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Community Economics and the Social and Solidarity Economy

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Abstract

Community Economies (CE) is a key term in the growing interdisciplinary subfield of diverse economies (DE) scholarship, a perspective that continually grew from the pioneering feminist political economy and economic geography scholarship of J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006). It defines 'community' as a space where humans negotiate the terms of our shared coexistence and in which 'solidarity' is one possible disposition. CE and DE may offer Social and Solidarity Economies (SSEs) three important contributions: 1) an open and pluralist concept of both economy and community where humans negotiate the terms of our interdependence; 2) an appreciation for how these negotiations respond to different conditions and places producing different SSEs; 3) an argument for the necessity of extending solidarity that aligns with the cosmologies of many peoples, but has been only recently acknowledged in academic disciplines in depth.

Keywords: diverse economies; community economies; ethics; postcapitalist politics; anthropocene; capitalocentrism

Introduction

Community Economies (CE) is a key term in the interdisciplinary subfield of diverse economies, growing from the pioneering feminist political economy scholarship of J.K. Gibson-Graham (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020). Scholarship in this subfield has been influential in many academic fields including Geography, Anthropology, Sociology, Business and Organization Studies, as well as the Humanities and Arts. It has also informed movement activism in countries throughout the world. In keeping with this tradition this entry uses the term “community economies” to emphasize the plurality of economic forms of life but recognize the meaning of the suffix “ic” as of or pertaining to something. Both ‘community’ and ‘economy’ have distinct pluralist and open meanings that contrast with their common-place understanding. Accordingly, community economies are spaces where humans negotiate the terms of their coexistence (Gibson-Graham 2006). From the CE perspective, ‘economies’ are always plural, containing diverse forms of economic organisation, exchange, remuneration, finance, care, and ownership. Consequently, economies are not understood as a systematic totality. Correspondingly, ‘community’ is understood as always open. Coexistence is the basis for belonging, rather than being from a particular place, community of interest, class, or any conception of ‘imagined community’. From this perspective, solidarity names both an aligned stance and disposition towards one another as well as designating (economic) spaces where these negotiations unfold. What community economies offer is a way of understanding what these stances entail, as well as a further opening up of the “with whom”, or “what” we humans are solidarity with.

These theoretical starting points of economies-always-plural and communities-always-open plays a decisive role in shaping how CE relates to the SSEs. In what follows, this entry make three conceptual contributions: 1) It aligns the SSEs’ commitment to pluralist politics with the theory of community economies as already defined above; 2) It uses the theory of community economy as a way theorizing the different ethical dilemmas that attend being-together in solidarity in place; 3) In conclusion drawing on the theory of community economy it makes the case for the necessity of a commitment to solidarity that includes the ‘more than human’ world as crucial for our shared survival.

1. Pluralism and Community Economy, what’s in a name?

The SSEs’ theoretical and political commitment to pluralism is one of its distinctive features. Rather than imagining one path to social change, pluralism commits the movement to paths, where there may be many roads to social transformation. The role of the state, market exchange, formal or informal institutions and practices in constituting the SSEs are all up for debate. One consequence for the movement is that solidarity becomes a process of discerning how the elements of this plurality can connect with and support one another. This pluralism is one point of contiguity with the theory of community economies. What CE adds to this debate is an insistence that both the ethical and political vitality of social movements, like the SSEs, hinges upon the opening of how community and economy are understood.

Gibson-Graham’s (1996) early intellectual interventions drew on array of scholarly and theoretical perspectives including Marxian, feminist, economic

anthropology, and queer theory, to understand the economy in anti-essentialist terms. Writing just a few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union their aim was to challenge the conflation of the economy-singular with a capitalist-totally. *Capitalocentrism* is a diagnostic term they developed to describe an ideological consensus, that capitalism was now the 'only game in town'. They challenged capitalocentric thinking in two ways. First, they brought capitalism down to size, making capitalism one form of enterprise organisation among many. Drawing on a nuanced reading of Marx, they defined the capitalist class process as an enterprise that employs wage labor to produce goods and services and to generate a surplus in the process that is appropriated and distributed by the capitalist. With this 'thin' definition, capitalism is no longer a totality, and the capitalist class process sits alongside various forms of non-capitalist organizations.

The second move has been to populate this non-capitalist exterior with an increasing diversity of organizational forms, processes of exchange and remuneration, finance and ownership, work and non-work-a diversity that can no longer be contained or subordinated to a systemic logic. Accompanying this second move was a call to other scholars, artists, and activists to develop new understanding and appreciation for the hidden, alternative, and non-capitalist economies that had been pushed to the discursive and material margins. Many have answered this call, leading to the formation of the Community Economies Research Network (CERN), circa 2008. The *Diverse Economies Iceberg* (2000) is a visualization, initially developed in the context of action research projects, to emphasize that capitalism is only the tip of the iceberg: far more is going on below the waterline, and this matters. There is a need to learn to see the economy differently.

