

Moving Beyond Neverland: Reflecting Upon the State of the Diverse Economies Research Program and the Study of Alternative Economic Spaces

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Abstract

The project of examining economic diversity and alterity has grown significantly both within the discipline of geography and beyond. There now exists an expansive literature pertaining to diverse economies and alternative economic spaces, which continues to grow in new and exciting ways. In this observation piece we reflect upon the current state of the diverse economies literature and the study of alternative economic practices, which we argue is in need of more nuanced analysis in the form of self-critique. We suggest that such an analysis is possible by bridging the gap between ‘believers’ and ‘skeptics’. Researchers exploring the economic landscape must be critical, reflexive, and reach beyond literature and political boundaries while still being hopeful. We must explore common themes, shared concerns, and possibilities for future research. In this paper, we briefly consider two topics which are in need of further attention within this field of study: (1) the importance of power relations and gendered positions; (2) the significance of historical-geographic context. Those examining alterity and/or diversity must engage more frequently with one another as each of these fields offer lessons for enacting a radical politics of the economy rooted in hope; we must actively join together in our efforts to identify and document potentially emancipatory economic forms.

Introduction

Most of us are familiar with a tradition of Western story-telling, in which the bare act of believing can make something so. In Peter Pan the application of fairy dust can only make us fly if we succeed in thinking happy thoughts... Arguments of alterity and transformative affects are tinged with this hope – what we believe, what we say, how we speak and act and see may be able to constitute new realities, new futures. Of course, just believing does not make it so... (McKinnon, 2010, 259).

As McKinnon argues, the project of examining, documenting, and enacting economic diversity and alterity remains vital; although simply believing that diversity and alterity exists in the economic landscape does not make new realities so. The expansive literature pertaining to diverse economies and alternative economic spaces has grown in new and exciting ways and we suggest that these fields of study are worthy of critical reflection. A critical mass of work on diverse economies and alternative

economic spaces has emerged over time (see for example, Crossley, 2002; French, 2004; Leyshon et al., 2003; Fuller and Jonas, 2003; Miller, 2003; Pavlovskaya, 2004; Routledge, 2003). Though there may be differences in the emphasis of each theoretical framework, as those studying alternatives are primarily interested in uncovering the alterity of economic practices while scholars examining diversity do not necessarily take alterity as their starting point, there is nonetheless common ground between them as researchers working with each of these literatures seem devoted to deeper analysis of economic practices and the desire to explore concerns of social and economic justice. Along with the growth that has taken place in these fields, a polarization seems to have occurred between so-called ‘believers’ and ‘skeptics’ of alterity (Healy, 2009; Jonas, 2010; Fickey, 2011). The issue seems to boil down to whether an interest in the diversity of economic practices necessarily pre-supposes the alterity of such practices. Whereas some scholars are interested in exposing the diverse and variegated practices sustaining material life, others seemed to be more concerned to investigate the conditions and contexts that enable such practices to be viewed as alternatives, if not in direct opposition to capitalist hegemony. Though this polarization has been fruitful—forcing researchers to refine what constitutes a diverse economy and/or alternative practice—there remains a need for the further development of ideas.

Here we argue that the work of believers and skeptics, with regard to study of diversity as well as alterity, needs to be woven together; while the polarization has been somewhat beneficial, such division may also be hampering the practical potentials of the work. There is certainly a common understanding that there is no single, monochromatic economy, but the sense of hope that is embodied by the believers and lacking among the skeptics is of fundamental importance. Hope is needed if work is to continue moving beyond theoretical boundaries and into the realm of practice. Research which seeks to document diversity and alterity is often motivated by the negative effects of capitalist systems (such as the worker being cut off from the surplus generated) and the presence of other kinds of economic practices which may provide an expansion of social possibilities (Community Economies Collective, 2001; Fickey, 2011). The skeptics, for their part, provide important critiques that touch on issues of human rights and social justice at the heart of the diverse economies project. For example, critics have suggested that an alternative ‘social economy’ may be nothing more than a form of social-welfare capitalism (Amin et al., 2003). Others have argued that studies to understand alternative economic practices have been limited in empirical focus, emphasizing primarily western financial services (Samers, 2005). Exploitation, inequality, abuse, and marginalization are potentials within any economic practices, not just capitalist practices. However, if we want to foster the diverse economic practices that exist and develop alternatives, a nuanced understanding of the realities of economic geographies needs critique to be divorced from skepticism. Hope can be about seeing reality and potentiality, about celebrating the moral and transgressive possibilities of a diverse economy (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Fuller et al., 2010).

