

Economic imaginaries

Mid-1990s

The argument: it is the way capitalism has been 'thought' that makes it difficult to imagine its supersession. It is therefore the existing knowledge of capitalism that we hope to delegitimize and displace.¹

The virtually unquestioned dominance of capitalism can be seen as a complex product of a variety of discursive commitments, including but not limited to organicist social conceptions, heroic historical narratives, evolutionary scenarios of social development, and essentialist, phallogocentric, or binary patterns of thinking. It is through these discursive figurings and alignments that capitalism is constituted as large, powerful, persistent, active, expansive, progressive, dynamic, transformative; embracing, penetrating, disciplining, colonizing, constraining; systemic, self-reproducing, rational, lawful, self-rectifying; organized and organizing, centred and centring, originating, creative, protean; victorious and ascendant; self-identical, self-expressive, full, definite, real, positive, and capable of conferring identity and meaning.

This list of qualities should not be seen as exhaustive. Indeed one could certainly construct a list of equal length that enumerated capitalism's weaknesses and 'negative' characteristics: for example, images of capitalism as crisis-ridden, self-destructive, anarchic, requiring regulation, fatally compromised by internal contradictions, unsustainable, tending to undermine its own conditions of existence. That these opposing lists do not negate (or even substantially compromise) each other is one of the oddities of economic representation. In fact, 'weaknesses' or problems of capitalism are often consonant with, and constitutive of, its perceived hegemony and autonomy as an economic system.

Part of its invulnerability lies in the way capitalism is represented as a unified system or body: bounded, hierarchically ordered, vitalized by a growth imperative, and governed by a telos of reproduction. Coextensive with the space of the social, capitalism is the unitary 'economy' addressed by macroeconomic theory and policy. Though it is prone to crises (diseases), it is also capable of recovery or restoration.

In the context of poststructuralist theory, the body, the political subject and the social totality have been rent apart and retheorized as open, continually under construction, decentred, constituted by antagonisms, fragmented, plural, multivocal, discursively as well as socially constructed. But capitalism has been relatively immune to radical reconceptualization. Indeed, rather than being subjected to destabilization and deconstruction, capitalism is more likely to be addressed with honorifics that evoke its powerful and entrenched position. It appears unnamed but nevertheless unmistakable as a 'societal macrostructure', a 'large-scale structure of domination', 'the global economy', 'post-Fordism' or even 'consumer society.' Often associated with an adjective that evokes its protean capacities, it emerges as 'monopoly capitalism', 'global capitalism', 'postindustrial capitalism', 'late capitalism', 'neoliberal capitalism.' Like other terms of respect, these terms are seldom defined by their immediate users. Rather they function to express and constitute a shared state of admiration and subjection. For no matter how diverse we might be, how Marxist or post-Marxist, how leftwing or rightwing, most of us somewhere acknowledge that we live within something large that shows us to be small — a capitalism, whether global or national, in the face of which all our transformative acts are ultimately inconsequential.

Representations of capitalism are a potent constituent of the anticapitalist imagination, providing images of what is to be resisted and changed as well as intimations of the strategies, techniques, and possibilities of changing it. For this reason, depictions of 'capitalist hegemony' deserve a particularly skeptical reading. For in the vicinity of these representations, the very idea of a noncapitalist economy takes the shape of an unlikelihood or even an impossibility. It becomes difficult to entertain a vision of the prevalence and vitality of noncapitalist economic forms, or of daily or partial replacements of capitalism by noncapitalist economic practices, or of capitalist retreats and reversals. In this sense, 'capitalist hegemony' operates not only as a constituent of, but also as a brake upon, the anticapitalist imagination. What difference might it make to release that brake and allow an anticapitalist economic imaginary to develop unrestricted?

If we were to dissolve the image that looms in the economic foreground, what shadowy economic forms might come forward? In these questions we can identify the broad outlines of our project: to discover or create a world of economic difference, and to populate that world with exotic creatures that become, upon inspection, quite local and familiar (not to mention familiar beings that are not what they seem).

If it were possible to inhabit a heterogeneous and open-ended economic space whose identity was not fixed or singular (the space potentially to be vacated by a capitalism that is necessarily and naturally hegemonic), then a vision of noncapitalist economic practices as existing and widespread might be able to be born. In the context of such a vision, a new anticapitalist politics might emerge, a noncapitalist politics of class (whatever that may mean) might take root and flourish. A long shot, perhaps, but one worth pursuing.

Ten Years On—A Postcapitalist Politics

It seems that the making of a new economic (and political) imaginary is underway.² Coming into being over the past few decades and into visibility and self-awareness through the Internet, independent media and, most recently, the World Social Forums, this emergent imaginary confounds the time-worn oppositions between global and local, revolution and reform, opposition and experiment, institutional and individual transformation. It is not that these paired evaluative terms are no longer useful but that they now refer to processes that overlap and intertwine.

