

JK Gibson-Graham

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Biographical Details and Theoretical Context

J.K. Gibson-Graham is an academic pseudonym of feminist economic geographers Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham. Writing under the authorial identity of Gibson-Graham, the duo established the field of diverse economies, a theoretically sophisticated feminist post-structuralist economic geography that has transformed debates within, and well beyond, the discipline (Barnes and Christophers 2018). Core to the approach is a consistent refusal of totalising discourses of economy, and particularly 'capitalocentric' representations of economy, a commitment to 'reading for difference', and methodological stance that looks for how the world we live in is always already more-than-capitalist. The single writing persona of Gibson-Graham was born in a dormitory room at a feminist conference at Rutgers University in 1992 (Gibson-Graham 1996, xi) and first appeared in print with the publication of 'Waiting for the revolution, or how to smash capitalism while working at home in your spare time', published in *Rethinking Marxism* (Gibson-Graham 1993). A series of high-profile articles followed, leading to their first path breaking book *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Gibson-Graham 1996), now on its second edition and published in multiple languages.

Katherine and Julie first met as PhD students in the mid-1970s at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Katherine Gibson moved from her home country Australia to the US for doctoral study following a geography undergraduate degree from the University of Sydney and further postgraduate study in community development at Macquarie University. When Katherine came into the discipline in the 1970s, quantitative and humanistic approaches were pulling geography in different directions, she was developing her skills in the art of conversation researching the inner-city Sydney's remnant working-class community. Julie Graham was an American whose intellectual grounding involved an English literature degree from Smith College (Massachusetts) followed by several years of freelance writing, editing, and researching and involvement with the feminist movement. Katherine has previously spoken about the shift to Clark; her intellectual pleasure on discovering the rigors of Marxian political economy, but perhaps even more importantly her meeting, and subsequent friendship, with Julie Graham in her 'beat-up yellow Volkswagen' and its lasting professional and personal impact (Gibson 1999).

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The intellectual camaraderie and friendship gave rise to intellectually influential collaborations. Both Katherine and Julie wrote doctoral theses that involved rigorous theoretical engagements with Marxian political economy and substantive empirical engagements with processes of economic and industrial restructuring in Australia and the United States respectively. They carried these research concerns as they took up academic positions in economic geography in their own countries. Katherine took a series of prestigious positions in the Australian academy, eventually assuming a Professorial fellowship at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. Julie, on the other hand, moved to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, subsequently becoming Professor and Associate Head of the Department of Geosciences there, and remaining until her death in 2010 at the age of 65. Both supervised many postgraduate students, drawing on their shared feminist ethics of care.

Despite the substantial physical distance between the two scholars, their ongoing engagement with political economy, increasingly adventurous theoretical experimentation, and robust intellectual engagements with each other continued unabated over more than three decades. As they themselves explain; 'From the theory sluts of 1996 to the self-help junkies of 2006 we have navigated a personal path that ever enriches as new challenges of relating and thinking/writing together arise' (Gibson-Graham 2006, xi). Their collaboration spanned both the Pacific Ocean and time differences of 14–16 hours; at a time when maintaining this level of commitment required expensive international phone calls and infrequent intercontinental visits. In early publications Gibson and Graham developed their individual and collective interests in Marxian political economy. The first co-authored Gibson and Graham (as opposed to Gibson-Graham) article used Marxian theory to include new forms of international contract labour migration in understandings of economic restructuring (Gibson and Graham 1986). Further signs of wider intellectual engagements came when Graham published an early article on postmodernism and Marxism (Graham 1988) now widely considered a disciplinary classic. Similarly, Gibson (1991) began to explicitly engage with debates around what we would now call 'positionality' by stressing the intellectual distinctiveness of 'northern' and 'southern' Marxist geography and accounting for the empirical specificity of the Australian social formation when theorising economic change.

By the late 1980s the appeal of structural Marxian analysis began to recede. After her appointment at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Julie attended the seminars of anti-essentialist Marxist economists Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, who argued for alternative theorisations of class and capitalism. Inspired by her experiences in Resnick and Wolff's seminars Julie began co-organising seminars with student cohorts on industrial geography, economic subjectivity, regional development, and post-capitalist politics. This intellectually generative environment helped shape the publication of the edited collections *Class and its Others* (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2000) and *Re-presenting Class* (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2001), co-edited with Resnick and Wolff and featuring the work of students they co-mentored. Further these writing collaborations coincide with major research projects, focused on two post-industrial settings, the Pioneer Valley in the US, and the Latrobe Valley in Australia, which informed *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Gibson-Graham 2006). Through this work the Gibson-Graham authorial presence reflected a relationship of shared thinking and co-writing, in

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which neither distinguished whose contribution was whose. After Julie Graham's death in 2010, Katherine Gibson has honoured this shared thinking by using JK Gibson-Graham as an authorial presence in works that continue to build directly on their shared thinking in many articles, the popular action book *Take Back the Economy* (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy 2013) and the edited academic volumes *Making Other Worlds Possible* (Roelvink, St. Martin and Gibson-Graham 2015) and *The Handbook of Diverse Economies* (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020a).

