual power more fairly, and changing what economic and sexual justice consists of. For instance, one way of thinking about LETS is to see them as offering people, with less wealth, opportunities to access goods and services they otherwise could not (redistribution). But LETS can also be understood as posing an alternative form of economic justice through, for instance, reconstituting economic temporality (as slower paced, relaxed, satisfying, attentive, less alienated, sustainable etc.).
7. Likewise, if sexual justice is not simply about remedying inequalities or asymmetries of power, does sexual justice mean the pursuit of a richer, more adventurous, more "caring" sexuality? And what relationship does sexual justice have to the question of sexual "needs"; does justice depend on identifying something as a "need"? Can achieving greater sexual pleasure constitute justice if pleasure is defined as non-necessary?