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Troubling Power: An Introduction to a Special Issue on Power in Community Economies

Nate Gabriel and Eric Sarmiento[I]

In this introduction, we briefly frame the impetus behind this special issue focused on theorizations of power in diverse- and community-economies research. Catalyzed by a panel session at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers*, this collection of essays reflects broader, ongoing discussions about how to grapple analytically and practically with power—in all of its forms—as a feature of economic formations. We outline here how each of the contributors to this issue, unsatisfied with a division of labor between theorists concerned with power's constraining force and those focused on its enabling or generative force, offers new paths for critique that neither reify existing power relations nor turn away from them.*

Key Words: Community Economies, Diverse Economies, Power

This special issue was prompted by the idea that power is a problem for economic practices and imaginaries that seek justice. Not solely in the sense that power disparities lead to, perpetuate, and feed on exploitation and oppression—although certainly in that sense—but more fundamentally, due both to our academic training and our personal inclination, we have long been interested in the problem of either understanding or enacting power, the assumptions about power that animate any given scholarly work, any political program, or any act. The concern for us, is how *power* has become an object of thought, a "problem" in its own right (Foucault 2009), in scholarly work and political praxis—if we may draw a flawed distinction—concerned with more-than-capitalist economic formations. Philosophical explorations of social power of course have a long history, as do debates about theorizing power in geography and other fields. Indeed, such

1. We would like to emphasize that the writing of this piece and the guest-editorial duties for this special issue were carried out collaboratively and reflect years of working, thinking, and talking together. This applies primarily to the two of us but, as we note below, should also be considered in light of the broader discussions and input with a range of colleagues and research participants and with others who undoubtedly shaped the authoring of this editorial. As such, we regret that conventional scholarly practices that prioritize author order as reflective of the relative significance of each author's contributions are the only option available to us.

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debates form a major part of the backdrop against which recent critical understandings of capitalist economic practices and their alternatives emerged and developed over the past several decades. And while the contours of those debates were well established some years ago, we were never comfortable with the détente that seemed to occur at a point when various interlocutors in a fertile discussion agreed to disagree and, in many respects, went their separate ways. It seemed to us that this created something of a division of labor: more "orthodox" political economists could focus on modes of regulation, regimes of accumulation, and struggles between preexisting class blocs, emphasizing what Kelly (2005, 40) referred to as "the political-economic power to *deprive*," while poststructural Marxists and postmodernists in general could attend to culture, discourse, difference, and eventually the more-than-human elements of economy, foregrounding possibility and, returning to Kelly's formulation, "the cultural power to *define*." To us this division of labor was unsatisfying as it seemed to present flip sides of the same coin when it came to the problem of power. The power struggles at the heart of the entity known as "the economy"—monolithic or diverse, hegemonic or fraught with ruptures and inconsistencies—seemed not only unaltered but also oddly unattended by this division of labor.

Moreover, we felt unsettled by the critiques lodged from each side (or rather each of many sides) regarding the other side's theorizations of power. On one hand, while totalizing, capitalocentric conceptions of class power are in our view risky at best, it is no less problematic to turn away from the ways that power knots and coalesces in certain configurations, flows through more or less clearly defined hierarchies, and enables some ways of being and relating at the expense of others. As Miller (2019, 27) recently put it, "Critique *is* dangerous, but *so is our refusal of it*." Thus, while we recognize that making economic difference visible, legible, and legitimate is a crucial form of political struggle, as J. K. Gibson-Graham asserted nearly thirty years ago and as others have since taken up, this, too, can seem a confining position when it is the primary and sometimes sole mode of political engagement.[2] To Miller's point, recovering and strengthening economic difference begins with the recognition that difference is rendered invisible, illegible, and illegitimate by some collection of forces. This rendering is itself inevitably diverse, contested, and fine grained, even if it is generally associated with something one might refer to in shorthand as "capitalism." Yet even when one refers instead to (more or less) undifferentiated "capitalist practices," the refusal to critique is, in practice, to treat those forces as something akin to monolithic capitalism, which leads back to the same problem.

2. We should note that this is not always the case in community- and diverse-economies research. Moreover, the two of us and many others associated with the Community Economies Institute and Community Economies Research Network have discussed such questions for years at conferences, workshops, and writing retreats, via email, and in our personal communications, and we of course address them in our own research.

This special issue can trace its particular origins to the 2017 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers, in Boston, and to a session titled "Gazing at Power in Alternative Economies Research," which we convened to expand the space for this discussion and to begin formalizing it. The session drew attention to a fresh set of concerns for community economies and gathered a slightly different audience around community-economies themes. For us, it injected new life and fresh ideas through a robust, substantive, and wide-ranging discussion among panel and audience, especially around how we theorize power in diverse- and community-economies research. It seemed to open floodgates that are too often closed in this subfield, and it reintroduced something of the improvisatory in a field of inquiry that perhaps had risked becoming a little too settled. It quickly became clear that we were not the only ones who had been grappling with similar questions and were bothered by similar frustrations, and we began to consider the idea of a themed issue on the topic. Since that time, the conversation has continued, gathering steam and including a wider range of voices and vantage points, such as the Kurdish struggle for autonomy, contested community land trusts, Latin American coffee growers fighting for their livelihoods, and historically segregated African American neighborhoods confronting gentrification, among others. Some of these perspectives are captured in this issue, but many unfortunately are not, for various reasons beyond our control. Thus, while the essays collected here approach the topic from a plurality of perspectives, this collection represents—and we hope contributes to—a considerably broader ongoing discussion.

