

## THE DIVERSE ECONOMIES APPROACH

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The approach to political economy outlined in this chapter is one that self-consciously places thinking in service of making other worlds possible. The grounds of this Diverse Economies approach are squarely located in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Marxian and feminist theory, but its genealogy has been shaped by important epistemological and ontological ruptures within these traditions. For all of us interested in alternative theories of political economy, the famous Marxist adage that we seek to understand the world in order to change it remains a driving motivation. Yet, *how* we understand and what understanding *produces* is where our approach offers a distinctive stance, one that we characterise in this chapter as a *political economy of possibility*.

In the mid-1990s, the joint authorial presence of J.K. Gibson-Graham was fed up with ‘waiting for the revolution’—the strategic dead end in which Marxian political economy appeared to be mired. The piercing vision of capitalism that had been so meticulously theorised by critical scholars (and to which Gibson-Graham had contributed) had erected an edifice that was ever-inventive and all-encompassing. Leftist thinkers all appeared to agree that there was no ‘outside’ to capitalism. This was presented as an unfortunate, undeniable, toe-stubbing fact. In *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (1996), Gibson-Graham proposed that capitalist dominance was not a fact, but the product of a hegemonic ‘capitalocentric’ discourse that was strangling any attempt to imagine and enact other economies. To make this argument, they drew on anti-essentialist Marxian political economy and feminist poststructuralist thinking and, in doing so, rejected epistemological realism and the essentialist ontology of structural determinism. By naming this hegemonic discourse ‘capitalocentrism’, they shed critical light on the way that ‘Big C’ Capitalism had become the only model of what an economy was and could be. In its capitalist guise, the ‘economy’ was represented as having an insatiable need for growth and an inherent resilience to crisis. All other forms of economy were rendered inadequate or non-viable in comparison to Capitalism. Although capitalocentric discourse seemed to endow the radical theorist with superior powers of insight into the structures of economy and society, it had politically disabling effects.

Rather than waiting for the revolution, Gibson-Graham set out to challenge the dominant capitalocentric discourse that had the performative effect of limiting possibility. Focusing on radical heterogeneity and difference rather than dominance, they proposed a *diverse economy*. This was a language of economy that was more inclusive of the wide range of practices that make and support livelihoods, create and distribute wealth, marshal and

steward resources, make infrastructures and shape futures. They argued there was a need to broaden the scope of who might act to reshape economies and, thus, who was the 'subject of economy'. They also proposed starting right now with what is already at hand by engaging in collective action to build ethical *community (not capitalist) economies*.

A collective of scholars and practitioners working with Gibson-Graham and each other have subsequently identified their performative intellectual stance as a form of ontological politics (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2015). For the Community Economies Collective, ethical economic practices already exist in abundance (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2021). Determining just how these practices might connect and cohere to build a different world is the current task for a political economy of possibility. New kinds of economies are not there to be 'discovered': they must be performed and experimented with. This is a materialist argument that recognises that a different economy cannot be thought into existence; rather, it must be enacted and made durable by multiple means, including infrastructures, subjects, ecologies *and* theories.

This chapter briefly introduces the principal theoretical contributors to the Diverse Economies approach, namely: anti-essentialist Marxian political economy and feminist poststructuralism. It concludes with a discussion of the ever-evolving practice of making community economies and some research directions for a political economy of possibility.

## **A diverse economy of class processes**

Theorising diverse economies started by challenging the singularity of economic identity with a reading of Marxian political economy that emphasised difference, not dominance (Gibson-Graham 2020). These readings were inspired by the anti-essentialist analysis of Marxian political economy developed by Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff (1987). The two components of Resnick and Wolff's work that have been particularly important in developing the Diverse Economies approach are their class analysis and their introduction of Louis Althusser's theory of overdetermination into political economy.