We glimpse the broad outlines of this new imaginary in the performative self-designations of the ‘movement of movements’, for example, *We Are Everywhere*, *Other Economies are Possible*, *One No, Many Yeses*, *Life After Capitalism*.³ Perhaps the most frequently acknowledged wellspring of this revolution-in-process is the Zapatista uprising in Mexico. Rejecting the old revolutionary ordering of means and ends and the seizing of state power as a prelude to economic transformation, the Zapatistas have moved directly to institute what has been seen as a ‘post-capitalist’ indigenous communalism.⁴ Like the other movements for whom they have become both ally and avatar of possibility, their goal is not to wrest control but to create autonomous zones of counter-power. Michal Osterweil tells us that ‘by asserting and creating multiple other ways of being in the world, these movements rob capital of its monopoly and singular definitions of time, space and value, thereby destroying its hegemony, while at the same time furnishing new tools to address the complex set of problematic power relations it confronts us with from particular and embedded locations.’⁵

Participants in the World Social Forum and others of their ilk are charting a globally emergent form of localized economic politics that Osterweil calls ‘place-based globalism.’ This new paradigm combines an expansive and proliferative spatiality with a compressed temporality, traversing the distance from ‘nowhere’ to ‘now here.’ Among its elements and groundings we find:

² Parts of the following essay are reprinted from J.K. Gibson-Graham, ‘Place-based Globalism: A New Imaginary of Revolution’, *Rethinking Marxism* 20, no. 4 (2008): 659–664. By permission of the Association for Economic and Social Analysis.

³ ‘Notes from Nowhere’, *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism* (London: Verso, 2003); title of the economic alternatives track at the Boston Social Forum, July 2004; Paul Kingsnorth, *One No, Many Yeses: A Journey to the Heart of the Global Resistance Movement*, (London: The Free Press, 2003); title of a conference in New York in 2004.

- an understanding of economy as a diversified social space, inhabited by everything from worker cooperatives to sites of enslavement, new forms of commons to forced privatization, market transactions to gifting and gleaning, sweatshop labour to household-based caring
- an ethical and political rather than structural conception of economic dynamics
- the centrality of new economic subjects and ethical practices of self-cultivation
- the role of place as a site of becoming, and as the ground of a global economic politics of local transformations
- the everyday temporality of radical change
- the uneven spatiality and negotiability of power, which is always available to be skirted, marshalled or redirected through ethical practices of freedom (while at the same time making them necessary)

What is most distinctive is the vision of a *place-based* yet at the same time *global* movement for economic and social transformation. For us, this vision is compellingly exemplified in the story of second-wave feminism, which has transformed and continues to transform households, lives, and livelihoods around the world to different degrees and in different ways, rendering the life experiences of many women literally unrecognizable in the terms of a generation ago. The crucial role of alternative discourses of ‘woman’ and gender in this process of transformation cannot be overestimated. But second wave feminism also offered new practices of the self and of intersubjective relation that enabled these new discourses to be inhabited in everyday life. The slogan ‘the personal is political’ authorised women to speak of their concerns in legitimate tones, enabling them to connect the private and public, the domestic and national, shattering forever the rigid boundaries of established political and economic discourse.

⁴ Monty Neill, ‘Toward the new commons: working class strategies and the Zapatistas’, 1997, available at: www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/3849/commons_paper/.

⁵ Michal Osterweil, ‘Place-based Globalists: Rethinking the Global in the Alternative Globalization Movement’, (unpublished paper, Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2004), 8.

We are intrigued at the way the loosely interrelated struggles and happenings of the feminist movement were capable of mobilising social transformation at such an unprecedented scale, without resort to a vanguard party or any of the other ‘necessities’ we have come to associate with political organization. The complex intermixing of shared language, embodied practices, non-hierarchical organizations, emplaced actions and global transformation associated with second-wave feminism has nourished our thinking about a politics of economic possibility, impressing us with the strikingly simple ontological contours of a feminist imaginary: *if women are everywhere, a woman is always somewhere, and those places of women are transformed as women transform themselves.*

This vision of feminist politics as grounded in persons yet and (therefore) potentially ubiquitous has been extended in our thinking to include another ontological substrate: a vast set of disarticulated economic ‘places’ — households, communities, ecosystems, workplaces, civic organizations, enterprises, public arenas, urban spaces, diasporas, regions, government agencies — related analogically rather than organizationally and connected through webs of signification. A feminist spatiality embraces not only a politics of ubiquity (its global manifestation) but a politics of place.

