IMAGINING AND ENACTING A POSTCAPITALIST FEMINIST ECONOMIC POLITICS
J K Gibson-Graham
Women's Studies Quarterly; Spring 2006; 34, 1/2; Academic Research Library
pg. 72

IMAGINING AND ENACTING A POSTCAPITALIST FEMINIST ECONOMIC POLITICS

J. K. GIBSON-GRAHAM

We, like Hester Eisenstein, have been encouraged by the resurgence of interest in "discussions about capitalism, socialism, and alternative economic systems" and by the innovative organizing energies of "those who believe that another world—a postcapitalist world—is possible." Indeed, our forthcoming book *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Gibson-Graham 2006b) takes up the very question of an alternative economic politics and, as the sequel to *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (1996, 2006a), does so with feminist politics as its guiding inspiration. So it is fascinating to both agree with Eisenstein's core plea, that the women's movement "align itself with the struggle for alternatives to the current economic world order," and yet diverge in so many ways from her challenging stock-taking of feminism's achievements and failures. We wonder whether our idiosyncratic offerings in answer to the question "What is to be done?" (we might ask, "What is being done?") could in any way satisfy Eisenstein, built as they are upon an affiliation with poststructuralist feminism, queer theory, and antiessentialist Marxism. In this brief response to her engagingly personal and provocative essay, we identify some of the theoretical insights we have drawn from these lines of thought and the key elements of feminism's political contribution that we build on to forward our postcapitalist (feminist) political imaginary.

As the narrative of her life experience illustrates, Hester Eisenstein has benefited from the gains feminism has been able to effect and she is somewhat amazed at the "ease with which gender discrimination could be reversed," virtually in one lifetime. This leads her to observe that "gender has been a much more malleable feature of public life than either race or class." Her assessment seems to oddly devalue the achievements of feminism, suggesting that gender was an easier target than these other dimensions of social life. Taking Eisenstein's ascription of

[*WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 34: 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2006)]
© 2006 by J.K. Gibson-Graham. All rights reserved.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

success at face value, we would prefer to ask, "How have feminists been so successful?" rather than why or whether gender is more malleable. In other words, we would like to focus on the strengths of feminist politics and avoid the implication that the achievements of feminism are less than revolutionary because they are not addressed to the most resistant, most "structural" aspects of our existence. We are also uncertain about admonition and reproach and their usefulness to feminists; perhaps we might more easily build (upon) a feminist economic movement through an accounting of past successes and an enticement to pursue new ones.

For us the successes of feminist politics haven't led to a sense that gender struggles are somehow easier or even a diversion from the more difficult tasks of transforming race and class. Instead we've taken the victories and strategies of feminism as something to be learned from and extended into other realms. Indeed, this is what we have done to develop exactly what Eisenstein asks for, an engaged feminist political economy. It is feminism's introduction of a different vocabulary (dare we say language, or even discourse?) to describe women's lives and their social context, and feminism's unique focus on practices of the self—consciousness-raising, personal and local group actions—that offer the outline for us of a new postcapitalist economic politics. As Eisenstein notes, both the vocabulary of feminism and the practice of feminism have been life-changing for her, leading to new career pathways and an altogether different subjectivity. This is surely a good advertisement for a politics of social change.

But somehow this is not enough for Eisenstein, and here we want to understand and share the dissatisfaction she feels. In the United States, the lives of many poor women are arguably worse than they were before the movement, and neoliberalism and capitalist globalization seem to be relatively untouched by feminism. Eisenstein finds it distressing to trumpet the successes of the feminist movement while many are suffering from calamities that feminism has neither stemmed nor redressed. When disappointment shades into blame, however, we find ourselves unable to follow her emotionally and intellectually. Feminism has undoubtedly occurred in parallel with capitalist globalization and the demise of welfare supports. But to suggest that "the contemporary women's movement [is] an *unwitting coconspirator* in the deadly process of capitalist globalization" (emphasis added) betrays what Eve Sedgwick (2003) calls a paranoid sensibility, familiar in leftist or radical thinking:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"As a psychic disposition of the intellect, paranoia . . . attempts to show intricately and at great length how everything adds up, how it all means the same thing. Paranoia extends the terrain of the predictable, casting its hypervigilant gaze over the entire world, marshalling every site and event into the same fearful order" (Gibson-Graham 2006b, paraphrasing Sedgwick). Without our knowing it, it appears that our feminist actions (which we believed to be contributing to progressive social transformation) have contributed to the even greater structural hold of capitalism over our lives—to an economic agenda "pleasing" to international capital.