The distinctive reading of Marx offered by Resnick and Wolff draws attention to the use of class as a verb to describe the *process* of producing, appropriating and distributing surplus labour, in contrast to the more familiar use of class as a noun to describe groups of people defined by their structural location with respect to the mode of production. The class process points to the particular role of human labour in creating new wealth (often in concert with exploitation of nature) and to the legally and extra-legally regulated mechanisms with their varying degrees of agreement or coercion that govern how new wealth is generated and apportioned.

In *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Marx ([1867]1976) distinguished the capitalist class process from other historical forms of class. The capitalist class process is one in which workers produce surplus labour that is then appropriated (or taken) by the capitalist as surplus value and distributed in ways that might benefit the latter. The market price paid for waged labour masks this process of wealth appropriation. Marx theorised this hidden transaction as a form of theft from the producers, the rightful owners of this wealth. Marx identified other class processes. In the feudal class process, lords directly appropriate peasants' surplus

labour in-kind in the form of products such as grain or livestock. Traditionally, this arrangement was underpinned by the lord's commitment to protect the peasants, and the peasants' right to access land. In the collective (or cooperative) class process, the workers jointly own the surplus labour that they produce together. In this self-appropriative class process, a single producer owns what she or he produces. And in the slave class process, the master owns not just all that the slaves produce, but the slaves themselves. This arrangement is frequently intertwined with an ideology of racial hierarchy which means that slaves are subject to multiple and ever-present abuses.

Resnick and Wolff's anti-essentialist Marxism opened up 'the economy' to diversity by pointing to the continued co-existence of these different class processes. Their analysis also pointed to the prevalence of class processes in a range of sites, not just in industrial enterprises or mines, but also in households, farms, schools, universities and churches (for example, Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2000; Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2001). It brought to light how, in a modern so-called 'capitalist' economy, a large number of people's livelihoods are maintained by participating in non-capitalist class processes, whether it be in their own small business or farm, a coercive feudal household, an employee-owned business or worker-owned cooperative, or a slave enterprise. Furthermore, all of us are involved in multiple class processes (at work, at home and in the community) and, therefore, occupy multiple economic subject positions.

This reframing has major implications for how we think about economic determination, that is, what causes economic restructuring and social transformation. The anti-essentialist approach advanced by Resnick and Wolff drew inspiration from Louis Althusser's concept of overdetermination (Althusser 1968). Simply put, this means acknowledging the myriad dynamics and relationships at work in a world in which things are multiply determined. No one dynamic (such as the appropriative moment of the class process or the drive to accumulate) is necessarily more efficacious than any other. In a world understood as being comprised of multiple coexisting determinations it is up to us as thinkers, writers and researchers to make decisions about how we proceed with making sense of the world. Resnick and Wolff explain this in terms of using an 'entry point' (1987, pp.25-30). Their entry point for analysis is class understood as a process. Selecting an entry point is itself an overdetermined process and the outcome of a host of interactions, as Resnick and Wolff (1987, pp.27) describe:

We would [...] point to the variety of political, cultural, and economic processes whose interaction overdetermined our deployment of the class process as our conceptual entry point. Among them would be certain educational and political processes in which we have participated, as well as certain imaginative processes in which we conjured up visions of a future society that we might like to see, as well as certain economic processes in which we were constrained to participate, and so on.

Entry points are the culmination of our pasts as well as our projections for the type of world we want to live in and that we think might be feasible. This signals the end of the authoritative all-knowing theorist who has the 'correct' analysis, ushering in a more pragmatic, humble, self-consciously performative and, thus, political thinker.

The entry point for analysis in a Diverse Economies approach is ethical economic action and practice, with the aim of expanding opportunities for collective actions that might help produce a more just and more livable world. Class as a process provides one lens for helping do this because of how it sheds light on different ways of appropriating surplus labour that are less exploitative and different ways of distributing surplus value that will contribute to the well-being of people and the planet. As we discuss below, other lenses used in the Diverse Economies approach focus on different forms of work and ways of remunerating labour; different types of transactions and ways of establishing or bypassing commensurability; different forms of property and how these might be commoned to benefit people and the planet; and different forms of finance and ways of investing in futures.

