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Economic Diversity as a Performative Ontological Project

Making Economic Diversity Credible

In the fields of biology, ecology, and cultural studies, the concept of diversity is naturalized (even as this naturalization is contested). But in economic science, monocultural thinking has naturalized capitalist economic relations and their homogenizing dynamics and thus “interfered” with the “realities” of economic diversity (Law and Urry 2004, 404). When economic diversity is evoked it is associated merely with the mix of economic and industrial sectors (primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary), or the mix of public and private sectors, all within an economy of capitalist sameness. The interfering effects of monocultural thinking have been eloquently identified by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2004, 238), who alerts us to how certain kinds of difference have largely been “disqualified and rendered invisible, unintelligible, or irreversibly discardable.” In the economic arena where lively conceptions of diversity have been rendered non-credible, we are able to see the reinstatement of economic diversity as a performative act of world-making.

<i>ENTERPRISE</i>	<i>LABOR</i>	<i>PROPERTY</i>	<i>TRANSACTIONS</i>	<i>FINANCE</i>
CAPITALIST	WAGE	PRIVATE	MARKET	MAINSTREAM MARKET
ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST State owned Environmentally responsible Socially responsible Non-profit	ALTERNATIVE PAID Self-employed Reciprocal labor In-kind Work for welfare	ALTERNATIVE PRIVATE State-managed assets Customary (clan) land Community land trusts Indigenous knowledge (Intellectual Property)	ALTERNATIVE MARKET Fair trade Alternative currencies Underground market Barter	ALTERNATIVE MARKET Cooperative Banks Credit unions Community-based financial institutions Micro-finance
NON-CAPITALIST Worker cooperatives Sole proprietorships Community enterprise Feudal Slave	UNPAID Housework Volunteer Self-provisioning Slave labor	OPEN ACCESS Atmosphere International Waters Open source IP Outer Space	NON-MARKET Household sharing Gift giving Hunting, fishing, gathering Theft, piracy, poaching	NON-MARKET Sweat equity Family lending Donations Interest-free loans

Figure 1:
A Diverse
Economy
Framing.

With many others, I am working on theorizing—and thus bringing to greater visibility—the diversity of markets, transactions, forms of labor, enterprise, property, and finance that make up our economic world. J. K. Gibson-Graham’s diverse economy framing (fig. 1) is one element of a performative ontological project designed to liberate

economic thinking from its capitalocentrism (2006, ch. 3). The deconstructive moves, thick description, and weak theorizing embodied in Figure 1 are but first steps towards mobilizing desires for building “other” economies. But there is work to be done to move beyond an inventory of economic diversity towards disclosing new worlds.

Diversity as Only One Dimension of “Pattern”

In various action research projects I have used a framing of economic diversity as an aid to imagining and enacting alternative futures. Attempts to increase just one aspect of economic diversity—that of enterprise forms—have been guided by the innovative work on local development by Jane Jacobs (2000). Jacobs’s interest in bio-mimicry leads her to suggest that economic development is connected to the expansion or decline of economic diversity and resilience. She writes: “In an ecosystem, the essential contributions made within the conduit are created by diverse biological activities. In the teeming economy, the essential contributions made within the conduit are created by diverse economic activities” (2000, 59). Using the framing of a diverse economy, Jacobs’s conception of economic diversity can be extended beyond sectoral differentiation to include, for example, diverse transactions with multiple rules of in/commensurability, diverse forms and remuneration of labor, and diverse ways of producing and distributing surplus within different enterprise organizations.

In exploring the hypothesis that diversity creates resilience, we need to go beyond the simple notion that economic diversity is an unquestioned good. This is pretty obvious in a community where child slavery, indentured labor, theft, and feudal tenancy are part of the diverse economy. Diversity is only one aspect of any workable or livable or healthy “pattern.” Here I am invoking the language of Wendell Berry in his 1981 essay “Solving for Pattern.” Diversity needs to be situated with respect to relations of independence and interdependence, development and co-development, balance and harmony. What resilience means in any socioeconomic-ecological context must be a subject for democratic deliberation.

We need a way of conducting ethical negotiations about what kinds of diversity are to be supported and what dynamics of development can be activated to do so. Gibson-Graham

offers the “community economy coordinates” as a focus for ethical deliberation about what is necessary for life, what is held in common, how we might consume, and what to do with surplus (2006, ch. 6; 2009). In each deliberation, the question of whether to cultivate or ignore diversity is an open question that invites analysis of potential effects.

Diversity as Strategy

It’s hard to ignore the destruction of all kinds of earthly diversity that has accompanied (at least) the Western development project. This does not mean that diversity is not still with us, or that it is not continually being reproduced. I would like to consider how we might attend to biological, cultural, and economic diversity. In a recent essay, Freya Mathews (2010) argues for re-animating the world, enlivening the object in the subject/object dualism by setting aside *theoria* (our theoretical spectatorship) and embracing *strategia* (coordinating collective or individual agency by cultivating greater sensitivity to our world). I suggest that we have a choice: we can pursue the traditional path as “theorists,” situating diversity as an independent object to be studied, a truth to be reflected or not, according to its worldly existence; or we can approach diversity as “strategists,” admitting that it is one of the influences at play in our immediate situation in which we are “agentially immersed” and negotiating ways of adapting to and accommodating it to attain certain goals (Mathews 2010, 8).

Can we abandon the interferences of monocultural thinking and begin to attend to our already diverse world, to the diverse relationships between biology, ecology, culture, and economy, to the diversity of dynamics that animate our world, and to the diverse developmental trajectories that might unfold if we let them? If we can, our discussion may be less about diversity as such and more about ethical negotiations around diversity and their effects.

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