Rather than answering any "big questions" about power—solving the *problem* once and for all, as it were—our primary hope for this collection of essays is that it can trouble the détente surrounding discussions of power and more-than-capitalist (and/or anti-, non-, or postcapitalist) economic formations. We believe that the authors assembled here collectively contribute toward reopening the problem of power and making power strange and troubling once again, not for the sake of endlessly roaming the privileged halls of ivory-tower theorizing but to trouble the ongoing inequalities and injustices that riddle all economic formations, capitalist or otherwise.

The essays gathered here do this in a number of ways. Tuomo Alhojärvi begins his essay with a question that lies at the heart of our concern in this special issue: "What has happened to the critical spirit that sparked" the diverse-economies approach? Gibson-Graham's potent critique of capitalocentrism, he argues, has too often been taken as complete, a matter sufficiently "settled" so that it can now serve almost as a soundbite or placeholder for graduate students reading the canon of economic geography. Contra this tendency, Alhojärvi undertakes a close reading of capitalocentrism, demonstrating that many—perhaps even most—glosses of the concept are limited not only because they are partial accounts of Gibson-Graham's work but also because the critical value and force of that work has yet to be fully realized. Nicole Foster's contribution reexamines Henri

Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city through a Nietzschean lens, asserting that the concept is or can be more than a tool for resisting oppressive power or building alliances among otherwise disjointed constituents of the underclass. Instead, Foster pursues what she calls a more "vital" reading of the right to the city, one that examines its material (bodily and affective) dimensions, enabling a political mode that extends beyond the important but sometimes one-dimensional justice agendas in which the right to the city is typically employed. In doing so, she doesn't oppose her work against these other projects but is more interested in troubling the right to the city to see what else it can do beyond its more familiar deployments.

In a not dissimilar attempt to recover and amplify often discounted modes of power, the contribution by Peter North, Vicky Nowak, Alan Southern, and Matt Thompson works to reclaim antagonistic readings of and responses to undesirable economic forms as a means of fostering alternatives in the here and now. Antagonism and anger, they indicate, do not always lead to a further closing down of possibilities but can play an important role in a generative politics. Bradley Wilson and Tad Mutersbaugh unpack the role of solidarity in ethical commodity networks, arguing that workers in these networks are too often rendered inert "objects of benevolent concern" by fair-trade discourses, as unseen and unaccounted for in their struggles to define and establish solidarity within and across those networks. Not content to choose between critique of fair-trade certification schemes and performative exploration of possibilities engendered therein, Wilson and Mutersbaugh focus on the limits of certification alone to create more just futures. While at first blush this focus may appear to fixate on domination at the expense of difference, the authors aim at something quite distinct: to enable greater understanding of worker solidarities, thus bringing into view producers' collective capacities to reconfigure power relations and also tracing complex relationships between these collective capacities and the related certification schemes.

Our own contribution to the collection shares with Alhojärvi's an emphasis on assaying the now substantial literatures concerned with diverse and community economies, in our case to examine the deployment of the concept of genealogy in that work. Sketching the Nietzschean roots of genealogy and more recent linkages between genealogy and assemblage thinking, we advocate for a deeper engagement with genealogy, not merely as an analytic concept but as an ethos or a mode of becoming that in our view is invaluable for helping to bring into being more just political-ecological formations and relations. This ethos, we conclude, is an important element of cultivating ourselves as community-economies subjects. Stephen Healy's essay, a review of Ethan Miller's (2019) *Reimagining Livelihoods,* approaches the question of subject formation from a different angle, that of psychoanalysis. Citing the post-Lacanian distinction and interrelations between dialogue *in* and *of* a collectivity, Healy explores how Miller's assemblage-inflected take on livelihoods might inform the dis-identifications necessary to *recomposing* ourselves

in conjunction with "our ongoing relationship with and responsibilities toward the common world we make, which makes us, and which we make for others."

"The point is to change it," indeed. But this collection rests on the notion that to change the world requires us to gaze at it in a way that embraces the fullness of political struggles in all of their multiplicity and emergent becoming. We wager that by definition this requires a heterogeneous and constantly evolving theoretical-practical landscape in (or should we say *with)* which to act.

Acknowledgments

This special issue is the culmination of a project we've been turning over in our minds for well over a decade. We'd especially like to thank the contributors, Rethinking Marxism *editorial collective, particularly Boone Shear, who showed early interest in this issue and helped bring it into being, and the broader Community Economies Collective/Community Economies Research Network community for the ongoing conversion that we hope finds some worthy expression here.*

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