Independent and small community businesses

Peter North, University of Liverpool

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Edited by JK Gibson-Graham and Kelly Dombroski

Draft for discussion: Comments welcome to P.J.North@liverpool.ac.uk

Introduction

This chapter will review the contribution of SMEs, businesses with fewer than 250 employees, to the creation of viable diverse economies in which humans can create thriving livelihoods in the context of the Anthropocene. Structuralist approaches to economic development focus on the tendency of capitalism to monopoly over the long term: and the existence of large conglomerates that do not pay their fair share of taxes and work to eliminate competition suggests that there is something in that. But a diverse economies approach to the contribution of SMEs to the creation of economic futures reveals a wider range of motivations on the part of SME owners as economic actors than would be suggested by capitalocentric visions, and a wider range of contributions to the performance of economic futures by SME owners with different visions of good and bad work, how surpluses should be generated and distributed, and what the contribution of SMEs to an economic ethics for the Anthropocene could be. In taking forward a theory of economic difference as applied to SMEs as heterogeneous, contested organisations the chapter develops an understanding of diverse conceptions of entrepreneurialism that go beyond the 'heroic' thesis - that entrepreneurs are in some way different from the rest of us: more organised, harder working, focus, able to see the future. Rather, it develops a broader, more democratic, inclusive understanding of entrepreneurism as something performed by a wider range of people who see SMEs as vehicles for living as they want to. Secondly, it will go beyond capitalocentic assumptions of the motivations of SME owners as profit maximisers to understand their broader motivations. Third, it will provide examples of SMEs contributing to the performance of everyday ethical economies.

Capitalist entrepreneurs: driving economic development?

Market economies are composed of a number of privately, state and co-operatively-owned enterprises. But do markets = capitalism? In a market economy, what is a 'capitalist'? What is an 'entrepreneur'? Who is a 'captain of industry'? Who is a community change maker, or community-based economic development activist? Are 'capitalists' bearers of wider structural processes, people who put their capital to work by employing labour and utilising machinery to produce surplus value which they appropriate in what is an exploitative

process; or are they the heroic entrepreneurs who create the jobs the rest of us rely on? Or are they a mix?

Left wingers are often suspicious of businesspeople, caricatured as rapacious capitalists who exploit the workers through processes of the extraction of surplus value, i.e. that value produced by the worker once s/he has produced enough value to reproduce her existence and which is appropriated by the capitalist. This, it is argued, is an objectively exploitative process even if the worker is well paid, the conditions of work are good, and the capitalist or manager acts in a fair way. It is also, Resnick and Wolf (1987) argue a *class* process through which surplus value is created, and the objective of the capitalist is to maximise the creation of surplus value. Consequently, Scase and Goffee (1982) argue that capitalist business owners are regarded by the left as being "optimising, selfish and materialistic" creators of unsustainable growth, of "stuff" created beyond the capacity of the ecosystem to provide resources to fuel it or absorb its wastes (Anderson, 1998). They are interested in extreme individualism, freedom and independence, personal satisfaction, success, and the rewards that go with it. Thus, those unsympathetic to businesses see capitalists as maximisers of profit which they retain in ways that are antisocial, unethical, unscrupulous, dishonest and selfish.

In contrast, pro-capitalist economists argue that the *capitalist* entrepreneur drives innovation in the economy and this is why, they claim, the bureaucratic state planned economy has lost the global battle of ideas after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992. For Schumpeter (1949) entrepreneurs are the generators of economic development as they identify and implement new combinations of land, labour, machinery and capital in new production processes that add new value. Without this process of innovation, he argued, economic development would stall, as it did in the bureaucratically planned economies. Consequently, even business crises can be opportunities for 'creative destruction' in that they release factors of production that are no longer profitable so they can be recombined in new, innovative and thus more profitable ways. Consequently, Cunningham and Lischeron (1991) argue that for their advocates entrepreneurs are the 'heroic', charismatic, special people who 'have what it takes'. They have the instinct and feel for a problem, high levels of vigour, persistence and self-esteem. They have energy, perseverance and vision. They motivate, direct and lead. They are inspirational leaders, adaptable, energetic, and willing to take

responsibility. They have personal characteristics (height, attractiveness, a firm handshake: they are popular and persuasive). These 'special' people are members of the business elite born into power, success and wealth. We need them, and we should all emulate them by subscribing to an 'enterprise culture' that sees our life as an accumulation project .