Figure 7.1: Diverse Economies Iceberg by Community Economies Collective



Over the years, this diagram has been elaborated upon, redrafted, and translated into other diagrams and visualizations as part of an evolving program of action research (CEC 2017), making visible the Diverse Economy (DE), and furthermore,

the theoretical consequences of taking this stance. When the 'economy' is no longer a space driven by a totalizing logic, it becomes a space open to other possibilities, and allows for an understanding of what kinds of economies might be enacted and to specify the terms of coexistence. A principle inspiration is the late philosopher Jean Luc-Nancy's (1991) inessential conception of community as "being in common". For Gibson-Graham what this redefinition of community did was to separate community from scale, especially the local, and fixed notions of identity (e.g. a local community, the "working class") and as such the work of enacting community economy is opened as well.

What does the reconfiguration of economy as always plural, and this sense of community as always open, do for us? It allows us to identify the dilemmas and difficulties of being-in-common, and to identify potentialities of living in common on a planet that has been overexploited over the centuries. In this line, Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy (2013) explored the possibility for "taking back the economy" by identifying efforts throughout the world, seen as efforts at enacting economies of solidarity (whether they use the term or not), and by enacting provisional answers to the questions of how humans *and* non-humans (other species, machines, the material world, are to live together. Key concerns are expressed as questions that reprise familiar Marxian and feminist concerns- what's necessary for shared survival? What is to be done with surplus? What are the terms of fair exchange? How do communities care for a common world or invest in a common future? In DE scholarship, art and activism over the last decade, the answer to these questions have increasingly been infected by planetary concerns and a growing recognition that human livelihood depends upon renegotiating the terms of coexistence with a life-giving planet, and this means including non-humans (other species, things) as well as future generations.

These questions foreground both community and economy as dilemmatic spaces of problem posing and decision making in interdependence. Their relevance to the solidarity economy movement becomes apparent when one considers the persistent questions that preoccupy the movement: Is the SSEs a movement that aims at social transformation, or does it aim to address the shortcomings of so-called free market societies? Is the movement experiencing 'mission creep' as it becomes more professional? What role does/should the state play in supporting the solidarity economy movement? What is the relationship between more formal solidarity economy institutions (e.g. cooperatives) and everyday practices of mutuality? How does the solidarity economy connect to the concerns of other social movements? Each of these questions express genuine ethical dilemmas-the struggle to answer these questions is ongoing. In a sense, they repose the central questions raised by the theory of community economy-- "what is an economy?" and "with whom are we in community (solidarity)?"--for which there can be no final answer.

The sections that follow sketch out some of the ethical dilemmas that shape and in part define solidarity economies in different regions of the world.

1.1 UK: What is a solidarity economy?

Home to the Rochdale Pioneers (see the entry "Cooperatives and Mutuals") and Owen, the UK was foundational in the development of the SSEs but is also now perhaps a place where processes of professionalization and neoliberalisation have gone the furthest. For this reason, it becomes important to understand how the movement arrived at this point and to also describe what counts as SSEs.

The end of World War Two saw the development of a 'nationalized' social economy in the United Kingdom. The aspiration was to replace locally inadequate and piecemeal local provision with comprehensive welfare services. Critics felt there would never be enough money to meet everyone's needs, and often these hoped-for comprehensive services were poor quality and not targeted on local needs. The economic volatility of the 1970s brought this approach into crisis.

At a local level, vibrant community-based, solidarity economies grew in response to criticism of inadequacy and bureaucratization as young people squatted in derelict housing, and workers occupied factories that were closed. Co-operatives thrived and local authorities often supported them. The rise of Thatcherism in the 1980s closed off these experiences and many social economy initiatives were 'translated' into social enterprises, engaged in service delivery (see the entry "Social policy and SSE"). For some, this translation was class war, pure and simple, while others saw opportunities to deliver services tailored to local needs. By the 1990s New Labor's 'enterprise state' sought to enlist social enterprises into its agenda of social inclusion, a 'solidarity economy' in which "everyone was included" (in a market economy).

After the financial crisis of 2008, state support was cut off. Some survived in the new harsh environment by, they said, running their affairs in conventionally business-like ways, while others failed in this new competitive 'market'. While this story of social entrepreneurship, professionalization and privatization is an important part of the UK experience, it is not the whole story. The Transition Initiatives movement, emerging from south west England, has seen an effervescence of local action to avoid the dangers of extreme exploitation (of human and non-human). These processes count as solidarity economies in action. For example, in Preston, the local council is engaged in community wealth building to grow social enterprises and co-ops, meeting local needs. The Welsh Government is supporting the foundational economy, consisting of things needed for everyday life, haircuts, green groceries, bread – rather than encouraging multinational businesses to invest in the area, hopefully bringing jobs. Liverpool's social economy is starting to speak the language of solidarity in the face of an unsympathetic national government. As elsewhere, COVID saw a mushrooming of mutual aid both online, and from place-based community businesses. In this sense, it would appear the last chapter on Social Solidarity Economy in the U.K. has not been written, yet. Perhaps what the UK needs is a little more of the anger at injustice that has inspired solidarity economy activities elsewhere, as outlined in the section below (North et al 2020), where the aim is not to include everyone in what we have now, but build something better.