In terms of ways of appropriating surplus labour, one strategy is to ensure that workers receive adequate remuneration for their labours (and that they work in safe conditions). This political intervention, typically the focus of leftist political struggles, targets exploitation and the appropriative moment of the class process. Another strategy, also focused on the appropriative moment, is for workers to become the appropriators of their own surplus labour through setting up worker-owned cooperatives or through employee buyout schemes. Struggles such as Argentina's *recuperadas por sus trabajadores* (or worker-recuperated enterprises) movement have helped to make this type of intervention more visible by showing how capitalist enterprises can be transformed into worker cooperatives (Heras and Vieta 2020).

In terms of ways of distributing surplus labour, there are a range of strategies that can contribute to well-being. In a stereotypical capitalist class process, the priority is to maximise profits, for example, by distributing surplus value to managers who can pressure workers to work faster; to accountants who will devise ways to minimise tax payments; and to marketing firms to increase product sales. But surplus is a potentiating force that can be used to generate well-being both within and beyond the firm. For example, some of the worker cooperatives in Argentina take the view that the surplus labour they produce does not belong to them but to the wider community in which their enterprises are located (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013). These cooperatives make significant distributions to schools, health care centres, libraries and the like. Simultaneously, workers in these cooperatives pay themselves a living wage, rather than an extravagant one, to ensure that they generate surplus that can be distributed. In the Mondragon cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain, surplus is sometimes distributed across the network of cooperatives. For example, during times of economic crisis, workers in one cooperative may be paid to re-train (via a distribution of surplus generated by others in the network) so they can shift to working in another cooperative. In social enterprises, especially those with a non-profit legal form, surplus is distributed back into the enterprise to help generate more job opportunities for those who are often marginalised from employment options.

Importantly, one consequence of the anti-essentialism that characterises the Diverse Economies approach is that it does not assume that capitalist enterprises are necessarily destructive (Cameron 2020). Capitalist enterprises *can* appropriate surplus labour from workers in ways that are non-exploitative (for example, by providing safe working conditions and high levels of remuneration for workers, and by incorporating workers in decision-

making). Capitalist enterprises *can* distribute surplus value in ways that will benefit communities and environments (and in the next section we provide some examples of how this is happening in the manufacturing sector).

A second consequence of the anti-essentialism of the Diverse Economies approach is that it provides a starting point for dislodging 'Big C' Capitalism. In place of discussion of the capitalist system or the capitalist context or Capitalism, the focus is on ways of producing, appropriating and distributing surplus labour in a capitalist class process. Our ontological entry point is that we live in a radically heterogeneous economic world in which there are multiple economic actions, practices and possibilities. It makes no sense to ask about how Capitalism operates or how Capitalism swallows-up other economic systems or how Capitalism is aided and abetted by neoliberalism. These types of questions reflect a capitalocentric framing and what we have elsewhere discussed as instances of 'strong theory' (Cameron 2020; Gibson-Graham 2006, 2020). Instead, in a Diverse Economies approach, the focus is on interrogating specific examples and instances without assuming in advance the determinants that may or may not be at work, deploying what we have elsewhere discussed as 'weak theory' (*ibid*). This does not preclude taking a hard, critical look at the power of certain capitalists and capitalist businesses to, for example, squander wealth, corrupt processes of public regulation, pervert justice and enroll racist practices to suit their accumulation goals. In a diverse economy, however, competition and private interest are exercised in many different ways. And, in an overdetermined economy, a range of non-class actions affects whether society's wealth is pooled or dispersed equitably, or not. Regarding class as a process offers one lens for contributing to ethical economic actions and practices because of how it opens a plethora of avenues for tracing flows of wealth and economic power and, importantly, proposing new mechanisms by which these flows can be directed to building a more livable world.