This hagiographic account of the 'heroic' capitalist entrepreneur is obviously problematic. John Ogbor (2000) argues that socially-constructed entrepreneurial discourses sustain societal biases, and are discriminatory, gender-biased, ethnocentrically-determined, and ideologically controlled. He builds on Foucauldian theory to show how entrepreneurialism and enterprise culture, as discourses, privilege the 'heroic entrepreneur' myth, which he identifies as a rational western white male discourse which silences understandings of the existence of racism, sexism, prejudice and discrimination. 'Heroic' entrepreneurs have the *masculine* super normal qualities of intellect and will, and the strength and courage to challenge the accepted way of doing things. These, he argues, are associated with western concepts of personal autonomy, individualism and freedom, a strong internal locus of control, aggressiveness, dominance, a low need for support, task orientation, and a high tolerance for risk. He argues that this is rooted in the frontier myth of white settler states, where heroic pioneers tamed the wilderness, mastering nature, conquering a land of opportunity. The wilderness is seen as feminine, the mother that 'real men' made something out of, and consequently 'nice guys don't win'. Contemporary discourses of the assertive, energetic conquering entrepreneur are, for Ogbor, a masculine, science-based rational discourse. He argues that we need to challenge this accepted common sense and habits of organised routine to see afresh, and ask what alternative discourses are silenced through entrepreneurial discourses

There are other readings. The word entrepreneur is a loan word from the old French, entreprendre, '*to undertake'.* It means no more than that. Cunningham and Lischeron (1991) argue that in 'undertaking', entrepreneurs are neither heroes nor villains but practical people who want to get things done. They value moderate, sensible risk-taking in a controllable environment in which they feel comfortable given their skills and outlook on life. They do not want either gambling or extreme risk, or the certainty of a job with a large corporation. They are managers who put the factors of production together, accepting an element of risk for the sake of profit which they therefore think is justly theirs (or they would have taken a safe

job). They feel the need for achievement, and have a strong Weberian work ethic. They value honesty, duty, responsibility and ethical behaviour. They are dependable, conscientious. This reading follows Cantillon's 'Essay on the Nature of Commerce in General', written around 1734, that first identified the importance of entrepreneurialism in the wealth creation process. Cantillon conceptualised entrepreneurialism as a form of arbitrage whereby entrepreneurs buy low at currently known prices in the expectation of selling higher for as yet unknown future prices (Murphy, 1986). Entrepreneurs, unlike landlords and labourers, look into the future, weigh up the likelihood of certain events occurring or new needs emerging, and act accordingly in order to meet these new needs or handle new events – and reap both the rewards for getting it right and the costs of getting it wrong. They relish uncertainty, and take on the risk of engaging with it on others behalf. Cantillon had a democratic view of entrepreneurialism – everyone who produces and sells is in some way acting entrepreneurially, but those who focus on connecting buyers and sellers, and accepting the risk that prices might fall rather than rise, are key (Hébert, 1985). This suggests that millions of small traders across the global north and south as entrepreneurs – not a few special people.

Ethically, Cantillon argued that the entrepreneur was entitled to the profit between buying at known low prices and selling them in the future for as yet unknown higher prices, and for accepting the risk that future prices will be higher, "otherwise he would not do it". While he was in many ways admiring of this sublime new force, capitalism, that melted 'all that is solid into air' (Marx and Engels, 1848/1980) breaking up all pre-existing local dominations and petty prejudices, Marx countered that what capitalist entrepreneurs – rather than traders, middle men who do not produce value but are part of the cost a capitalist has to pay to get her or her goods to market - actually do is buy labour power at currently known prices from those who have no other option but to sell it, and extract profit by paying the worker less than the also known value of all he has produced. While he did not discuss entrepreneurialism in any depth, he would not have subscribed to the heroic perspective: in fact his project was to counter such analyses produced by the apologists of capitalism of his day (Resnick and Wolff 1987). Contemporary environmental thinking questions the ethics of producing goods in places were costs are low as a result of cheap wages and low labour and environmental standards. Natural resources can be extracted through exploitative core-

periphery relations. Transporting finished goods to northern markets from southern production areas results in the consumption of fossil fuels and avoidable greenhouse gasses emissions (Woodin and Lucas, 2004). Thus the ethics of business, capitalism and entrepreneurialism are disputed.

