

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**J.K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron and Stephen Healy, *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming our Communities*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-8166-7606-4 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-8166-7607-1 (paper)**

This is the latest product from J.K. Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies Collective (CEC – see <http://www.communityeconomies.org/Home>). It can be seen in some ways as the third part of a trilogy that began with their cheeky feminist call that ‘we do not need to wait for the revolution but can make it in our living rooms’ in *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)* (Gibson-Graham 1996; 2006a), later developed in *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Gibson-Graham 2006b). This latest CEC analysis continues to argue that economies are produced from ethical decisions, and that it is the way that ‘Capitalism’ has been thought that has created a monster that seems overawing, unbeatable. It argues that after 200 years of capitalist exploitation, we have ignored the depletion of the earth’s resources for too long. Not only is capitalism exploitative and unequal: as a species we are consuming more than we are replenishing, not sharing the wealth we have with future generation and distant others, and destroying other species. We need to turn things around. To do this, we need to “approach each effort to reclaim the economy with an open and curious mind, a feeling heart and an orientation towards the experimental rather than the programmatic. Let’s not rush too quickly to the big picture and the big judgements” (p7).

We now need, they argue, an economic ethics for the Anthropocene (see Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010). In doing this, we need to ask ourselves:

- How do we survive well?
- How shall we produce what we need?
- What will we do with any surplus?
- How shall we share and encounter others?
- What do we consume?
- How do we create a world worth living in, and invest in the future?

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This is a book for those who want something better and who believe it can still be produced, if not in our living rooms, then in our communities. It is not a programme for a revolution. It argues that we need to reframe ourselves as actors who produce and shape economies through our consumption and production decisions. Consequently, we need to be aware of both the implications of our economic decisions, and, crucially, the myriad ways in which we make our living not only through paid work and running businesses, but also through sharing, growing our own food, generating our own power, and through participation in various clubs, societies and commons - a process they call 'resubjectification'. The book is a guide to help activists and community members through this reframing and resubjectification process, thinking through their ethical consumption decisions and identifying the options open to them.

Each chapter starts with the dominant view of the economy (privately owned, with markets as optimal allocation systems if left alone, and status coming from consumption), before showing how people across the globe are creating alternatives. Each chapter, on how to take back work, business, the market, property and finance, concludes with a set of questions for those reading the book to ask about how they live their lives in the here and now (uncovering the diversity of economic relations discussed above) and a set of tools and techniques to create alternatives. It's a book to be read in a group, as a guide to thought and action.

It is a book that I've looked forward to reviewing, so two things need to be said up front. First, I am a fan, relentlessly enthusiastic about all things J.K. Gibson-Graham, and will review the book on that basis. Not everyone is so enamoured of the 'Pollyannas' of the geographical profession (see Gibson-Graham 2006a:xxxix), preferring to focus on capitalism as a system characterised by boom and bust, with inevitably problematic, if not ecocidal, outcomes (Kovel 2007). They see people as only dimly being able to understand the systemic forces acting upon them. For them, politics has become managerial, post-political, deracinated. It's not a view I share. J.K. Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies

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Collective, among others like John Holloway (2002; 2010) and autonomous geographers (see Pickerill and Chatterton 2006), see a vibrant movement challenging neoliberal domination, inequality and climate chaos, and I am on their side. I want to focus more on developing ‘our’ power to create the world we want to see, and see barriers as issues to be grappled with, not fundamental blocks to progress. It is not good enough that we can more easily see the end of the world than the end of capitalism. I am a fan, many people won’t be. This is a review for fans, aiming for critical engagement rather than debunking. I read it in a spirit of excitement. I am glad that J.K. Gibson-Graham and their CEC colleagues provide such a refreshing alternative, a politics of hope. In this review I want to fill out, not knock, this task.

