

## **Reluctant Subjects or Passive Resistance? A commentary on J.K. Gibson-Graham's "Surplus possibilities: Postdevelopment and community economies"**

The reference for this article is:

Curry, G.N. (2005). Reluctant subjects or passive resistance? A commentary on J.K. Gibson-Graham's "Surplus possibilities: postdevelopment and community economies". *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 26(2), 127-131

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, postdevelopment has been criticised for essentialising development (Corbridge, 1998; Pieterse, 2000) and for being unable to provide a viable alternative to conventional development practice. J.K. Gibson-Graham's (2005) paper in the March issue of this journal (with commentaries by Aguilar, Laurie, Lawson and Kelly) attempts to forge a path through this apparent impasse by opening possibilities for postdevelopment interventions through their "diverse economies" approach. Their paper challenges mainstream development grounded in the discourse of a monolithic capitalism that fails to recognise the diverse non-capitalist practices associated with the household and informal economies. They seek to do this by adding "all the economic 'others' that sustain survival and wellbeing" (p. 12) to the market transactions, wage labour and capitalist enterprises usually associated with the mainstream economy. These economic others consist of the "vast mesh of activities that do not intersect formal markets where the rules of competition govern behaviour and outcomes" (p. 15).

Gibson-Graham argue that the challenge for postdevelopment is not to give up on development but to practice it differently (p.6). I share this sentiment. Unfortunately, as I argue in this commentary, the potential of Gibson-Graham's strategy to generate viable livelihoods above subsistence level is limited. This is because their anti-capitalocentric perspective sometimes slips into an anticapitalist stance that has two effects: (i) it overplays the division between capitalism and its non-capitalist others, thereby limiting visions of economic futures which involve the inflection of capitalist development to serve non-capitalist ends; and (ii) it leads to the inappropriate and theoretically inconsistent relabelling of economic practices to discursively cast them as "good" or "bad". I conclude the commentary with a short discussion of how a less anti-capitalist stance that is cognisant of capitalism's social embeddedness opens possibilities for new economic imaginings in which indigenous socioeconomies could be strengthened by the inflection of capitalist development. However, before discussing these points, it is necessary to first comment on how Gibson-Graham's project to make visible non-capitalist practices involves an apparently unconscious privileging of western economic values over indigenous economic values in relation to some non-market activities.

## **PRIVILEGING WESTERN AGENCY AND NEOCLASSICAL ECONOMIC VALUES**

Despite Gibson-Graham's attempt to develop an ethical practice based on valuing indigenous knowledges and agency, they repeatedly fall back on assumptions about the economy and rural subjects from the very models they claim to destabilise. For instance, by labelling their study population as "reluctant subjects" Gibson-Graham might inadvertently perpetuate the modernisation view of third world people as lacking agency and not knowing what is in their best interests. They assert: "the rural Filipino tends to want the dole-out, not a role in the community economy" (p. 20), and "participants in workshops... [are] awakening to the possibility that they can start from where they are and build upon this substrate" (p. 20). Their "reluctant subjects" must be enlightened about their colonial mindsets before they can be liberated from themselves; without this liberation they remain obstacles to development:

Perhaps the greatest challenge to a postdevelopment agenda lies not so much with generating new theories and strategies, but with the subjects who are constituted by development practice, Enlightenment thought, Spanish and then US colonisation, and are reluctant to "become" anew (p. 20).

Presupposing a Filipino lifeworld and history constructed by external agency not only denies local agency, but is contradicted by Gibson-Graham's own documentation of the diverse range of non-capitalist practices in which people are already engaged. By labelling these existing practices a "substrate" to build on, Gibson-Graham present an image of a static indigenous socioeconomy where innovation and experimentation cannot occur endogenously (maybe because of their colonial mindsets?). Such a perspective does little justice to the rich tableaux of experimentation and innovation documented in numerous studies among rural communities in developing countries (e.g. Schmink, 1984: 88; Dudley, 1993, 13). Indeed, Gibson-Graham's statement that "the hold of epistemologies of the 'north' is deeply ingrained" (p. 20) in their subjects is not substantiated by their own evidence.