In this observation piece we reflect upon the current state of the diverse economies research project and the search for alterity in the economic landscape. We suggest that a more nuanced analysis is possible by engaging in conversation with recent studies and theorizations of alternative economic spaces and diverse economies. Overall, we briefly consider two topics that are in need of further attention: (1) the importance of power-relations and gendered positions, and (2) the significance of historical-geographic context. Those examining alterity and/or diversity must engage more frequently with each others’ ontological assumptions and ethical starting points as each of these fields offer lessons for enacting a

radical politics of the economy rooted in hope. Through the exploration of these topics, we find that common ground exists in the struggles encountered by both the believers and skeptics, offering avenues to enrich our understanding of the social context and historical depth in which these practices are shaped and negotiated. We must actively join together in our efforts to identify and document potentially emancipatory economic forms, regardless of whether or not we are a believer or a skeptic.

Building a Research Community

In 1996, J.K. Gibson-Graham published her ground breaking work, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Reflecting upon this work, Gibson-Graham states that this work 'was attempting to open up an imaginative space for economic alternatives at a point when they seemed to be entirely absent, even unwanted' (2008, 624). As Gibson-Graham argued, the diversity of economic practices had been harshly reduced within a binary framework of capitalism/non-capitalism, limiting both our understanding of economic geographies and our ability to adapt practices to meet changing economic needs. Substantial progress has been made with regard to the study of economic alternatives, so much so that years later in a lecture published in *Progress in Human Geography*, Gibson-Graham (2008) confidently recognizes the 'birth' of a diverse economies research community in the field of economic geography and provides concrete examples of the fostering of alternatives. Examples of activities that have typically been considered 'alternative' and have garnered the attention of researchers include: local currency systems such as local exchange trading systems, cooperatives, credit unions, barter networks, and social enterprises (Amin et al., 2003; Jonas, 2010; Lee et al., 2004; Lee, 2006; Fuller et al., 2010; Leyshon et al., 2003; North, 2007; Williams et al., 2003; Fickey and Samers, 2012).

Although studies of diverse economies continue to provide rich understandings of economic practices that build individual and community well-being, the birth and further development of the diverse economies research program has not occurred without growing pains. Samers suggests that researchers have been seduced by small-scale production, romanticizing small-scale, local informal production, consumption, and exchange (Samers, 2005) and further argues that many scholars often fail to provide an adequate distinction between 'informal employment' and 'alternative / informal economies'. This seduction has tended to result in less-than-critical engagements with so-called 'diverse' practices. The result has often been a failure to examine and understand the living conditions produced within these economic systems.

Power-relations and gendered positions

A call for a more critical (though still hopeful) analysis is certainly worthwhile as diverse economies may be experienced in different ways by different people and as such are not immune to producing negative conditions for some. Carnegie's (2008) work on diverse economies in the village of Oelua, Indonesia, is an example of a diverse economies study attuned to the possibility that within diverse non-capitalist economic practices exist negative circumstances. Although Carnegie acknowledges examples of diverse economic activities which are exploitative and undermine community well-being, she does

not explore these activities in depth. Rather, the goal for Carnegie is to create a language of economic diversity by documenting the existence of non-capitalist economic transactions, such as hunting and farming within Oelua's economy. The illumination of these practices may then be utilized to widen the possibilities for local and regional economic development, allowing development practitioners to explore how 'surplus labor is (and could be) produced, appropriated, and distributed in ways that meet local needs, values and aspirations for building sustainable, ethical, place-based economies' (Carnegie, 2008, 367).

Issues of gender, class, and race have long been motivating factors for understanding and developing diverse economies (for examples, see Lawson, 2005; Oberhauser, 2002, 2005; Oberhauser and Pratt, 2004). Unfortunately, questions of gender, class and race as lines of inequality within diverse economies have been somewhat neglected—a problem reflected in Carnegie's piece mentioned above, despite an acknowledgment of exploitation and negative impacts of diverse economic activities. It is in this way that Wright's recent work offers significant contributions to the diverse economies research program. Wright (2010) explores the intersection of power relations and economic strategies to argue for an understanding of diverse economies negotiated within responsibilities, obligations, and access to opportunities that differ between individuals (with regard to differential power relations, see also Aguilar, 2005; Kelly, 2005). Drawing on recent work with residents of a small Filipino village involved with three different social movements, Wright examines the diversity of strategies employed by three individuals with varying socio-economic and gendered positions. Community members develop 'spaces-beyond-capitalism' through their efforts to overcome problems and debilitating outcomes associated with previously practiced capitalist strategies. A focus on power relations from the perspective of individuals struggling to create alternatives allows Wright to demonstrate that diverse economies are neither inherently exclusionary, nor inclusionary, but are experienced differentially within a community. Diversity and alterity certainly exists within the economic landscape and a critical focus on gendered relations within that landscape—in ways that demonstrate the leveling and unleveling potential of economic practices—will contribute to our work aimed at transformation.

