
The Nitty Gritty of Creating Alternative Economies

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Amidst widespread concern about 'the economy', this paper explores how academic researchers can contribute to the work underway to create environmentally orientated and socially just economies. We offer the diverse economies framework as a technique with which to cultivate ethical economies.

Introduction

Climate change is a booming wake-up call that our economies cannot go on with business as usual. Widespread concern about the environment sits alongside growing doubt about the viability of what we know as 'the economy' — the financial system is considered shaky, unemployment rates are high, and market expansion is no longer seen as a viable solution to declining revenues. From all quarters, not only the traditional left but also governments, non-government organisations, development agencies and grassroots organisations, there is interest in environmentally attuned and socially orientated economic alternatives.

Amidst such concern, for some time now activists in movements such as the World Social Forum have been supporting and growing alternative economies through a whole range of techniques including new forms of learning and more traditional methods of lobbying, publicity and rallies (Roelvink 2009 and forthcoming). In doing so they are clearly showing that 'another world is possible'. As academics, with others we have developed a suite of complementary techniques for use in research specifically designed to cultivate more diverse, people and environment centred economies, what we call 'community economies' (see Gibson-Graham 2006, Chapter 4).

In developing these techniques, one of which we introduce below, our primary aim has been to make real the possibility that the economy can be a space of ethical action, not a place of submission to 'the bottom line' or the 'imperatives of capital' as it is so often portrayed. We have found, however, that to imagine and enact 'other' economies is no small feat. A significant barrier resides in ourselves, in the very way that we understand 'the economy'. As Stephen Healy (2009) argues, when the capitalist economy is seen as the real, dominant and

or most powerful form of economic life, the alternative economy is usually seen as idealistic, inferior and powerless. But if we displace this binary view of the economy with one of radical difference — of diverse capitalist and non-capitalist economic forms — then we open up many more spaces of action without prejudging their transformative potential. From here our task can be to facilitate ethical debates about which practices foster community wellbeing and resilience and to conduct research that supports and grows these practices.

The techniques we have developed are thus directed at transforming ourselves, that is, at creating new economic subjects who can begin to take ethical action in the economic realm. To create new subjects, however, we first need a different representation of the economy. J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) offers an alternative framing of economy — diverse economies — that acknowledges the already existing multiple forms of economic activity and sources of economic innovation that we can find all around us if we look for them. In this essay we focus on the technique of diverse economies framing.

The diverse economies framing

When people speak of 'the economy' they tend only to think of formal commodity markets, waged and salaried labour and capitalist enterprises focused on creating profit for owners or shareholders. The diverse economies framing broadens our conception of the economy. There are different kinds of transaction and multiple ways in which exchange is negotiated — not only formal market transactions, but alternative markets where considerations other than supply and demand influence the terms of exchange, and non-market exchanges and transactions. There are different ways of performing and remunerating labour — not only waged and salaried labour, but alternatively paid labour and unpaid labour. And there are different modes of economic organisation

or enterprise with their multiple ways of producing, appropriating and distributing surplus labour — not only capitalist enterprise, but other forms of enterprise where private accumulation of surplus is not, or not the only, core business.

Transactions	Labour	enterprise
Market	Paid	Capitalist
Alternative Market	Alternative Paid	Alternative Capitalist
Non-Market	Unpaid	Non-Capitalist

Figure 1: A Diverse Economy Framing. Source: J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006,71)

This preliminary framing is the starting point for specifying the wide range of activities that constitute economies in place. Rather than lay out a more elaborated diverse economy framing here, we turn now to how this representation has been applied.

Using the diverse economies framing in place

We have used this representation as a tool for reimagining regional economies in many different places such as the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts, USA, the Latrobe Shire in South Eastern Australia and the municipalities of Jagna and Linamon in the Central and Southern Philippines (see Cameron and Gibson 2005a, Gibson, Cahill and McKay 2009, Gibson-Graham 2006, Graham, Healy and Byrne 2002). Participatory action research processes have been central to many of these projects (see Cameron and Gibson 2005b). In the Pioneer Valley, the Latrobe Shire, Jagna and Linamon there has been some interest by potential research partners in the agenda of imagining and enacting different economies, ones in which people who are often seen as economically marginalised play a purposeful and valued role. The choice of site has been influenced by the proximity to our university settings in the first and second cases and, in the third, by our partner NGO's relationship with particular municipal governments keen to experiment with alternative development pathways.