Secondly, this is not an academic book. While *The End...* was resolutely academic in focus, and hard going, *A Postcapitalist Politics* was slightly more accessible, but still not as engaged with the plethora of grassroots anticapitalist and climate action groups that were working, perhaps without knowing it, on creating another, egalitarian, convivial, sustainable economy at the time the book was written. When I reviewed *A Postcapitalist Politics* for *Progress in Human Geography* (North 2008) I lamented this lack of engagement, so it is good to see that *Take Back...* is stuffed full of real life examples of the politics the authors wish to see in action. We need more of this. It’s a popular book, and I will review it as such. Is it useful guide to action, to what works and why, providing tools for a better world, or an uncritical celebration of activism? Does the theory stay in, helping activists think through what they are doing? Is it well written, or an attempt to communicate theory to activists that fails? Does it ‘work’ on its own terms? The answer must be – yes. I’ve actually read it twice, having the advantage of looking through the original manuscript on the long flight to the Los Angeles AAG in 2013. The look, feel and design of the thing matters. Theory is deployed lightly but clearly, and explained well, with good examples like the analogy of the economy and the ecosystem that supports it as a community garden (p.xv-xvii). The examples and tools for reframing and resubjectification (that is, seeing familiar economic forms like work or business in new ways, and realising that we can be actors making economies) are nicely laid out, and the design quality is good. It’s not perfect. If I compare it

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to my own publication *Local Money* (North 2010), which is a similar activist-focused book, with other books published by Green Books on the Transition Towns movement (Hopkins 2008; 2011; Pinkerton and Hopkins 2009), or some of the work by activist collectives (Notes from Nowhere 2003), the text could have been broken up more with boxes and photographs. That said, it can be hard translating ideas that have currency in academic circles into language and forms of presentation that work for activists. I thought translating academic work on local currencies in *Local Money* would be an easy job: it was much, much harder than I thought it would be, pushed by a great publishing house that knew what it wanted. The authors have done a better job than many.

Will activists use it? Perhaps being an academic myself, if an engaged one, I am not the right person to say: but I found the questions and thinking tools to be useful. I can imagine an active transition town, local currency network or co-housing group finding a useful set of tools for thinking through what they are doing. I thought it was particularly useful for the project of developing our capacity to do more, focussing less on ‘their’ power over us. Can I see an anticapitalist or anti-austerity group engaging with the book? My feeling, and one shared by activists from local currency networks who do want to focus more on creating alternatives, is that it is often much easier to go on a demonstration or action than to undertake the long, patient work of creating alternatives. We will have to see what reviews from activist groups emerge (see, for example, <http://www.catalystcentre.ca/2013/07/23/take-back-the-economy-an-ethical-guide-for-transforming-our-communities/>).

From my own perspective, the engagement with practices and with activists in a way that uses theory lightly, but clearly, and without patronising the reader is very effective. As a contribution to movement building, I feel it is strong. It could be improved in design terms (see above), but also, knowing as I do a worryingly large amount about local currencies as just one of the techniques for building a community economy, the book could have been more balanced in identifying some of the barriers to building a community economy, and discussing techniques for grappling with them. I am concerned that activists using the book will be able to think through the way they see their economy in a reasonably straightforward

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way, but struggle to actually build alternatives. Not forewarned about the problems they will likely encounter, they may contrast their early fumbling steps forward with the seemingly effortless success achieved elsewhere: problems encountered and overcome remain opaque in the success stories. In fairness, this is perhaps another book: a sequel to ‘an ethical guide’ might be ‘a practical guide’ that focusses more on developing our power to create alternatives and overcome blocks than on resubjectification. This might fill out what economic *practices*, rather than *ethics*, for the Anthropocene might look like, and it would be very powerful. It would be good if groups and activists using this guide recounted their concrete experiences of building alternatives on their blogs and websites, from which we can all learn.

As activist geographers in the academy we will obviously, where appropriate, draw these ideas into our activism: but theoretically, how do we build on the platform that the authors have provided us with? Three issues that deserve further discussion are the role of conflict, of the state, and of scale. As I say, I’m a big fan of the community economies approach. I like thinking about how we can strengthen our power to act, and take back business, work, finance and the rest to make them work for ourselves. I love the way the book reframes poor Indian textile artisans as market savvy skilled producers and shareholders in a company with a global reach who also promote social justice, making a better world (p.7). This is so much more productive than either blanket condemnations of informal employment in the majority world as a coping strategy in conditions of extreme exploitation and poverty (Davis 2007) or uncritical celebrations of it as the precursor of the capitalist businesses of the future (de Soto 1989). That said, I cannot help remembering my recent experiences in Buenos Aires at a seminar we organised to facilitate an exchange between academics and activists working on solidarity and social economies in the UK and Latin America. I felt that my recounting of conceptions of reframing business, entrepreneurship and the economy, and my emphasising of our capacity to act in an effort to construct a new economic practice for the Anthropocene, was heard by our Latin American partners as an unwelcome accommodation to neoliberalism that ignored the structural violence of 500 years of colonialism (see Galeano 1997) that continues to this day in unequal core-periphery

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relations. Climate change is the latest evil northern plot to keep the majority world in a subaltern position.