Diverse economies perspectives on business, the entrepreneur and the enterprise

Diverse economies' perspectives accept that decisions about what to produce and how surplus value is created are class processes, but, following Resnick and Wolff (1987), they hold that 'capitalist' business owners are not uniformly heroic, despicable or merely practical actors who focus relentlessly on maximising profitability alone. Going beyond capitalocentric assumptions of the motivations of business owners as profit maximisers, Diverse Economies perspectives argue that that totalising conceptualisations of `capitalism' divert analysis away from an understanding of the wide range of motivations on the part of economic actors for engaging in economic activity beneath metanarratives of utilitarian profit maximisation. The perspective argues for an 'ontological reframing' of economic motivations and performance away from a formal assumption of utility maximisation and individualistic economic rationality. Diverse Economies accounts see economic actors as *people*, with human flaws, not heroic (or otherwise) calculating machines identifying optimal economic outcomes through some magic process that the rest of us do not possess. Like other more or less thoughtful human beings, business owners can be very aware of the implications of the 'bigger picture', for their and other people's future prosperity and happiness. Thus entrepreneurs are not just deracinated profit seekers, but may be interested in both "profit" and "food, sex and saving souls" (Cyert and March 1992:9 quoted by Gibson-Graham 2006:187). Taking a feminist-inspired poststructural position, they argue that 'capitalists' can also be environmentalists, parents, consumers, recyclers, activists, organizers and leaders.

In taking this forward, Diverse Economies perspectives build on Resnick and Wolff's (1987) conception of firms as heterogeneous institutions composed of human beings with different motivations, drives and objectives (Gibson-Graham 2006:186-189). A firm might need to make a profit, but what constitutes 'profit' as opposed to costs or reinvestment and how much is 'enough' profit, is discursively produced, and consequently, can be struggled

over and/or assembled in different ways as assemblages of people, ideas, accounting practices, machinery and natural environments. Thus we can, Gibson-Graham argue, refuse to essentialise the firm as operating in line with capitalistic conceptions of maximising the bottom line for the owner to expropriate. All we can say is that enterprises generate and distribute wealth in diverse ways, labelling some elements of the productive process costs (wages, machinery) and others elements of profit which need to be reallocated (shareholder dividends, personal drawings, taxes paid or sequestered in an offshore tax haven, interest payments, rent or mortgage costs).

Can we go beyond an assumption of the profit motive to discuss how we want to live given the need to avoid dangerous climate change, developing an economic ethics for the Anthropocene (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2010)? This would ask: what should we produce, given our ethic concerns? Should a surplus be generated, and if so what should happen to it? How much of any surplus should be reinvested so future generations can live well? What should be redistributed, and to whom in order to enrich social and environmental health in equitable ways, and to ensure that we, and other species, live together within the ecosystems that support and nurture us.

In 'The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)', Gibson-Graham (2006) recognised that there is a large substantivist literature in political economy, economic geography and economic anthropology which "debates the different forms of organisation and corporate behaviour that have emerged as part of contemporary enterprise culture", and that firms are "'embedded' in social, cultural and local relations that create quite unique pressures and rationales." (2006a:186), This literature by culturally-informed economic geographers identifies social, cultural, economic and environmental drivers of economic decision including the role of passion, sympathy, moral judgement, embodied knowledge and practices, sentiment, trust, mutuality and reciprocity in constructing economies, and which change in time and over space (Amin and Thrift, 2007). Consequently, Gibson-Graham (2014:10) look to explore:

> "a much wider range of social relations (that) bear on economic practices including, to name just some, trust, care, sharing, reciprocity, cooperation, divestiture, future orientation, collective agreement, coercion, bondage, thrift, guilt, love, community

pressure, equity, self-exploitation, solidarity, distributive justice, stewardship, spiritual connection, environmental and social justice."