### **Expanding the diverse economy**

The work of feminist economists and feminist poststructuralist thinkers plays a significant role in expanding the conception of a Diverse Economy to include all those 'other' activities and practices that contribute to livelihoods but that mainstream economics ignores, silences or renders invisible. The empirical work of feminist economists has been crucial in documenting the scale of what was excluded from 'the economy' in both neoclassical economics and most other traditions in political economy. The philosophical approach of feminist poststructuralists helped to expose how capitalocentric discourse worked to subordinate the power of these other economic realms. Deconstruction and queering provided techniques for further challenging the singularity of economic identity and the essentialism of structural determination.

Marilyn Waring's (1988) documentation of the extent to which women's unpaid labour contributed to a national economy was a major eye-opener. Feminist scholars documented the significant amount of time that women spent doing unpaid work and non-market-oriented activities such as housework, volunteering, child-rearing, and care for the elderly and infirmed (see Folbre 2001). The revelation that this women's work was uncounted and unvalued

severely undermined economists' claims to neutral coverage of what constituted an economy. Women's work was positioned as having no determining effect on economic fortunes. It was important but subordinate to the work that generated wealth, transacted commodities and made investments.

The empirical research of feminist economists had a parallel in the work of social scientists concerned with the 'developing' or majority world. Economic anthropologists and informal economy scholars pointed to the quantitative dominance of workers involved in subsistence and self-employment in functioning economies that were, nevertheless, regarded as backward, stagnant and not dynamic enough to raise people out of poverty, as did capitalist economic activity (for example, Hart 1985; Ostrom 1990; Gudeman 2001; see also Gibson *et al.* 2018). Others have pointed to the global geographic spread of economic practices such as cooperativism and community-based financing by diasporic communities (for example, Hossein 2019). It seemed that there were a great many practices that contributed to livelihoods but did not contribute to 'the economy' as it was conventionally understood.

The diversity of all these economic activities was captured in the simple representation of the economy as an iceberg (Figure 23.1). Visible above the water line are the capitalist businesses, the commodity exchange markets and the paid workforce that constitute what is seen as the legitimate economy. Below the waterline are the myriad additional activities and practices that people are involved in and that help to keep them alive. This image by J.K. Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies Collective took-off as a tool for undermining capitalist dominance, shifting to a language of the diverse economy, and enacting a more inclusive vision of economy in which people made multiple contributions in different class and non-class processes, and in a variety of settings, not just the formal workplace.

The inventory work that went into elaborating the Diverse Economies approach was accompanied by a critique of the knowledge/power nexus by which unpaid labour and informal economic practices are subordinated within capitalocentric discourse. Feminist poststructuralists (also employing an anti-essentialist epistemology) used Derrida's method of deconstruction to unpick the binary structures central to Enlightenment knowledge and show that meaning is always in process and incomplete. Contrary to the common misunderstanding that deconstruction refers to the act of breaking something down and demolishing meaning, this way of seeing highlights moments of contradiction and undecidability in what appears to be neatly conceived structures or text; and it pinpoints the decisions and arbitrary violence intrinsic to all attempts to fix meaning. The effect of fixing the meaning of Capitalism (the tip of the iceberg) as opposed to non-capitalism (everything under the waterline), and then of conflating Capitalism with the idea of 'an economy' was, Gibson-Graham (1996) argued, to violently make less credible a whole swathe of economic activities (in addition to class processes) that have kept the world afloat for millennia.