What is the image of power that underlies such an interpretation of events? It seems to be one in which power is predominantly distributed to capital. Feminist success has simply redistributed the meager helpings of power once possessed by working men and women into the hands of white professional women, leaving those at the bottom of the heap more vulnerable as a result.

We are inclined to ask, "What is being performed here?" Surely the building of an immense apparatus of integrated and implicated parts, a veritable "Christmas effect" (Sedgwick 1993; qtd. in Gibson-Graham 1996, viii), in which women's rights, femocrats, changed life chances for women, shoring up of capitalist globalization, enclosures of land and sea, informalization of the labor market, increased exploitation, ransacked state services, a shredded welfare system, and the war on terror all sing to the same tune. Will seeing this monster in its "true light" really galvanize the counterattack on neoliberalism that Alexander Cockburn calls for? Will the combined affects of paranoia and moralism sustain a movement of economic possibility and creativity?

The stance of epistemological realism that underpins and seemingly justifies Eisenstein's analysis is the very same debilitating posture that, we argued in *The End of Capitalism*, stands in the way of thinking beyond capitalism and enacting postcapitalist futures. The way we represent capitalism (as all-encompassing and pervasive, or as uneven, fragile, and less extensive than imagined) has an important impact on the way we imagine, act, and claim new spaces of intervention. For us, poststructuralism has offered a less singular and solid analysis of power and thus more room to maneuver. Far from being removed from politics, as Eisenstein charges, we see poststructuralism as a key tool in beginning to develop a feminist political economy in which contingent ethical choices and political struggles—with their admittedly open-ended,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

unpredictable, and sometimes regrettable (see Eisenstein's point regarding the politics of black and white women's suffrage) outcomes—replace structural imperatives with their tight causality and constrained eventuation.

Had the early feminists only documented the extent of male power and its implication in imperialism and capitalism, we may not have seen the movement that we did. Instead, feminism has given us a new language, new practices of resubjectivation, and a new kind of dispersed collective action that did not depend upon the organized revolutionary agendas of more established radical politics. We have extended these three kinds of politics into our imaginings and enactings of postcapitalist economies.

In *The End of Capitalism* (2006a) we took up Eisenstein's challenge to "put the issue of capitalism back on the agenda." We argued that just as feminism had released "woman" from her phallocentric positioning as the same as, a *complementto*, or the opposite of "man," so noncapitalism needed to be released from its location in a capitalocentric discourse in which already existing economic alternatives are seen as no different from capitalism, supporting and shoring up capitalism, or so opposed as to be utopian and thus unrealizable. In *A Postcapitalist Politics* we develop this initial foray into *language politics* into a new, richer language of the diverse (not exclusively capitalist) economy. Here we draw on the extraordinarily fruitful work of feminist economic thinkers and activists who have been constructing a feminist political economy focused on the legitimate contribution to economic life made by nonmarket and alternative market transactions, unpaid labor, and noncapitalist economic sites (see, for example, the work on women's economies of generosity by Genevieve Vaughan [1997], or that of Nancy Folbre [2001] and many others on the caring economy and affective labor). This work has had a substantial impact at the global level, where feminists and international agencies, including regional ones such as the European Union, are collaborating to establish new ways of accounting for and distributing benefits to women's labor. For those we have worked with in action research projects in regions where privatization has wrought mass unemployment (Latrobe Valley, Australia), where capitalist economic relations have never taken hold (southern Philippines), and where alternative cooperative and intentional economic activities coexist with multinational capitalism (western Massachusetts, in the United States),

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

this new language of economy has provided a "click" moment that has released noncapitalist imaginaries from the ironclad imperative of the (American) capitalist modernization route to development.

What a more inclusive language of economy has enabled us to recognize worldwide are the noncapitalist practices and sites that are flourishing and the success of women's economic and class struggles outside the capitalist enterprise. In Australia and the United States, scholars such as Jenny Cameron, Cecilia Rio, and Marjolein van der Veen (see Gibson-Graham) have highlighted the ability of privileged and poor, black and white women to transform economic relations in the noncapitalist productive sphere of the household; activists and scholars reading the economic landscape through the lens of a feminist political economy have begun to acknowledge and build on the widespread noncapitalist sites of self-provisioning, gifting and caring, self-employment, and worker cooperation that involve women (along with others) in wealthy and poor communities and countries. The alternative economy "under our noses" has become visible in large part as a result of feminists tirelessly combing the economic landscape for women's activities and successes, establishing a new discourse of political economy centered on economic diversity and ethical action, and generating a new economic politics that acknowledges and nurtures already existing alternatives.