The rest of this commentary turns to the important task of identifying the limitations of Gibson-Graham's framework for providing a viable postdevelopment alternative.

## **NON-MARKET RELATIONS ARE INTRINSICALLY GOOD, OR ARE THEY?**

Gibson-Graham are less critical than they should be of the potential for non-capitalist practices to entrench exploitative relationships in the "community economy". While they recognise that non-capitalist practices "might maintain and heighten status and hierarchy divisions within the community, or might foster flows of labour that could be experienced as exploitative" (pp. 16-17), their cautionary note is thrown to the wind in their discussion of non-capitalist practices (e.g. p.15). Yet, exploitative relations are common in non-market economies. As Kelly (2005:42) notes, many transactions in the non-market economy incorporate gendered and generational relations that are highly exploitative.

For instance, several studies have revealed how the introduction of a market economy in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) highlands ended the gerontocracy of the bigman system of generational exploitation with a democratisation of indigenous economic relationships. (e.g. Hughes, 1978; Strathern, 1979; Feil, 1987). In my own work in the Sepik region of PNG, highly codified indigenous exchange relations enabled the systematic exploitation of villagers of less than six generations of village residence. Rising land pressures and their lacking “true” birthrights in their “host” community had legitimised indigenous exchange relationships that siphoned the wealth and labour power from these “migrants” to their “host” lineages (Curry, 1997).

For many people in the developing world the advent and expansion of a market economy has offered diverse routes out of the oppressive strictures, and sometimes exploitative relationships, of the village socioeconomy. This is one reason why labour migration is popular amongst the rural young. Indigenous exchange – while loaded with thick cultural meanings and central to social identity, group formation and community building – is not always egalitarian.

Further, in Gibson-Graham’s attempt to portray non-market practices as intrinsically good and to move them out of the shadow of the discourse of a monolithic capitalism, a process of relabelling is applied through a “language project of representing the economy as diverse” (p. 4). This is fine and well, but relabelling exercises to achieve this must be done carefully because the renaming process does not necessarily remove their pre-existing capacity for exploitation nor alter the physical realities of inequality – in fact, it may obscure exploitative relationships, or even legitimise them. As Aguilar’s (2005:29) commentary highlights, amongst other examples, the lending to rice farmers of money and fertiliser with interest charges masks the exploitation when the lenders are relabelled “donors”<sup>1</sup>.

Further, Gibson-Graham seem to misinterpret the sociocultural significance of different exchange practices, as revealed in their analysis of a communal pig feast versus an investment in water pipes to improve water quality (p. 19). They resort to market economic values to resolve their dilemma and so endorse the local councillors’ decision to forego the donation of a pig to the annual fiesta “for all to enjoy the taste of... spit-roasted pig” (p.19) in order to finance the water supply. Gibson-Graham see this as “privilege[d] longer-term investment in the community’s future over shorter-term cosmetic or consumption effects” (p. 19). By labelling communal pig consumption as a short-term cosmetic or consumption effect, they inadvertently do violence to the very non-market practices they claim to want to make visible and promote, through reinforcing a discourse that views such community investments as wasteful consumption rather than as acts of social investment with long-term community-building effects. Such valuing of indigenous economic practices seems to reinstall modernisation values in a different guise.

### **AN ANTI-CAPITALIST STANCE LIMITS OPPORTUNITIES**

Gibson-Graham’s framework is perhaps weakest in its inability to recognise the extent to which indigenous, non-market economies throughout much of the world are now subsidised or underwritten by surpluses generated in the capitalist economy. Further, a related point is that their aim to make visible the “‘community economy’ – those economic practices that sustain lives and maintain *wellbeing directly* (without

resort to the circuitous mechanisms of capitalist industrialisation and income trickle-down)” (p. 16; original emphasis) has, ironically, masked the social dimensions of capitalist production. This closes off opportunities for thinking about new kinds of postdevelopment initiatives, for example those involving international capital. I briefly discuss each of these points below.