It was the poststructuralist feminist critique of phallogocentrism—that is, systems of knowledge that privileged the masculinised dominant term in any binary—that inspired Gibson-Graham (1996) to propose that economic theory was capitalocentric and that capitalocentrism was standing in the way of imagining and enacting 'other' economies. Capitalocentrism positions all economic activities in relation to a set of capitalist practices (namely, waged labour, market exchange of commodities and privately accumulating

business), as either the same as, a complement to, the opposite of, or existing within the container of capitalism. There is no distinctive identity or independent dynamism granted to a wide range of activities that include, for example, caring labour, reciprocal exchange of labour, worker owned cooperatives, sole proprietorships, ritual gifting and sharing with natural ecologies or other species. The consequences of this discursive violence are only just now becoming widely recognised.

**Figure 23.1: Diverse Economies Iceberg**



Source: [The Diverse Economies Iceberg by the Community Economies Collective](#) is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License,

A political economy of possibility accepts that we can never escape the undecidability of meaning. What constitutes the economy will never be settled definitively. But herein lies the political moment of *political* economy—the moment when a decision is made to fix meaning (temporarily, at least) because of the effect it might perform, the actions it might inform and the worlds that this might make possible. Once a diverse economy of radical heterogeneity is sketched out, the political moment of stepping into the fray and performing new meanings

presents itself. This includes identifying the diversity of activities, unravelling the various logics or determinations that impel the activities (for example, care, service, stewardship, survival), and recognising that these things are overdetermined (not just by familiar socio-legal formations, but by ways of seeing and knowing with which we are unacquainted). In the Diverse Economies approach, decisions about which elements and alignments to bring to the fore involve both a calculation and a leap of faith about ways that economic activities and practices might be reshaped to service people and the planet. This is not to 'wish away' embedded relations of power but to acknowledge that there are always openings and opportunities. As discussed above, as thinkers, writers and researchers we make decisions about our entry points, and this includes deciding on the extent to which we focus on what seems to be constantly obstructing change or whether we seek out those moments that reveal how things might be otherwise, with a view to strengthening these possibilities.

Developing new ways of researching determination frequently comes up against the assumptions of connection that are part of a dominant knowledge system. Here the strategy of queering as suggested by queer politics of the 1980s and 1990s has been useful. Queering destabilised meanings that were once viewed as essentially locked together, unravelling the clear lining-up of the male/female binary in terms of biology, socialisation, cultural roles, desire, sex and gender (for example, Butler 1990; Sedgwick 1993). If elements of personal identity could be queered, so too could elements of economic identity. In place of a Capitalist whole comprised of entangled capitalist enterprises, commodified transactions and wage-labour relations, the Diverse Economies approach delinks these elements, such that they are regarded as nothing more than one way of running an enterprise, one way of transacting goods and services and one way of remunerating work. Furthermore, there are no necessary logics driving these elements: capitalist enterprises need not be governed by profit-making to the exclusion of other considerations; markets need not operate on a basis of price-taking; and wage-labour relations need not be cornered in an unending tussle between employer and employee.

Returning to the industrial heartland of political economy, a Diverse Economies approach has been used to study an emerging cluster of manufacturers in a way that illustrates this delinking of elements. The study focuses on manufacturers who are guided by a commitment to generating better employment outcomes (including for those who are marginalised from employment options) and to manufacturing in ways that will reduce adverse environmental impacts (Gibson *et al.* 2019). The manufacturers include cooperatives, social enterprises *and* capitalist enterprises (in public and private ownership). Their shared commitment to better social and environmental outcomes shapes how these diverse forms of the firm are appropriating surplus labour (in a way that prioritises workers' rights for fair wages and safe working conditions) and distributing surplus value (to transform their production processes and reduce environmental impacts). Capitalist enterprises are taking their place alongside social enterprises and cooperatives to problem-solve ways in which manufacturing can redress social and environmental harms, including by fostering novel transactions. As part of this study, the researchers have stepped into the fray by engaging with politicians and policy makers to make visible the new culture of manufacturing that these firms are building (Cameron and Gibson 2020).