Once the institutional partnerships with either local governments or NGOs were negotiated, the recruitment of participants in the research has proceeded in different ways. Each project employed local community researchers with varying educational backgrounds who joined with one, two or a small group of academics to become the research team. Research funds have been used to pay limited term salaries or small stipends for all community based researchers. They, in turn, have recruited other community members to work, usually on a voluntary basis, on inventorying and mobilising community assets towards social enterprise development. In the Latrobe Valley the research team placed

newspaper advertisements for community researchers who were members of economically marginalised groups (retrenched power industry workers, young unemployed people, sole parents). In The Pioneer Valley the research team advertised and used snowball techniques to find interested community researchers who could network with a wide range of Valley residents. In both Jagna and Linamon the research team recruited two 'local researchers' recommended by our municipal government and NGO partners for 12 months initially. They had tertiary education and, having grown up in the region, significant local knowledge and connections with peasant farmers, semi-employed labourers, fisher people, young mothers, older women and ethnic minorities. As each action research project has been slightly different, we focus here on only the Linamon Community Partnering Project to illustrate the nitty gritty of using the diverse economies framing.

Conducting a diverse economies inventory

In Linamon the diverse economy inventory was conducted as part of a larger exercise of identifying the assets (in addition to the needs) of the community. Our concern was that strengths-based approaches to community economic development often operate with a very narrow vision of economic assets that highlights small business and micro-enterprise and making formal markets 'work for the poor'. This focus ignores the wide range of economic practices that support well-being directly, offer a social safety net and are vehicles for community celebration and civic engagement.

Drawing on their own networks the employed local researchers recruited four people as 'community economy researchers' (CERs). In Linamon the project worked with a young unemployed youth, a retrenched power industry worker, an older single parent woman farmer and a young unemployed Muslim woman. The CERs were of varied social and educational backgrounds and came from different barangays, representing coastal and upland areas of the municipality (a barangay is the lowest administrative unit in the Philippines, equivalent to local councils in Australia). As part of the training for all community based researchers the research team worked together on compiling an inventory of the diverse economy of Linamon, drawing on local knowledge and data contained in the recently completed Barangay Development Plans.

With the employed local researchers the academics led a brainstorming session to scope out the range of diverse economic activities under the headings transactions, labour and enterprise. While conducted in English, attention was paid to listing the local terms for activities like barter, reciprocal labour and gleaning. Taking only the transactions column as an example, the following

questions were used to flush out the variety of exchange relationships in one setting.

A diverse transactions inventory exercise

- What kinds of goods and services are traded in your local area?
- What kinds of markets exist for these commodities?
- Are there alternative markets?
- What kinds of goods and services are exchanged in non-market ways?
- What kinds of ethics govern all these different transactions?
- How many buyers or sellers are there in each market?
- What kind of power is wielded by buyers or sellers?
- Can new entrants easily enter the market or are there constraints?
- Are some goods bartered, gifted, gleaned, poached, stolen?
- What kinds of relationships exist between producers and sellers, consumers and sellers, givers and receivers?

The research team was concerned to include those transactions taking place in formally regulated markets including naturally protected, artificially protected, monopolised, state regulated and niche markets. They were also keen to inventory the goods and services that were exchanged in non-typical or alternative markets, such as informal markets, barter, ethical fair-trade markets, underground markets, local trading system, alternative currencies, co-op exchanges, alternative credit and the sale of public goods. Many of the most important goods and services are given, taken or exchanged outside of markets in areas of life often seen as 'not economic'. In Linamon these 'non-market' transactions included the following:

Household flows

- Food sharing
- Child care sharing
- Care of house and animals

Gifts

- Charity to poor — house built, water sealed toilets constructed
- Dajong: neighbourhood mortuary assistance including money, food and services
- Gala 1: families give money, rice, wood to family of marrying son
- Gala 2: dances and money offered in honour of patron saint — fund raising for church
- Gift to coconut plantation landowners in gratitude

for access to land for inter-cropping

- Remittance funds from family members overseas

Indigenous exchange

- Ritual offerings to spirits

Gleaning

- Pamulak: collecting fruits and vegetables after harvest
- Lasik: picking up left over coconuts after the harvest

Theft

- Robbery of crops to settle gambling debts
- Illegal fishing practices
- Illegal logging on uplands

When it came to conducting the exercise with the CERs our local researchers outlined the columns in the local language and, using the names that had been identified in the first inventory round, gathered stories about activities that fit within each cell. As it was used in Linamon the diverse economies inventory was not an exercise in constructing a quantitatively complete census of the local economy, though this could be done in any setting if resources allowed and if it served the purpose of the research intervention. While the research team was able to collect information on labour and transactions from local knowledge and on the number of enterprises (mostly sole proprietorships and a few family businesses) from the *Barangay* Development Plans, they did not conduct a comprehensive survey. For the purpose of the Linamon Community Partnering Project the objective was to qualitatively identify local practices that might be strengthened and reoriented towards enhancing community economic development. The exercise was targeted at training all the non-academic researchers to shift their focus onto the fullness of their economy in place. The technique achieved a representational turnaround by situating practices often represented as backward and unproductive as part of 'the economy'. Many practices were thus revalued. Others were recognised as producing resource conflict and stress. The new understandings achieved by doing the diverse economies inventory then informed the next phase of the action research.