Gibson-Graham’s assertion “that there is a thin veneer of capitalist economic activity underlain by a thick mesh of traditional practices and relationships of gifting, sharing, borrowing, volunteering, and reciprocated individual and collective work” (p. 16), fails to acknowledge how the capitalist economy now sustains many of these practices, a point made by both Aguilar and Lawson in their commentaries. Lawson (2005:37) picks this up when she highlights that diverse economic practices are partly underwritten by the remittances of overseas contract workers and poses the question: “[d]oes this community transformation depend upon engagements with global capitalist circuits in order to generate surplus that can then lead to (potentially) empowering alternatives in home communities?”. While this hitching to the capitalist economy to empower or (re)vitalise indigenous non-market economies is not a new insight (e.g. Curry, 1999; 2003; 2005; Yang, 2000), it is important because it suggests a way forward that moves beyond the limitations of Gibson-Graham’s postdevelopment framework, a point to which I return shortly.

The second limitation, related to the preceding point, is that Gibson-Graham’s framework does not recognise the social embeddedness of *all* economic action (for an overview of this literature see Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990). Thus, Gibson-Graham’s dualism where only non-market economic activity has a social dimension is overdrawn. As the social embeddedness literature has shown, what are putatively market relations and transactions in both the western and developing worlds are often imbued with nonmarket social meanings and values (Curry, 1999; Imbun, 2000). Many transactions that are commonly thought of as market transactions are anything but – they may have more significance as makers and markers of social relationships of identity, especially in clan-based societies where they are also implicated in determining social boundaries.

For example, while the timing and level of indigenous exchange activities in PNG are influenced by opportunities in the market economy (e.g. the seasonal cocoa flush, or cash crop prices), the performance of commodity production (and other types of engagement with international capital) has been recast to serve indigenous social objectives such as maintaining and building social and kinship networks (Koczberski, 2002; Curry, 2003; see also Smith, 2003: 92, for an Australian example). When people work together in cash crop production they are forming social relations of identity in the same way that communal work groups do in subsistence production, or when preparing for, and participating in, ritual events. The remuneration of labour in commodity production, investment returns from small business enterprises, and so on, bear little or no relation to market rates of return (Curry, 1999). Instead, other logics associated with kinship, gift exchange and identity override market economic considerations in what are ostensibly enterprises of the market economy.

Gibson-Graham’s reluctance to recognise the social embeddedness of action in the market economy may stem partly from an anticapitalist stance, which makes it difficult for them to reconcile an exploitative capitalism with a capitalism that might

at times become community-constructive. This dilemma is highlighted by Kelly's (2005:43) pertinent question: "are we [Gibson-Graham]... in danger of confusing the goal of a more equitable society with a less capitalistic one?". Thus, despite their discussion of the exchange side of the economy, Gibson-Graham remain wedded to a Marxist emphasis on production as a yardstick against which they assess economic practices as either good or bad (see Aguilar's (2005) comments on Gibson-Graham's association of economic forms with good and evil).

By recognising that economic practices associated with the market and capitalist production can be embedded in their host societies in a wide range of ways, we can begin to move beyond postdevelopment frameworks that seek to exclude capitalism and markets from indigenous economies (e.g. international labour migration) to imagine futures in which indigenous communities are able to shape how capitalist development is to be embedded in their communities to accord with indigenous sociocultural values and practices. Economic surpluses generated through partnerships with international capital could be deployed in the indigenous exchange economy to foster and strengthen communities (for a fuller discussion see Curry, 2003). Finally, we must recognise and respect local agency in development futures — it is for indigenous communities themselves, not outsiders, to determine how much participation in the capitalist economy is desirable for their sociocultural wellbeing.

#### NOTE

1 This relabelling exercise is most intriguing when "Poor farm to market roads", "Broken dams" and "Broken irrigation systems", identified in Jagna's needs map (Gibson-Graham, 2005:10), are reimagined in Jagna's assets map (p. 11) as "Good road links", "Good water supply" and "Viable irrigation system".

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