Feminism’s re-mapping of political space and possibility suggests the ever-present opportunity for local economic transformation that does not require (though it does not preclude and indeed promotes) transformation at larger scales. Its focus on the subject prompts us to think about ways of cultivating economic subjects with different desires and capacities and greater openness to change and uncertainty. Its practice of seeing and speaking differently encourages us to make visible the hidden and alternative economic activities that *everywhere* abound, and to connect them through a language of economic difference (see Figure 1). If we can begin to see noncapitalist activities as prevalent and viable, we may be encouraged here and now to actively build upon them to transform our local economies. Rather than ‘waiting for the revolution’ to

transform a global economy and governance system at the world scale, we can engage with others to transform local economies *here and now*, in an everyday ethical and political practice of constructing ‘community economies’ in the face of globalization.

For us, the language of place signifies the possibility of understanding local economies as *places* with highly specific economic identities and capacities rather than simply as *nodes* in a global capitalist system. In more broadly philosophical terms, place is that which is not fully yoked into a system of meaning, not entirely subsumed to a (global) order; it is that aspect of every site that exists as potentiality. Place is the ‘event in space’, operating as a ‘dislocation’ with respect to familiar structures and narratives. It is the unmapped and unmoored that allows for new moorings and mappings. Place, like the subject, is the site and spur of becoming, the opening for politics.

Social movements and their successes have called into question the distinction between global revolution and local reform, showing that small-scale changes can be transformative, and that place-based politics can be a revolutionary force when replicated across a global terrain. ‘Place-based globalism’ now offers an alternative to the traditional revolutionary economic imaginary, which involves confronting and replacing a global power structure. The traditional vision is grounded in the embracing universality of capitalism (conceived as a worldwide system of economy) and the national or supranational sovereignty that exhaustively partitions the global terrain. From the perspective of this universality, everything else is particular, contained. The spatiality of this imaginary is hierarchical, global, massive, organized. Its temporality offers the appropriate moment and the millennium.

In the place-based imaginary, every place is to some extent ‘outside’ the various spaces of control; places change imitatively, partially, multidirectionally, sequentially, and space is transformed via changes in place. There’s no millennial organization or subject to call into being, no need to address at the same level of totality an ultimate (economic?) instance of power, no system

to be overthrown or cast aside before a new world can begin. What there is instead is a continual struggle to transform subjects and places and conditions of life under circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty. The universality to which this vision addresses itself is negatively grounded — in the openness of subjects, their potential to become, their partial freedom from fixity. The spatiality of this sort of politics is ubiquitous, scattered, connected semiotically. Its temporality is of the everyday and the continuum.

Another and perhaps very different way to express this: not as two alternative spatial imaginaries but as two different orientations to transformative politics. The former (masculine) orientation starts with something embracing like Empire. It starts with a positivity, more or less exhaustively theorized and depicted, which it is the project of politics to dismantle and replace. This gives politics a millennial quality. The latter (feminine) orientation starts with a negativity, the Lacanian ‘real’ of disarticulated places and empty subjects, and the practice of politics involves articulation and subjectivation. Politics in this vision is an ethical practice of becoming. Place is not a local specificity (or not that alone) but the aspect of potentiality, and the subject is not an identity but the space of identification. For us, places always fail to be fully capitalist, and herein lies their potential to become something other. Individuals and collectivities always fall short of full capitalist identity, and this lack is their availability to a different economic subjectivity. From this perspective, place-based globalism is not simply a potential or actual movement but an alternative logic of politics, one that invests not in what is to be replaced, but in what is to become.

Figure 1. A Diverse Economy

<i>Transactions</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Enterprise</i>
MARKET	WAGE	CAPITALIST
<p>ALTERNATIVE MARKET</p> <p><i>Sale of public goods</i> <i>Ethical ‘fair-trade’ markets</i> <i>Local trading systems</i> <i>Alternative currencies</i> <i>Underground market</i> <i>Co-op exchange</i> <i>Barter</i> <i>Informal market</i></p>	<p>ALTERNATIVE PAID</p> <p><i>Self-employed</i> <i>Cooperative</i> <i>Indentured</i> <i>Reciprocal labour</i> <i>In kind</i> <i>Work for welfare</i></p>	<p>ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST</p> <p><i>State enterprise</i> <i>Green capitalist</i> <i>Socially responsible firm</i> <i>Non-profit</i></p>
<p>NON-MARKET</p> <p><i>Household flows</i> <i>Gift giving</i> <i>Indigenous exchange</i> <i>State allocations</i> <i>State appropriations</i> <i>Gleaning</i> <i>Hunting, fishing, gathering</i> <i>Theft, poaching</i></p>	<p>UNPAID</p> <p><i>Housework</i> <i>Family care</i> <i>Neighbourhood work</i> <i>Volunteer</i> <i>Self-provisioning labour</i> <i>Slave labour</i></p>	<p>NON-CAPITALIST</p> <p><i>Communal</i> <i>Independent</i> <i>Feudal</i> <i>Slave</i></p>

Note: The figure is intended to be read down the columns rather than across the rows.

Source: J.K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 71.