The stories that had been told while compiling the inventory were examined for what they could tell us about mobilising resources. They disclosed many potential ways to fund community economic development in addition to export orientated production and micro-credit schemes so often pushed by mainstream development bodies. The transactions inventory highlighted, for example, remittances gifted by overseas contract migrants that are used by households to fund the necessities of everyday life and sometimes to purchase more luxury items. Stories were also told of migrants using their remittance earnings

to fund local *barangay* improvements. Local roads and water systems had been built by harnessing volunteer labour (modelled on the time honoured performance of *bayanihan*, or local civic effort) and materials bought with gifted remittances. The inventory prompted discussion about whether existing sources of finance and practices of giving and reciprocity might be enlisted to support other community-orientated development projects.

The diverse economies inventory was a technique that formed part of a much longer process of action research that lasted for three years. It was used both in the early stages of community involvement and informed the subsequent process of researching the feasibility of community based social enterprises and experimenting with building new businesses (see Gibson, Hill and Maclay, 2008 for more on this process).

The bigger picture

In this essay we have offered the diverse economies framing as a technique of reading for economic difference (see Gibson-Graham 2006, xxxi-xxxii). This technique trains us to see 'the economy' as a site of economic diversity. It enables those who use it to begin to see themselves differently, as actively contributing to economic life in multiple ways and through multiple roles and identities, as workers, researchers, gift givers, gardeners, reciprocators, activists, traders and so on. The reframing this technique achieves can be harnessed towards building socially and environmentally just economies. As Gibson-Graham (2006, chapters 2 and 6) has shown, however, it takes further techniques than those we have discussed here to turn 'reluctant subjects' of alternative economies into animated producers of new economic possibilities. Reframing can be joined by techniques that document examples of community economic action, that prompt participants to imagine creating new social enterprises and that help groups to build these enterprises (see Gibson-Graham 2006, 132). It is clear to us that academic work has a central role to play here.

With more techniques we might further differentiate economic life, thereby enlarging the possibilities for action. As it has been applied in different settings, for example, the diverse economies framing has been extended to include diverse forms of property and finance. In our new geological epoch of human-induced climate change, the Anthropocene, it has become increasingly clear to us that the more-than-human world is fundamentally implicated in the way we live our lives. We humans are neither masters nor caretakers of the environment and other species; the more-than-human world is an active participant in diverse economies. Consider the diverse exchanges, labour and surplus appropriations that involve rivers, soil profiles, animals, biota, minerals and atmospheres that

contribute to economic wellbeing. Our task now is to open ourselves up to the contributions of the environment and other species and to recognise the transactions we make with this more-than-human world. We might then also open up the space of ethical economic decision making to 'earth others' and together transform our economies (Roelvink and Gibson-Graham 2009, Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010).

Learning more

The Community Economies Collective has developed a number of resources with which to develop a discourse of economic diversity in place, many of which can be found on the Community Economies Collective website: <http://www.communityeconomies.org/Home> and in a book in progress by J.K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron and Stephen Healy called *Take Back the Economy* (forthcoming with the University of Minnesota Press).

The diverse transactions inventory in Linamon highlighted above was only a small part of the Community Partnering Projects conducted in the Philippines. The projects also involved the development of new social enterprises. Some of this work is documented in the DVD *Building Social Enterprises in the Philippines: Strategies for Local Development* (Gibson, Hill and Maclay 2008) which can be accessed at <http://www.communityeconomies.org/Resources/Community-Resources>.

The diverse economies framework was developed by J.K. Gibson-Graham. Her books *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)* (1996) and *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006) are central to the rethinking economy project and have inspired a new generation of economic researchers. Her *Progress in Human Geography* lecture (2008) provides a picture of this emerging field of research. The diverse economies approach is aligned with a range of activists and social movements, some of which can be found at the World Social Forum meetings.

Our new work developing an economic ethics for the Anthropocene has been published in two journal articles, one in the *Australian Humanities Review* (2009) and the other in the radical geography journal *Antipode* (2009).

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