In locking together a set of practices as Capitalism, 'the state' has been seen by some political economists as inescapably interwoven into the whole, with the latest neoliberal iteration of the state serving to protect and advance the interests of capitalists (for example, Harvey 2007; Brenner *et al.* 2010). For others, there is some hope that the vestiges of a social democratic welfare orientation can be worked with (for example, Eskelinen 2020). Recognising that the state is a complex and diverse set of entities, the Diverse Economy approach theorises a diversity of state practices, refusing to line them up into any pre-determined structure (see also Ferguson 2010; Mazzucato 2013), leaving it possible to use a queer logic to be creative about economic change. The role of state payments to citizens in a diverse economy is a case in point. Feminists have not been reticent in commandeering the state to enact changes that benefit the lives of women and children. The fight for equal pay in the paid workplace is one agenda that has been championed at the national state level, but so too have struggles to get wealth distributed to carers, to child-care, and to people with disabilities and the aged who seek to live independent and dignified lives. These state payments are *investments* in economies of care, which are supplemented by vast contributions of unpaid, gifted and volunteer labour largely done by women. Current interest in a Universal Basic Income signals another strategy by which state redistribution to guarantee a livable income is a way of investing in economies in which people are free to work on generative projects of environmental repair, creative art, social connection, innovative care, waste management, renewable technologies, sustainable travel and so on (Cameron 2017).

The diversifying of the economy that feminism helped make possible, the deconstructing of the economy that poststructuralist feminism enabled, and the queering of the economy that queer theorists and activists provoked has not just opened up the scope of political economy interventions. There are also implications for how the subjects of economies are conceived. For example, in the emerging economic landscape of just and sustainable manufacturing, the meaning of 'worker' and 'employer' is shifting. A hybrid economic subject emerges as a maker, a social justice producer and an environmental carer. This subject is positioned not in antagonism to the capitalist, but in antagonism to unscrupulous competitors, neglectful regulators and unthinking consumers. Providing a Universal Basic Income defuses the notion of the 'unemployed', 'unproductive' and dependent citizen; and it activates new economic subjects, potentially as direct subsistence providers, community builders, cultural producers and extended family carers.

### **Performing more ethical economies**

So far, we have presented the Diverse Economies approach as one that reframes the economy as radically heterogeneous and as populated by myriad diverse economic activities. Many of these activities exploit people and the planet—but not all. A diverse economy includes economic activities that are conducted in other ways, some perhaps recognising ethical interdependence and honouring reciprocity, others purposefully striving for equitable sustainability. The foundational anti-essentialism of the Diverse Economies approach opens up the economy as a space of possibility. Yet, this discursive opening up does not guarantee concrete change. If more ethical economies are to be realised, they must be imagined,

enacted and made durable. This work is not wish-fulfillment, but involves pragmatic and strategic steps about how to use what is at hand in order to help make other worlds possible.

A starting point for Diverse Economies researchers is to develop inventories of different forms of work and ways of remunerating labour; different forms of enterprise and ways of appropriating and distributing surplus; different types of transactions and ways of establishing or bypassing commensurability; different forms of property and ways of accessing and benefiting from these; and different forms of finance and ways of investing in futures. Scholars from a variety of disciplines are taking this work into a range of directions, as illustrated by entries in *The Handbook of Diverse Economies* (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020).

J.K. Gibson-Graham and members of the Community Economies Collective are interested in those practices that enact ethical concern for the fortunes of the 'other' and the 'whole'. We are particularly interested in bringing to visibility those that enact an ethic of care for: (a) surviving well (by people and the planet); (b) distributing surplus to grow social and environmental well-being; (c) encountering others (human and non-human) responsibly; (d) making, sharing and caring for commonly held and common pool resources; (e) investing in equitable and flourishing futures; and (f) consuming sustainably. The contours of a theory of *community economies* have developed out of inventorying real live cases of ethical economic action around these six concerns (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013).