1.2 U.S.: Who is involved?

In the U.S. context the solidarity economy is a new name for practices of cooperation, mutual aid, and solidarity interconnection, particularly in communities that face daily challenges to sustain life. The term became associated with an organized and intentional movement following the 2008 at the US Social Forum in Atlanta just as the magnitude of the Global Financial Crisis was beginning to unfold (Allard and Mathie 2008). Given the context of economic crisis and instability it is perhaps unsurprising that "jobs" was a focus of the movement, as well as other aspects that support immediate survival.

Over the past decade, particularly in the wake of Occupy, the Ferguson protests of 2015, and the rise of Black Lives Matter, the movement became more attuned and

connected to the struggle for racial justice, against anti-black white supremacist violence and state violence (Akuno 2017). For other theorists, such as diverse economies scholar Lauren Hudson (2020), part of what needs to be defended are the structures of everyday solidarity in communities that organize effectively to respond to ecological disasters like Superstorm Sandy and health emergencies like the Global pandemic.

This type of work necessarily involves a reflexive confrontation within the movement of forms of supremacist thinking, including forms of internalized racism. As in the U.K, in the U.S. solidarity vitally connected to the question of shared survival, but the context is different. In the U.K. the history is one of the state first absorbing, rationalizing, and then partly abandoning a shared commitment to solidarity. In the U.S. context, as one anonymous Detroit activist wryly observed, “for the state to abandon you, it needs to have been there in the first place.” To be certain, there are many places in the U.S. (e.g. New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland) where the city government and other institutions have started to foster solidarity economies. But, in this context who is a part of the SSEs cannot be divorced from the history of colonization, slavery and state-violence which also means that the questions of reparations, prison abolition and other animating concerns of social justice are movements that link solidarity to shared survival.(see the entry “Black Social Economy and SSE”)

1.3 Latin America: How to decide?

In the territories usually referred to as América Latina, a myriad of coalitions, enacting solidarity in difference, have existed, struggling to secure life, challenge oppression, domination and exploitation, and construct solidarity practices, over centuries. Recently, Vieta and Heras (forthcoming) have analyzed several of these enactments as “organizing solidarity in practice”, and they have started to map out several of these experiences in present times.

This work has started to identify the commonalities amongst these processes:

- Practices of collective decision making, creating to that effect, different ways of doing this (e.g. *asambleas, comisiones, células, mesas*).
- Communal ownership (oftentimes naming common property as both *comunal y comunitario*, which means that it is not only owned jointly but also *cared for* in common).
- Support parity and mutual caring for each other (even if there may be different perspectives at play about how this is enacted, which is explicitly discussed).

These practices are important because they stage an encounter between oppressed and exploited individuals, groups, and organizations with others who have already transformed their conditions and now operate *autónomos, autogobernados y autodeterminados*. Encounters like these take place throughout Latin America; their defining features are their mixed composition, i.e, enacting solidarity in-difference, and the fact that that they do not necessarily seek to remain stable over time, as a goal, but seek to transform the living conditions as they are, towards justice, openness and living well together.

2. Concluding Thoughts

The preceding sections foregrounded a working definition of community and diverse economies, and sketch an outline of how the theory helps to understand how

SSEs are enacted in and by, different communities around the world. The entry poses some foundational questions to be addressed when thinking about the mutual relationships across community / diverse economies and SSEs over space and time, such as: what counts as SSEs, as defined contextually; who is involved and who is in solidarity with whom, and to do what; how and when are decisions made, and by whom, introducing as well the notion of solidarity-in-difference, that is, an always to be defined notion of solidarity, when it is enacted, and not as a reified concept or practice.

The theory of community economy puts forward a challenge for the terms enacting interdependent existence: what is necessary for shared survival in the Anthropocene, and how to respond to the baleful effects of the great acceleration, the period between 1950 and the present, when the planetary impact of human communities became more pronounced? The need to attend to planetary wellbeing has consequences for the distribution of surplus, the terms of exchange and how a shared understanding of economy, interdependent with life giving ecologies, is crucial to care for what is held in common and how communities invest in a common future. For many community economy theorists and practitioners, the last decade has been defined by an increasing recognition that shared survival depends upon extending these negotiations to the 'more-than-human' world. This is a first point of contiguity between the fields of solidarity economy and community /diverse economies. For us, the solidarity economy can be a place where these discussions happen, in concrete ways as people think about how they want to live, and how they can actualize this.

In some parts of the world such as the US, the solidarity economy movements espouse a commitment to sustainability or environmental justice. In other places solidarity economy movement practitioners have been shaped by agroecological praxis. What the theory of community economies might meaningfully contribute, is a different way of thinking about the terms of human and more than human coexistence—this renegotiation of terms must take place locally: one cannot and will not try to define how or where this should happen in advance.

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