

Community Economy

Community Economies Collective¹

<http://www.communityeconomies.org>

Community economy unites two terms that have long been understood as mutually exclusive. Throughout the 20th century, theorists and folk on the ground alike have understood the modern capitalist economy as an expanding and unitary system that, among other things, has been a force displacing and undermining community. Traditional and localised economies were seen and experienced as entangled with and embedded in social relations that, often, resonated with the positive aspects of community such as mutual care, interdependence, recognition, collective wellbeing, and a sense of place; while the ever-expanding capitalist economy appeared as insisting upon individual utility maximisation, self-preservation, anonymity in market exchange, and the homogenisation of culture and place. This relationship of opposition relies upon an understanding of economy as a singular and expanding capitalist system dominating and shaping the social, a system to which community is, at best, subordinate and, at worst, an obstacle. Furthermore, it reduces community to an archaic and pre-modern form of social organisation distinct from economy yet always beholden to its needs, shaped by its force, and penetrated by its dynamic.

Using community to modify economy, however, signals a decidedly different understanding of economy as something modifiable, differentiated, and perhaps beholden to the needs and desires of community. It suggests that community may itself be a mode and form of economy distinct from other modes and forms (e.g. capitalist economy, slave economy, or household economy). To differentiate it from other economies, we define a community economy as a set of economic practices that explicitly foregrounds community and environmental wellbeing. Indeed, from a community economy perspective, such wellbeing is the purpose rather than the hoped for and, at best, secondary outcome of economy.

Building upon the progressive potential of community, community economies are sites of economic decision making, negotiation, and experimentation; they are also sites and starting points for research and activism that not only inventory and assess the specific dynamics of such economies but also foster and amplify their potential to be more durable practices and transposable models. As a dynamic and emergent form of economy rather than simply an economy that is “community-based”, community economy signals a novel research trajectory within economic and radical geography and, increasingly, an activist agenda to “take back the economy” for communities and the environments upon which they depend.²

Activating community economy as an object of analysis and economic practice requires a rethinking of economy where the economy loses its power to structure

and figure all other processes (e.g. community) as well as a rethinking of community as other than a static and bounded entity based upon principles of exclusion.

Rethinking Economy

The work of “rethinking economy” by Gibson-Graham (2014), Mitchell (2008), Callon (2007) and others is transforming how we conceptualise the economic and its relationship with other processes, practices, and actors. Rethinking economy sees “the” economy as an outcome or effect of economic discourse, metrics, calculations, and socio-technical devices rather than an overarching system, entity, or force which operates via a set of universal laws, progressing and moving independent of other processes (e.g. culture or community). The economy, therefore, is a decidedly more contingent assemblage of processes, practices, and actors (human and non-human) that make possible the production and distribution of goods and services.

Activists are also productively rethinking the economy as an indeterminate site open to intervention, local action, and possibility rather than inevitability (de Sousa Santos 2006a, 2006b; Escobar 2009, 2018). Around the world and networked via movements such as the World Social Forum there exist myriad enactments of economic difference and diversity that build upon the successes of cooperative production, fair trade, democratic budgeting, peasant and indigenous peoples’ livelihoods, alternative food and craft networks, and, generally, production and consumption practices that foreground community and environmental wellbeing (Roelvink 2016). These alternative economic practices require an alternative imaginary of economy as a site of possibility and ethical concerns rather than a global and totalising system beyond intervention.

So, where economic geography sees relationality and embeddedness, perhaps even explaining local variations of a global capitalism (Boggs and Rantisi 2003), the economy as rethought suggests that the multiplicity of economic practices all around us, as well as those we might imagine and enact in the future, do not add up to any unified form or system, capitalist or otherwise. Informal and non-monetised forms of exchange, independent or cooperative production, household or community-based labour, state sectors and nationalised industries, even alternative corporate practices are all elements of the *diverse economy* (Gibson-Graham 2006).³

Rethinking Community

To think of community as an adjective for economy, such that a “community economy” might be possible, requires a rethinking of community as well as economy. Indeed, rather than a sign of tradition, homogeneity, or exclusion (Young 1990), we must recognise and magnify community’s “progressive and ethical force”, its potentials for economic innovation and experimentation, and its ability to shape and transform local livelihoods and wellbeing (Gibson-Graham 2006).