In line with this way of thinking, recent academic analyses of entrepreneurialism are therefore concerned to go beyond either puff pieces about heroes or critiques of villains. Welter et al. (2017) argue for an understanding of entrepreneurial diversity and especially of the myriad ways that people are, become or are sometimes 'entrepreneurial'. They argue against a totalising analysis of what an entrepreneur 'is' or 'isn't', arguing that this devalues entrepreneurship and ignores the pleasures and benefits being 'enterprising' in different ways unless they are accounted for in terms of wealth and job creation. We need to understand entrepreneurialism as 'normal', 'heterogeneous', 'blooming', 'glorious', or 'messy'. Everyday entrepreneurs are heroes of their own lives, families and communities, heroes of the everyday. In line with Cantillon's democratic understanding of the practical nature of entrepreneurship as 'undertaking' as a project, Diverse Economies perspectives would recognise that many people can at times be 'entrepreneurial' when they put human and non- human resources together to create wealth in diverse formal and informal ways, perhaps to get rich, to provide a livelihood, or to have fun and put our values into practice. Part time, lifestyle microbusinesses are as important as growth orientated business, the emphasis on high-growth potential 'unicorns' notwithstanding. Elsewhere I discuss how Women against Pit Closures acted entrepreneurially to undertake ways to support their communities through the yearlong miners' strike in the UK 1984-5 (North, 2011).

Verduijn et al. (2014, 2017) argue against the mainstream view of entrepreneurialism as a market based individualist phenomenon through which special people create value which reproduces capitalism, or contributes to society basically 'working' – the functional approach. They critique the 'heroic' conception of the entrepreneur, arguing that this reproduces neoliberal capitalism and the production of docile bodies committed to an ideology of the production of themselves as relentlessly positive enterprising subjects who think that if they do not do well it as a result of their 'bad choices' or because they did not 'give it 100%'. They want to go beyond this to understand entrepreneurialism's contribution to "freedom, emancipation, and societal production." They want to embrace critical messiness and celebrate the positive in entrepreneurialism, that which makes it unique and interesting. They want to go beyond formalist, reductive, economic approaches, and complexify our

understanding of entrepreneurialism to understand micro manifestations of entrepreneurialism: everyday local struggles; the confused, shambolic and scruffy backstreet business; prosaic, everyday and quotidian lifestyle microbusiness. In an analysis of entrepreneurialism as emancipation and/or oppression they argue that entrepreneurship does more than bring new jobs and businesses, but also more liberating forms of individual and collective existence that address or provide alternatives to livelihoods based on exploitation, domination and oppression. Arguing for a balanced approach, they also argue that while it can be a liberatory practice, and like Ogborn (2000) they argue that it is also important not to romanticise or ignore the dark side of entrepreneurship, especially the privileging of the white middle class male at the expense of women, BME and indigenous groups. They want to avoid the trap of being overly negative, but recognise that while there is a dark side to enterprise culture it is not the only story: i.e. they reject capitalocentric, paranoid readings.

Rindova et al. (2009) reject a narrow focus on entrepreneurship as a process wealth creation. Following more democratic approaches to enterprising activities that reject the heroic myth, they conceptualise entrepreneuring (i.e. something people do, not something they are) as a range of change-orientated activities, widely conceived, undertaken by a diverse range of people aimed at "creative expression, empowerment, autonomy and enhancing life on the planet". They wish to understand entrepreneurial dreams and efforts to create new worlds through processes of discovery, change, and value creation, for example by finding ways to employ yourself and your friends and neighbours rather than getting a job. They ask how entrepreneurship can contribute to emancipation, setting free, disrupting the status quo, challenging hierarchies in the social order, or even the social order itself. They argue that the key elements of entrepreneuring as liberatory practice, i.e. going beyond wealth creation, are first seeking autonomy, or breaking free of authority and perceived restraints. Entrepreneurship here is conceptualised as 'escape', reactively solving a problem and making the world 'better'. Once you have broken free, the second process is authoring, writing a new script without banks of venture capitalists writing it for you. You need to create your own networks and relationships. Third, entrepreneuring as liberatory practice looks to make declarations of why your business is ethical, what its values are.