Following Jean-Luc Nancy (1991), we theorise community as always in the process of becoming, as not presuming sameness and, following new developments in ecological humanities, as not only 'human'. Although community is usually associated with groups of people, we challenge ourselves to envision community as a process of enactment with earth others as well as humans. We recentre the idea of community on the making of more-than-human ecological livelihoods (Miller 2019) involving the participation of plants, animals, atmospheres, soils, humans, bacteria and more. A political economy of possibility shifts focus away from a sole interest in the capitalocentric concerns of paid work, capitalist business, market exchange, private property and market finance with their associated 'driving motivations' of individualism, personal gain, private ownership, competition and growth. This political economy involves stepping into the mess to activate and support ethical action around care for the ecological basis of life, and for the wellbeing of people and the planet (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013).

In a series of place-based experiments, we have engaged citizen researchers to test out new ways of making community economies possible. In the resource region of the Latrobe Valley in southeastern Australia, the Community Partnering Project used poststructuralist participatory action research to develop an economic pathway based on the 'assets' of those most marginalised by restructuring in the region, following the downsizing and privatisation of its local state-owned coal mines and power stations (Cameron and Gibson 2005). What came to the fore was the diversity of people's creative outlets. The project saw citizen-led initiation of three social enterprises, a community garden, a Santa's Workshop making Christmas decorations, and a woodworking and repair shed. The attempt to reframe people rather than coal as the 'resource' at the centre of the Latrobe Valley economy had a large impact on those involved, but it did not gain the needed support of local government. Caught-up in political jockeying, the community-based initiatives that were started during the period of

research continued for several years (in the case of Santa's Workshop, for a decade) but eventually fizzled out.

In so many resource extraction regions in Australia and around the world, an antagonistic 'jobs versus environment' discourse corrals thinking. For the *ecological* health and well-being of the Latrobe Valley to be placed on an equal footing with that of *human* health and well-being was a long way off at the turn of the millennium when the Community Partnering Project was running. In Australia's resource regions, that shift is yet to be embraced, but small steps are being made. In recent years, the Valley has suffered major environmental challenges from a prolonged mine fire, caused by company negligence. There has been increasing community recognition of the extent of damage to the health of people and ecologies wrought by decades of brown coal mining and electricity generation, and there is greater preparedness to act on social and environmental harms. In this context, a combined union and environmental movement initiative, Earthworker Cooperative, is putting the well-being of people and the environment at the heart of its operations. Government support is uneven and, once again, the necessary institutional backing that this venture requires is not easy to find. The Latrobe Valley is, however, an important test-site for making community economies possible. There is an appetite for change and the availability of people willing to shift their old economic identity and embrace new commitments to environmental care and collective business. The power of a discourse of capitalist extractivism as the ultimate provider of material wealth is being undermined by its impact on embodied well-being but, without a supportive infrastructure of laws, regulations and education, experiments in a renewable future are vulnerable.

One of the conditions of bringing community economies into existence are metrics that can clearly demonstrate their benefit. To measure is to make real in our metricised society. Feminist economists used this insight to great effect and have now influenced national governments to regularly collect data on unpaid caring and household labour. The imputed value of this labour is equal if not more than the value created in the commoditised economy (Ironmonger 1996). A political economy of possibility can extend this success and begin to measure the return on investment that care affords, or how environmental repair and change of habits can reduce ecological footprint impacts.

In a different place-based project in suburban Paris, we have used quantitative tools to document the value of commoning and to make the case, in terms that resonate with policy-makers, for why there should be support for community-based initiatives founded on social and environmental justice (Petrescu *et al.* 2020). R-Urban was an urban commons project initiated in 2011 by the activist architecture practice atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa) on unused urban land in Colombes, a multicultural municipality on the outskirts of Paris where residents have incomes below the national average and where social housing towers are interspersed with single-family dwellings. The project was centred on community food production, materials recycling and activities for transitioning to a smaller urban environmental footprint. It included a micro-farm, family garden plots, cafe, teaching space, compost school and a self-constructed community recycling and eco-construction centre with workshop space, materials storage, a design studio and an apartment. The researchers adapted the Community Economy Return on Investment (CEROI) developed by Gibson-