Historic-geographic contexts

As Wright argues in her work, the diverse economic strategies employed by individuals will be influenced by socio-economic and gendered positions. We would also add that alternative practices are also differentiated based on place and therefore the historic-geographic contexts in which individuals live matters. In their examination of alterity's geographies, Samers and Pollard suggest that, "notions of alterity are not simply subjective, but produced and mediated through particular territories, and collectively (and not just individually) imagined and performed" (Samers and Pollard, 2010, 49). Recent work builds on this theme of understanding the particularity of the places created through economic practices. We provide a brief discussion below of such studies.

Researchers have started to delve into the historic-geographic contexts of diversity and alterity and suggest that our current interest in studying diverse/alternative economic practices runs the risk of producing ahistorical narratives, portraying such practices as contemporary phenomenon (Bryson and Taylor, 2010; Jonas, 2010). Bryson and Taylor (2010) argue that although Gibson-Graham's work

encourages geographers to engage in studies of diverse economies and to expose that which was once hidden, it is unfortunate that much of the literature pertaining to diverse economies implies that alterity is a new process rather than something that has been an important feature of economies for centuries. They empirically support this argument in their work on mutual dependency that explores diversity and alterity within the evolution of a single production system in a specific geographic region – the British metal trades in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

McKinnon's (2010) study of diversity and post-development project moves away from exploring diverse economic practices, but continues to emphasize the importance of historic-geographical context through the examination of the emergence of indigenous rights issues in northern Thailand. In her work, McKinnon applies the notion of diversity and 'making visible' to questions of social and political organization and begins her analysis with the formation of Thailand's modern borders in the early 1900s. Such historic-geographic context, including a discussion of how and where highlanders have lived throughout the last century, is necessary to understand the recent 'alternative' indigenous people's movement in Thailand. Working through a similar theoretical lens, Carswell's (2002) study challenging the portrayal of the historically marginalized economic activities of women as 'recent' economic diversification uses historical documents along with oral histories to argue that the trading activities of women in southern Ethiopia have persisted over time and are not new. She further argues that the marginalized position of women in the community and in the understanding of economic activity in the region has long rendered their economic contributions invisible, despite their long term importance in diversifying the economy in southern Ethiopia. Being hopeful requires an understanding of where we have come from—the forces that shape our political, social and economic contexts within particular regions and territories—which provides us with the foundation to build, adjust and change our economic landscapes.

Final thoughts

Studies of diverse economies and alternative economic spaces, although continuing to grow at an amazing rate, leave much to be addressed, particularly in relation to each other. The critical yet hopeful potential of economic geographies attuned to both historical depth and contemporary social factors influencing individuals and communities is significant. In the studies mentioned above, gendered and historical perspectives open up contextual depth; diverse/alternative economic practices are shown to be not new but enduring and may be practiced differently depending on power-relations and social positioning. As in many cases, diverse and alternative economic practices have persisted over time—pre- and post- capitalism—as livelihood strategies, assisting in the creation of economic geographies that allow individuals to produce, exchange and consume all values necessary for being and the sustenance of social life (Lee, 2010). However, it is important to remember that the potential for exploitation still exists within such alternative economic activities. Scholars have noted the need for an historical geography of alternative economic spaces which grounds discussions of the alterity debate in the past (Bryson and Taylor, 2010), fearing that geographers will develop an ahistorical account of alterity under capitalism. Likewise, new directions and possibilities for research include the need to further explore gender, class and racial inequalities in alternative economic spaces (Lawson, 2005; Oberhauser, 2002, 2005; Oberhauser and Pratt, 2004; Wright, 2010; Blake, 2010). Other emerging lines

of critical inquiry include questions on the role of the state (Jonas, 2010; Hodkinson, 2010; Fickey, 2011), circuits of value (Jonas, 2010; Lee et al., 2004; Lee, 2006; Lee, 2010), differential power relationships (Aguilar, 2005; Hughes, 2005; Smith and Stenning, 2006; Wright, 2010), as well as the significance of diverse economic practices in the 'majority world' (Carmody, 2005; Hughes, 2005; Wright, 2010).

As suggested in the epigraph, the project of examining economic diversity and alterity remains vital; simply believing that diversity and alterity exist in the economic landscape, however, does not create new realities or futures. The duty of the engaged researcher, in search of new economic development practices and livelihood strategies, remains defined as, 'to expose what was formerly hidden, highlighting new and emerging economic, social and cultural forms, and above all celebrate the actual diversity of apparently singular existing practices through the lens of new categories and constructs' (Fuller et al., 2010, xxv). It is, and will continue to be, hard work to investigate such economic practices, the actors, and their historic-geographic contexts. As we continue to explore the economic landscape, researchers must be critical, reflexive, and reach beyond literature boundaries. Those examining alterity and/or diversity must engage more frequently with one another as each of these fields offer lessons for enacting radical politics of economies rooted in hope. We must actively join together in our efforts to understand and produce knowledge about what was once hidden, and to learn from others in search of potentially emancipatory economic forms.

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