To some extent, the approach in *Take Back...* looks at minority world consumers to think through how the goods and services we consume from the majority world are produced, and who benefits: but the Latin Americans were looking for something more than a politics of individual consumption choices. They asked why the activists with whom they had engaged in a seminar the year before in Liverpool were not more angry about austerity and global justice, and so relentlessly positive about what they were doing. They wanted social and solidarity economy activists in the majority and minority world to work together to create a Polanyian counter-movement to ecocidal neoliberal capitalism. Reading through *Take Back...* the extent that these initiatives are part of constructing a counter-power to global capitalism - without reifying it into something that is unbeatable or monolithic, and through showing the diversity of alternative economic practices we have to hand - might have been lost. In parts of the world characterised by capitalist crisis or a peripheral place in the global economy, I can understand that this might be an issue. Do we need more anger, fighting 'against' as well as 'for'?

The state is also absent as a facilitator of the community economy. Like the authors, I want to see a postcapitalist world, and do not have too much faith in the state. But we could learn more from examples of states supporting grassroots initiatives: the socialist and progressive local states of the 1970s and 1980s in the UK and US (see Clavel 1986; Mackintosh and Wainwright 1987; Wainwright 2003); the successes of contemporary Bolivarianism in Venezuela and Ecuador; or the supportive way that the German and Danish states worked with grassroots actors to create community-owned wind power (see Cumbers 2012). The involvement of the state can support as well as undermine grassroots activism, and make it possible for those perhaps less politically engaged consumers to have access to alternatives without having to go through what is often a long process of resubjectification. There is no need to understand finance if a well-run credit union is available as an alternative to banks engaged in casino capitalism or lenders offering extortionate payday loans. If

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people engage in the new material practices without ‘reframing’, is that OK? Or do they have to go through reframing? While it can be obvious who the big, small-shop-killing, non-tax-paying, zero-hours-employing, exploitative-supply-chain high street names are, as the authors recognise (see p.95) understanding the relations in a supply chain can be daunting.

A final issue is the old chestnut of ‘community’. In labelling their project ‘the community economy’ are the authors conflating the small, understandable and local with the ethical (see Samers 2005)? Given that, as the authors recognise, we interact at household, neighbourhood, regional, national and global scales, is there, in the label the community economy, an explicit valorisation of the local? Might a regional or national scale be more appropriate to work at to construct a more resilient community economy, as seems to be the case in contemporary Latin America, Germany and Denmark (see also the example of the Cheimgau [North and Weber 2013])? Should we be talking about a convivial rather than a community economy, as, from the first time a young person left a small community for the liberating anonymity of a city, we know that communities can be sites of oppression and control, as well as of conviviality. Similarly, do we need to be so resolutely pessimistic about the ability of technological innovation, of large institutions, and, to put it frankly, of capitalism itself, to solve problems associated with anthropogenic climate change? As part of our process of reframing, do we need to pay more attention to the way that businesses are solving these problems (Pinkse and Kolk 2009)?

These are all issues to be grappled with. Overall *Take Back the Economy* is a valuable, engaged, accessible and very clear addition to the Community Economies Collective oeuvre, and I hope it will be read widely and – more importantly – change the world. To do this better, I would like to see more engagement with the successes and failures of the concrete practices that emerge out of resubjectification, and a sober analysis of what works and why, now we know that community and alternative economic practices are more than the dwarfish, ‘get by’ peripheral phenomena of the interstices condemned by Marx and Engels (see, for example, Engels 1968) as utopian solutions inadequate for the job of building a better world. That, perhaps, is the next task.

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