Graham *et al.* (2013) and presented the community economies accounts for one year (2015) for R-Urban. The accounts documented the direct financial revenues generated by R-Urban (such as sales from the resident-run cafe), the value of unpaid volunteer labour inputs, the value of increased individual capacity (including the value of skills that were developed that led to employment outcomes), and the costs saved (including the costs saved for individuals and households, the state and the planet). According to these calculations, in 2015 the Community Economy Investment of €1.2m resulted in a Community Economy Return on Investment of 180 per cent. However, these outcomes, even framed in terms of their return on investment, were not sufficient to sway a new right-wing municipal administration, and the project was subsequently evicted and replaced by a parking lot. Nevertheless, this is not the end of the story. The R-Urban model has been replicated in three other urban areas of Paris (in Gennevilliers, Nanterre and Bagneux, by aaa) and in two areas of London (in Hackney Wick and Poplar, by PublicWorks), and in these locations there has been funding support from local municipalities. Using a tool based on the idea of return on investment may seem to be ceding to the dominant economisation of lifeworlds. If a political economy of possibility is to proceed, though, tools are needed to track inputs and outputs of money, labour, care, conviviality and experimentation, making these inputs and outputs more visible and helping to add to the infrastructure that might support the shift to more renewable futures.

The research in the Latrobe Valley and Paris are just two examples of the ways that members of the Community Economies Collective have used the Diverse Economies approach to enact a political economy of possibility. The work starts with the economic diversity that is already at hand and mobilises this diversity for more ethical economies.

### **Where to for a political economy of possibility?**

The Diverse Economies approach has been shaped by some of the significant epistemological and ontological ruptures within the traditions of Marxian and feminist thought and practice. What has resulted is an embrace of performativity and anti-essentialism as the basis for progressing a political economy of possibility. The performative understanding means that in a Diverse Economies approach, theory and research are a means for building worlds. How and what we think matters. Theorising economic diversity outside of a capitalocentric framing supports research to make more visible the multitude of possibilities that abound and that might be acted on. Using an anti-essentialist understanding means that there is a willingness to trace rather than assume identity and alignments, and to use empirical description to unravel potential pathways and connections. Thus, for example, relations of power or actions of 'the state' are to be investigated rather than presumed. There are many entry-points into researching the radical heterogeneity of diverse economies. Our thinking and our political commitments are directed towards fostering ethically oriented community economies.

Like so many others, Diverse Economies researchers are grappling with how to respond to what has been called 'The Great Acceleration' (Steffen *et al.* 2015): the speeding up of both human activity and human planetary impact since the mid-Twentieth Century. One promising avenue involves the radical rethinking of what it means to be human, with implications for the

distinction between economy, society and environment (Miller 2019). The idea of the more-than-human has been crucial for demonstrating how the human body is not a bounded entity, but part of the worlds of microbes, other entities, flows, relations and energies. These worlds encompass multiple beings that are engaged in entangled practices of sustenance and securing livelihoods (Miller 2020). Thus, it makes no sense to distinguish between economies, societies and environments; instead, we might imagine a multiplicity of interdependent livelihood practices which involve humans to varying degrees. Where this might take us is an open question. However, as a first step, we might start to trace out some of the lesser-known livelihood practices to which humans could play supporting roles.

Here we are also learning from important scholarship on Indigenous and Black economic practices that sheds light on how livelihoods have been shaped for millennia by different cosmologies, including many that are still operating today (for example, Bargh 2012; Hossein 2019). This is not a matter of appropriating these practices, but to further deepen understandings of the prevalence of past and current economic diversity, the types of discourses, relationships and ethics that sustain those practices, and what opportunities there are for a political economy of possibility to be extended.

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