In their project of reframing entrepreneurship as s feminist practice Calás et al. (2009) take a gendered approach to entrepreneurship that assumes the need for social change given that women are historically disadvantaged and that all forms of knowledge advance the interests of some, not of others. They therefore advocate for forms of entrepreneurialism that advance the position of women using a social constructivist ontology and standpoint theory to critique the construction of subjectivities and performances that constitute society. On what basis are markets constituted, and how do these practises and discourses maintain patriarchal relations? How can new subjectivities and meanings emerge? How can desirable outcomes be reinterpreted, apart from market success? How are power relations enacted and resisted? On these lines, in their article 'rethinking innovation' Blake and Hanson (2005) challenge masculinist conceptions of regional development as sustaining industrial capitalism, underpinned by household and low paid, casual work done by women and other subaltern groups. Can this be remade by performing entrepreneurship 'differently'? Blake and Hanson argue for ethnographic studies to address this, especially given that so many masculinist constructions of entrepreneurialism are uncritically reproduced around the world e.g. microcredit.

Thus diverse economies perspectives, widely conceived, provide much evidence for the construction of concepts of the enterprise and the entrepreneur that go beyond essentialist conceptions of business as irredeemably capitalist. The next task in our understanding of diverse conceptions of enterprise is to move on from 'enterprise', broadly conceived which can include corporations, discussed elsewhere in this collection, to discuss what is special about small, independent and community businesses.

What sort of enterprise? SMEs, local, community and social businesses

Marxist accounts of the economy written in the period of what we now see as 'organised capitalism', or the mixed economy of the 1960s and 70s in Western Europe talk as if the individual 'capitalist' employing his or her own capital was dying out, replaced by the salaried managers of large corporations producing dividends for shareholders under conditions of organised, late modern capitalism (eg see Mandel, [1976]). The reality is that the announcement of the death of the small enterprise in the global North has been

premature (in the global South, or course, they have never gone away): SMEs, businesses with fewer than 250 employees (Storey, 2000), make up 99.9 per cent of UK enterprises, 60 per cent of private sector employment, and 49 per cent of private sector turnover[1]. In 2017, there were an estimated 5.7 million businesses in the UK with 16 million employees and a combined turnover of £1905 billion. 5.5 million (96%) businesses were micro-businesses – employing 0-9 people. Micro-businesses accounted for 33% of employment and 22% of turnover[2]. The monopoly tendencies of late modern capitalism were perhaps overemphasised. Are SMEs in postmodern, disorganised capitalism (1) uniformly capitalist and (2) resistant to social change, rather than allies in progressive projects? Will they always put the bottom line first, arguing, with Friedman (1962) that the *only* responsibility of business is to create shareholder value? When they claim to do good, is it just greenwash?

Critical literature paints a picture of a mass of struggling, barely profitable businesses with few customers, limited cash flows, perhaps an unsympathetic bank manager (for a fuller discussion, see North [2015]). SME owners often 'just about manage' in the global North, and may have established their business reluctantly as there is no other option. Many fail, and we pay too little attention to the costs of failure in both financial terms and the resulting mental health issues, internalisation of feelings of being a 'loser' who made 'bad choices' in the enterprise culture, family breakups, homelessness – what Olaison and Sørensen (2014) call the 'abject' of entrepreneurship. Many of us are three pay checks from disaster. In the global south, millions are abandoned in what critics such as Davis (2007) call the planet of slums. If they do manage to get by, SME owners can have limited time, cash and resources. They focus on current performance, on the short, not the long term. They firefight, especially in difficult economic times. They can feel that being socially engaged puts costs onto business not faced by profit driven 'cowboys' and overseas competitors who will then outcompete them. They can feel that their customers are uninterested 'consumers', and that the demand for ethical products and services is overstated. They rarely produce reports on corporate ethics as they do not believe that their customers are interested in the issue. Reluctant SME

[1] http://stats.bis.gov.uk/ed/sme/Stats_Press_Release_2009.pdf

[2] http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06152/SN06152.pdf

owners may need to be forced to act for the social good through regulatory compliance, for example to have good employment practices, respect consumer protection regulations, or health and safety.

This is of course one side of the story, but while we should recognise its legitimacy, we should also put it in its place and focus on more hopeful ontologies. The entrepreneurship literature also suggests that SME owners' behaviour in running their business can be strongly influenced by their world view, belief system *and* their confidence in their identity as successful entrepreneurs uniquely able to put their values into action in their economic life. Unlike less powerful actors who are only able to protest *against* problems, they self-identify as effective businesspeople able to do something about them through their business practices. They see themselves as people who don't give up when they encounter problems. Williams and Schaefer (2013) identified environmentally-minded business owners who saw themselves as practical business people who combined the formal business values of prudence and thrift with progressive concerns such as earth stewardship and the rights of future generations. They felt that they *could* and *should* make a difference, and that it was their responsibility to do so rather than adding to the problems of the world through their business activities (Battisti and Parry 2011:179). They are able to spend their money as they see fit, and don't have to persuade shareholders or senior management. Working with Diverse Economies perspectives North and Nurse (2014) identified SME owners driven by morality, curiosity, enthusiasm and a commitment to more than the bottom line in running their business. Thus the evidence of these studies is that ordinary SME owners do engage with a rich repertoire of ethical practices.