While the use of the term community in economic geography is diverse, it most often suggests a set of relations embedded in a particular place that either shape or are shaped by economic (read capitalist) practices (cf. Amin and Roberts 2008). In

this sense community is essentially local, and it suggests boundaries, however blurred, to both its location and those who “belong” to it. This aligns with the common conception of community as a place or homogenous group of people, and it tends toward an imaginary of community as conservative, exclusionary, and essentially based upon some commonality or “common being” (cf. Joseph 2002).

Yet community can be other than commonality; it can also be an acknowledgement and practice of “being in common”—that understanding of the individual not as a singularity but as always being with others. Nancy (1991a, 1991b) suggests that this understanding of being gives us a foundation to rethink community as an always emergent process and a practice of co-dependence and mutuality. Beginning from this conception of being and community, we might start to see the potentials of community desires, ethics, and dispositions (rather than just individual drives) to be central to an economic dynamic and to guide economic decision-making (Popke 2010). We might begin to imagine a host of economic practices beholden to community rather than communities displaced or beholden to “the economy”.

Activating Community Economies

Emerging from these core insights, the community economies project today constitutes an ongoing effort to make other worlds possible. These efforts resonate with and advance a number of themes in economic and radical geography.

Economic Difference “Here and Now”

While economic and radical geography have long documented the unevenness and variability of the economic landscape, the heterogeneity revealed invariably exists within or relative to a singular and now global capitalist economy (Gibson-Graham 1996). Similarly, despite challenging the systemic coherence and unity of “the” economy by foregrounding how economic worlds are made by and through a range of actors, associations, and processes, “rethinking economy” scholars most often document and thereby come to perform essentially capitalist practices, markets, and economies (cf. Butler 2010). From a community economies orientation, however, the goal of revealing economic difference is to produce a rich reservoir of examples that work to foster an “imagining and enacting [of] noncapitalist futures”. Indeed, the “capitalocentrism” of much economic and radical geography, from a community economies perspective, works to stunt our imaginations of economic difference and stifle our desires to enact other economies “here and now” (Community Economies Collective 2001).

By contrast, building upon feminism and queer theory, community economies scholars and activists approach economic difference as a resource for thinking and doing non-capitalism rather than as a remnant of some pre-capitalist economic form or an oversight of an otherwise comprehensive and ever expanding capitalism. Doing so allows them to engage in a politics of possibility, revealing the political potency of a proximate and always emerging economic diversity. As feminists and queer theorists have done across scales and to great effect,

community economies scholars make visible and account for that which had been invisible and unaccounted in order to, in this case, perform new worlds beyond the confines of capitalism where alternative economic subjectivities and practices might thrive.

For the community economies project, the inventory of economic difference is a profoundly political act that reminds us of existing and possible economic difference not in spite of capitalism's power, but as an outgrowth of the performative and proliferating nature of economic practice. A whole range of such economic practices are successful, many of which foreground community livelihoods (Safri 2015; Safri and Graham 2010; Sweet 2016), environmental sustainability (Emery and Pierce 2005; Gabriel 2011; Hurley and Emery 2018; Poe et al. 2013), and struggles for class, racial and gender justice (Borowiak et al. 2018; Heras and Burin 2014; Huron 2015). Furthermore, this ontological starting point, of economic diversity, beckons us to see and assess not only the occurrence of economic difference, but also any particular economy's range of economic dynamics, conditions of durability and transposition, and alignments with ethical concerns for human and environmental justice (Roelvink et al. 2015; Sarmiento 2017).

The Possibilities of Economic Justice

By and large, radical geography's core interest in economic justice has traditionally been pursued through the important documentation of the injustices which emerge from capitalism's essential dynamic, much of which has been traced in the pages of *Antipode*. While a community economy perspective acknowledges the many injustices that result from capitalist practices, it seeks to avoid the melancholia and paralysis that often result by focusing on such injustices alone (Gibson-Graham 2006). Indeed, performing only capitalism's injustices will only reproduce, to borrow a phrase, the "brutal energy" of capitalism, reifying its totalising power (Roy 2011; see also Roelvink 2016). Locating and amplifying economic difference, as noted above, counters such powerful narratives and works to perform an economic "otherwise". Yet, making visible the diverse economy does not in itself foster economic, social, or environmental justice. What it does do, insofar as the economy is differentiated and therefore open to possibility, is to make clear that economies can be (and may be already) sites of ethical negotiation and decision-making whose dynamics can be assessed and reworked by our research practices, activist initiatives, and communities themselves.

