

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Gerda Roelvink, Kevin St. Martin and J.K. Gibson-Graham (eds), *Making Other Worlds Possible: Performing Diverse Economies*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780816693283 (cloth); ISBN: 9780816693290 (paper)

In *Making Other Worlds Possible* the authors all make it abundantly clear that there is no point in talking about “alternative economics” because this only reinforces the idea that there is a dominant way of doing business. J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013) have long been moving the conversation about economics away from “capitalocentrism”, arguing that in fact most people engage in economies in various ways. Yet in 2016 much of the critical political economy literature is still focused on “alternatives”. When we are focused on labeling activities “alternative” then it sets up the binary between what is “normal” and “mainstream” and what is not. This book is a helpful analysis of the variety of business models active in the world today, and we should see them as vibrant and viable and not only as special projects reacting to the dominant capitalistic marketplace. Given people’s annoyance with hegemonic economic models, it is prime time to think about the everyday ways people around the world organize their economies.

In the introduction, the editors pay tribute to the late Julie Graham, one of the authors under the pen name “J.K. Gibson-Graham”, who made it her life’s work to rethink the varied ways people are doing economies. This tribute is a loving one and shows that the editors remember their comrade in a way that is rare in the world of academia. It is in this same introduction that the editors refer to the work they do as part of the “economy as a site of difference” and continue in the tradition of J.K. Gibson-Graham. It is a chapter that should be required for any course on economic difference. The 13 chapters that follow examine the performance of diverse economies, each presenting a rich case study. While the book is dense

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and one can get lost in the critical political economy and feminist theorizing, the actual cases ground the theory well to understand the issues people encounter as they try and do economies for themselves.

The authors are mainly from the US and Australia, and they are deeply committed to carrying out research in community economies. One author, Karen Werner, even took a sabbatical from her college teaching to work on a Buddhist project in Massachusetts because she felt it important to integrate what she teaches about with some hands-on experience about community economies. This is exactly what most of us teaching about diverse economies should be doing—taking a sabbatical year to live the diverse community experience! This literature is fresh and engages with real-life cases, and this compilation brings the focus on economic difference back to ordinary people. The book is excellent for teaching: one can engage with the theoretical ideas and then relate them to an actual issue affecting a group of people. I am hard-pressed to choose the cases to highlight in this review, so I will cherry-pick the ones that resonated with me.

In Chapter 1, “A Fishery for the Future”, Robert Snyder and Kevin St. Martin examine the fascinating case of small-scale fisheries in Port Clyde, Maine, and their move toward community-supported fishing. For a long time the communities in the area struggled with the tension between corporate fisheries management and people’s needs and concerns. People had to deal with the overfishing and losses of groundfish, and this resulted in corporate managers making decisions that cut into the economic livelihoods of people. The community worked with the authors to map the issues, and figure out the “group of concerns” to confront the neoliberalization of the fish sector with alternatives that made sense for people first. The success of the Port Clyde community came after building alliances across sectors and led to the eventual creation of a cooperative to develop alternative forms of fish distribution, teaching people how to

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consume fresh fish and including scientists, researchers and NGOs in the local fishing issues. The result was impressive and the community-supported fishing movement led to the total restructuring of the local economy and environment. As a Canadian, this case is reminiscent of the 1920s Antigonish movement where Catholic priests worked with fisherfolk through “kitchen table” talks to develop collective enterprises and improve the wages and advocacy of communities in Nova Scotia highly dependent on the fishing sector (see Alexander 1997).

In Chapter 4, “Biofuels, Ex-felons, and Empower, a Worker-Owned Cooperative”, Stephen Healy examines a failed effort—a worker-owned cooperative called Empower made up of ex-felons which transformed waste vegetable oil into an energy source in Massachusetts. Empower had a dual mandate: to contribute to the green economy and to assist former felons to find productive livelihoods. The author worked closely with the cooperative until its demise in 2012. This case is a hard one. Healy admits that Empower failed in its mission but there are take-home lessons for understanding how to do social enterprises and that the class bias in society can affect how such enterprises succeed. A person in the case makes a poignant point that, perhaps, worker-owned cooperatives are not really for marginalized people if they cannot pay salaries. The Empower case offers up suggestions of what kind of social capital is needed to sustain a viable worker-owned cooperative. And I think the most important lesson in this case is that managers need to think beyond the ethical aspects of the business, and to look at the money aspects of the business operation. If the project does not move from its “hobby” status then some workers won’t stay on if they do not have decent paying jobs. Empower’s workers were ex-prisoners and they needed an income; however, Empower did not succeed in making its business plan viable despite a potentially lucrative activity of transforming waste into energy.