The women's movement demonstrated that a different vocabulary is of little use unless accompanied by new practices of the self. A postcapitalist economic politics involves, for us, a *politics of the subject*, that is, cultivating ourselves and others as subjects of noncapitalist economies. As many of us found as we tried to become different kinds of women, self-cultivation is no easy task, and neither is that of becoming a different kind of economic subject. Think of the hard decisions that migrant domestic workers must make when they negotiate with their expectant families back home to retain a portion of their meager living allowance (that they otherwise might remit to support family consumption) for investment into independent and community enterprise development in the Philippines, Indonesia, or Thailand (Gibson, Law, and McKay 2001). This involves a daily practice of refusing to succumb to the slave or victim mentality usually associated with the domestic servant role in the international economy and embracing, with the support of other members of savings groups that are not unlike consciousness-raising groups, the unfamiliar and uncharted sensibility of a community entre-

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

preneur. Feminism has taught us that changing the self is a path toward changing the world, and that transforming one's environment is a mode of transforming the self.

Finally, a postcapitalist politics involves working collaboratively to produce alternative economic organizations and spaces in place. How might we think of a *politics of collective action* that is not the kind of global feminism that Eisenstein sees as being a "product of globalization"? Feminism has offered a powerful vision of global transformation through the accretion and interaction of small changes in place. In a new collection edited by Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar, *Women and the Politics of Place* (2005), we and others working across the activist/academic and North/South divides argue for a recognition of the transformative potential of a place-based global politics grounded in the ubiquity, and not necessarily the unity, of women. This new political imaginary gives us a larger world in which to start where we are, building our alternative economies here and now. Bolstered by an imagined connection—with the movement of movements, with people in every local setting and circumstance—we sense our wider engagement in collective action. Such action takes place in a landscape of potentially articulated projects and practices, connecting them imaginatively as well as practically.

It seems to us that we have a choice: to perform structural power, to continually suspect the inevitability of co-optation (because anything in relation to capitalism is understood to be dominated, if not controlled, by capitalism), or to resist being theoretically invested in failure. We can resist the view that co-optation automatically happens in the vicinity of power. We can resist co-optation, not by distancing ourselves from power or even the established successes of the past, but through the vigilant ethical practice of not being co-opted. At the same time, we can foster the growth of a feminist political economy by enrolling women in actively practicing "noncapitalism" rather than primarily opposing capitalism. For this project to flourish we need the juices of creativity to flow, and a hospitable, trusting intellectual environment. We probably also need to draw more on the power of women's economic experiments on the ground (where many initiatives remain to be documented) than on our well-honed capacities of judgment and discrimination.

Hester Eisenstein has taken a valiant step by reminding us of the difficult choices confronting any movement that attempts to reshape the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

world. For us, feminism, flawed though it might be, offers inspiration for a postcapitalist economic politics that does not inevitably support a system of privilege.

J. K. GIBSON-GRAHAM is the pen name of Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham, feminist economic geographers at the Australian National University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst, respectively. Their work focuses on rethinking economy and performing economic alternatives in the United States, Australia, and the Philippines. Their books include *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Blackwell, 1996; University of Minnesota Press, 2006) and *A Postcapitalist Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

WORKS CITED

Folbre, Nancy. 2001. *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values*. New York: The New Press.

Gibson, Katherine, Lisa Law, and Deirdre McKay. 2001. "Beyond Heroes and Victims: Filipina Contract Migrants, Economic Activism, and Class Transformation." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 3(3):365–85.

Gibson-Graham. J. K. 1996. *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Oxford: Blackwell.

———. 2006a. *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. With a new introduction. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 2006b. *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gibson-Graham, J. K., Stephen A. Resnick, and Richard D. Wolff, eds. 2000. *Class and Its Others*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Harcourt, Wendy, and Arturo Escobar, eds. 2005. *Women and the Politics of Place*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1993. *Tendencies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

———. 2003. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Vaughan, Genevieve. 1997. *For-giving: A Feminist Criticism of Exchange*. Austin, TX: Plain View Press.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.