But assessment and reworking of economic practices, specifically on behalf of community and environmental wellbeing, will require a set of entry points for inquiry, entry points that open economic decision-making to concerns for human and environmental justice. Those coordinates which we might use to recognise, evaluate, and/or foster community economies include the following:⁴

- *Survival*: What do we really need to survive well? How do we balance our own survival needs and well-being with the well-being of others and the planet?
- *Surplus*: What's left after our survival needs have been met? How do we distribute this surplus to enrich social and environmental health?

- *Transactions*: What are the ranges of ways we secure the things we cannot produce ourselves? How do we conduct ethical encounters with human and non-human others in these transactions?
- *Consumption*: What do we really need to consume for our well-being? How do we consume sustainably and justly?
- *Commons*: What do we share with human and non-human others? How do we maintain, replenish, and grow this natural and cultural commons?
- *Investment*: What do we do with stored wealth? How do we invest this wealth so that future generations may live well?

While these coordinates cannot act as a blueprint for “the” just economy, they nevertheless prompt us (communities and researchers alike) to interrogate, reimagine, and struggle to bring into being more just economies (Dombroski 2016; Dombroski et al. 2016; Morrow and Dombroski 2015).

Amplification and Action

Finally, we wish to highlight the contribution of community economies research to radical geography’s long-standing commitment to political praxis. Imagining and desiring something other than capitalism (e.g. an economy informed by ethical commitments to community and environment) has required scholars and activists to loosen their affective investments in economic explanations that presume the ever-present dominance of neoliberal capitalism, and instead pursue an open and reparative stance towards economic life that refuses to know too much, and yet also takes responsibility for the economic worlds that are made and remade through practices of research, activism, writing, and representation.

This attentiveness to how research can be deliberately structured to not only document and inventory economic difference but bring into being other economic worlds (and community economies in particular) has led to the development of a rich set of methods beyond the conceptual tools of the community economies coordinates. For example, community economies scholars have rethought participatory action research in terms of its capacity to initiate shifts in economic subjectivity and imaginaries of economic possibility (e.g. Cameron and Gibson 2005; Gibson-Graham 2008). They have explored where and how metrics and maps can, along with others, perform other economies (e.g. Boro-wiak et al. 2018; Safri and Graham 2010; Snyder and St Martin 2015). And their work has intersected with that of artists and other activists creatively engaging with communities to rethink and rework their economies (e.g. Hwang 2003).⁵ Across this variety of research and more activist-oriented projects, there is a common commitment to not only making community economies visible, but also to actively extend their reach and influence, multiply the sites where they exist, and amplify the work they do on behalf of community and environment.

Conclusion

Community economy, since the mid-1990s, has signalled an expanding and evolving project within radical geography that resonates with a host of initiatives taking place around the world. Indeed, the call to “take back the economy” for community and environment is being heard and alternatives are emerging, and it is imperative that academics and activists alike harness and extend the traditions of radical geography to align with and foster such action. The community economies project does so by foregrounding the politics of making visible economic difference and its attendant subjectivities, creating openings in the economy for ethical negotiation, taking responsibility for those economies we wish to see thrive, and working with others (human and more-than-human) across a range of sites and scales to bring community economies into being.

Endnotes

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² The term “community economies” as understood here emerges from the influential body of work by the feminist economic geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham and that of the Community Economies Collective (see <http://www.communityeconomies.org>). Key texts by Gibson-Graham include *Class and Its Others* (Gibson-Graham et al. 2000), *The End of Capitalism* (Gibson-Graham 1996), *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Gibson-Graham 2006), *Take Back the Economy* (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013), and *Making Other Worlds Possible* (Roelvink et al. 2015).

³ The diverse economies project clearly overlaps with and complements the burgeoning literature on “alternative economies” in economic geography (e.g. Fuller et al. 2010; Leyshon et al. 2003). However, the former emphasises the non-capitalist practices and potentials resident in various sites, whereas the latter more often discovers such sites to be home to a hidden or nascent capitalism (for discussion, see Healy 2009).

⁴ For an introduction to community economies coordinates, see Gibson-Graham (2006: Chapter 4). For a guide on how to activate these coordinates with others, see Gibson-Graham et al. (2013). For a recent update and discussion, see Gibson-Graham and Community Economies Collective (2017).

⁵ See, for example, the projects “Arts and Community Economies” (<https://artsandcommunityeconomies.wordpress.com>) and “Redrawing the Economy” (<https://redrawingtheconomy.info>).

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