These are studies of 'normal' independent businesses that aim to make a profit by running their business well, but not unethically. Other businesses, that we might call 'alternative capitalist' independent and community-owned small and medium enterprises aim to practice their ethical perspectives through their business practices, and advance their social change agenda. Over the last thirty years a large 'localist' literature had emerged that looks to value small, locally-owned businesses that mean a community is not reliant on large inward investor branch plants that demanded required significant corporate welfare as a condition of making their investment in the community: for example an Amazon distribution centre, a car factory. These footloose businesses can threaten to leave when trading

conditions change, or when they can get more profit somewhere else (Dauncey, 1988; Douthwaite, 1996; Shuman, 2001; 2007; Estill, 2008). The deleterious and irresponsible effects of non-local 'big box' large retailers responsible to non-local shareholders or equity businesses has been extensively documented, and contrasted with the claimed benefits of locally and community-owned independent stores (Mitchell, 2006; Simms, 2007). While some of these large businesses might actually be more 'locally dependent' than they would like to admit (Cox, 1997), advocates of small local businesses argue that as they are embedded in their local communities, they will pay 'social license to trade' costs if they act in abusive ways (Lynch-Wood and Williamson, 2007), and may see their workers and customers as 'part of the family. The personal reputation of an SME owner in a small community may matter, and drive ethical actions. Community businesses and social enterprises have emerged specifically to use business skills to develop a geographical community or provide much needed services to specific groups of people. Many people enter into informal business partnerships or register as a limited company, but run their affairs co-operatively without registering as a worker-owned co-operative. A lifestyle business might not be profitable enough to be attractive to a profit maximiser, but might well enable an enthusiast to live where they want, doing things they love, and making a living out of it. The UK Transition network's Reconomy project[3] looks to develop transition-orientated enterprises that aim to develop local self-reliance and low carbon forms of business that help avoid dangerous climate change. Concrete examples of independent and community-owned business are too numerous to fully document here, but a survey of the examples documented by organisations such as the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE[4]) – there are others - shows the experimentation that is underway and which an analysis of the economy as uniformly capitalist would occlude. These are myriad examples of local innovation. Diverse Economies research looks to document and value these practices, taking a non-essentialist and democratic approach to understanding the progressive potential of independent and community businesses and their owners.

[3] http://reconomy.org/about-reconomy/
[4] https://bealocalist.org/

Diverse Economies perspectives also look to develop these persepctives, going beyond documenting the 'now' to understanding the 'not yet' and the 'what if' rather than assuming limits, or the 'never'. We know more about how to build an economy based on competition than we do one based on dignity, love and justice (de Sousa Santos and Rodriguez-Garavato, 2007) Perhaps we develop more local and community businesses providing dignified livelihoods using local money, the internet, peer-to-peer lending, new forms of platform economy, electronic forms of money and local forms of finance develop into what might be called a 'post-capitalist entrepreneurialism for the 99%' (Cohen, 2017). What if we had better business incubation processes – perhaps based on fostering solidarity rather than business competitiveness (da Costa, 2017); a less judgemental view of failure and more support for creativity and experimentation, long term patient finance, a basic income, more affordable property prices and ways to share, healthcare, and decent pensions? Could we combine the dynamism of entrepreneurialism and the diversity of an economy full of creative SMEs and community businesses with a social democratic state that provided for all; the entrepreneurial, those who just want a different job, those who want to work less, or look after their family, or pursue their hobbies in ways that do not costs the earth? That is the prize of a fully-developed economic ethics for the Anthropocene. Either way, a Diverse Economies analysis of the enterprise, who is entrepreneurial, and the role of small independent and community businesses identifies far more hopeful ways of thinking about the economic that the blanket dismissal of them as irredeemably 'capitalist' would uncover.

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