In Chapter 12, “The Politics of Mapping Solidarity Economics and Diverse Economies in Brazil and the Northeastern United States”, Maliha Safri examines the US Social Forum, which

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was a venue that enabled activists from many countries such as Canada, the US and Italy to engage with the global South countries like Brazil and Mexico to create solidarity economies. The Brazil case is particularly interesting in terms of looking at what the solidarity economy is and exploring its relation to diverse economies. Brazil's solidarity economy defines itself as self-managed; the worker cooperatives run by indigenous people and women reinforce the idea that ordinary people can control and manage their affairs. I enjoyed the US comparisons of solidarity economics in New Jersey, Massachusetts and Mississippi, also. The Jackson-Kush Plan initiated by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and the Jackson People's Assembly was able to work with former mayor Chokwe Lumumba's plan to push for a cooperative model in one the poorest American cities.

Making Other Worlds Possible is useful for expanding who is counted in the social economy, and for moving beyond the notion of "alternatives" because so many racialized people engage in community economies not as an alternative, but, rather, as a way of life (Hossein 2016a, 2016b). The idea of diverse economies was provocative since its inception and political in that it challenged the way the language about economics has been used. This has worked for many of us who seek to uncover the contributions of racialized people in the economy (Gordon-Nembhard 2014; Hossein 2016a).

This book is wonderful in that it documents the community economies in the world. We should be injecting more cases from the global South where community economies are not isolated tiny experiments but significant undertakings. For example, since the 1970s, more than 30 million Indians belong to self-help groups while the country's leaders pursue commercialization (Wilson 2001); the Mata Masu Dubara of the Nigerien Sahel is a movement of thousands of rural women owning their own local development (Grant and Allen 2002); and Muhammed Yunus' Grameen Bank, a bank that gives financial services to over eight million

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Bangladeshi women, shows once again that collective institutions matter (indeed, millions of women around the globe act as “Banker Ladies”, creating community-based banking groups [Hosseini 2016b]).

Many people engage in business in an ethical way, and their motivation is not necessarily as a reaction to neoliberal economics, but rather is focused on the way they choose to live. In Canada, Aboriginal people reinforce the notion that diverse economies have always been with us. Wanda Wuttunee (2004), in *Living Rhythms: Lessons in Aboriginal Economic Resilience and Vision*, speaks of myriad ways that First Nations people have organized socially-conscious and purposeful businesses on their own terms.

Making Other Worlds Possible offers case studies from Australia, Brazil, the US, Russia, and the Philippines to demonstrate that people creating community economies are not just “confronting” neoliberal markets, but, rather, they organize local economies that make sense first to their own livelihoods. I do wish that the book stepped into history to understand how colonized people have resisted domination through diverse economies. I find in my own work that racialized people who have endured (and still endure) exclusion are far more political in their orientation when it comes to performing diverse economies; economic difference means so much to many historically oppressed people organizing communities in such a way to deal with the systemic biases at play in markets and society.

Making Other Worlds Possible is a major contribution to the literature. As a Black Canadian woman teaching my students about business in society, I find that the book opens up the space to think about local community-run economies. So much of the academic literature does not do a good job at including the positive contributions of excluded people as activists in the economy. *Making Other Worlds Possible* is conscious of other worlds and shows in concrete terms what people are doing. This work makes the readers conscious of the varied local

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economies occurring in our world today, and that we need to think about these economies as part of the spectrum of economic models. Examples of actually existing community economies are useful to me and liven up the material in ways which I think students will enjoy. What makes the book so special is that each of authors know the communities they speak of and they write with real passion.

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