Spatial Contributions

One major contribution of Gibson-Graham has been in the representation of economic space as a space of heterogeneity and difference. Whereas both the proponents and critics of mainstream economics tended to accept the vision of a capitalist totality, Gibson-Graham argued that economic space in fact encompasses many different economic practices. This recasting of 'the economy' as always more-than-capitalist composite of many different economies is a key contribution of the subdiscipline of diverse economies and continues to reshape economic geography and many cognate fields (Barnes and Christopher, 2018). The diverse economies project has implications for space at a local and global scale, but its viability as a shared project depended firstly upon a reconceptualization of authorial space. The Gibson-Graham persona was founded in a recognition of scholarship as a site of shared thinking and creative exchange, rather than a heroic individual endeavour. This feminist rethink of the site of scholarship is consistent with the injunction to 'start where you are' which constitutes a feminist ethical thinking-strategy, as well as an approach to empirical research, theorising, pedagogy, and engagement. Put simply, starting where you are signals an acceptance that you can never step outside your present context and the limitations that inevitably places on radical thought and action. The response required then is a theoretical and methodological commitment to reading for difference, entailing a careful refusal to *a priori* allocate agency and power and a generative commitment to experimentation as the basis for generating new thought (Sharpe, 2014).

The intellectual space that Gibson-Graham managed to create is no dour factory but a promiscuous workshop of creation. Scott Sharpe describes this thinking-space as one that proceeds through a process of disjunctive synthesis, or a willingness to put in apposition seemingly disparate ideas in order to see what happens. For example, what might embodied feminist theories of performance have to say about the power and potential of a politics of collective action? What might queer theory suggest in an analysis of global finance? This disjunctive thinking-practice is one that requires a sort of intellectual patience, and an extension of goodwill, and a sense of faith that there *is* a connection to be made. Julie was asked in the 2010 Janice Monk lecture, what happens when you disagree? Her answer was to say, 'we never disagree in our writings, there are just space where we are not yet being clear with one another.' Starting where they are, also means committing to a process of ongoing conversation and dialogue--a willingness to work on intellectual collaboration as a relationship. What the pen-name Gibson-Graham makes explicit is how the means of thinking, much like other means of production is always socialised (even if the fruits of intellectual labour are not).

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One of the innovative and empowering spatial arguments J.K. Gibson-Graham has brought to geography is their approach to economic transformation as a global politics that can be punctiform and ubiquitous. Drawing inspiration from the feminist movement, which managed to effect social change in a widespread manner without a central organising committee or hierarchy, Gibson-Graham argued that capitalism might be overcome through similarly decentralised and seemingly disorganised politics (Gibson-Graham 1993). As theorists overlooked the significance of the feminist movement and women's political activism with a phallogocentric logic, so too did a capitalocentric logic mean that theorists overlooked the anti-capitalist movement that was already all around them (Gibson-Graham, 1996). This argument advanced thinking on the spatiality of global politics and social transformation with its approach to scale not as a set of nested hierarchies, but as a complex assemblage of relationships across space (and through time). While others have contributed to this thinking (Marston, Jones III and Woodward 2005, Massey 2005), Gibson-Graham's use of 'weak theory', their commitment to both place-based action research and radical transformation of a global capitalist economy, and their experience of feminist political activism is singular. One example of this line of thought is the politics of ubiquity captured by the argument that "if women are everywhere, a woman is always somewhere, and those somewheres are what the project is about: places being created, strengthened, defended, augmented, or transformed by women" Gibson-Graham, [2005] 2016 p.131). Thus, the place 'where you are' becomes the only space in which it is possible to think and to act, even with the intention that the repercussions of those actions might spread beyond your reach.

Their particular combination of serious Marxist and feminist thinking and action, poststructural analysis and explorations of Buddhist philosophy influenced their commitment to a stance of 'not knowing' or 'beginner's mind'. This stance shaped the three-pronged politics laid out in *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006): a politics of collective action, a politics of language and a politics of the subject. This understanding of social and economic transformation embraces a kind of 'both/and' approach to thinking about change, where the power of discourse, the power of collectives and tangible action, and the power of self-transformation are all recognised. If the economy is 'overdetermined' by a range of overlapping histories, trajectories, power relations, and social norms, so too is 'the revolution' – there are multiple spaces of political action in which we are all able to access. A decentralised understanding of global transformation is used to both explain and prompt transformation, as was made explicit in the 2013 popular publication *Take Back the Economy*.

Key Advances and Controversies

Gibson-Graham's critique of the capitalocentric nature of much geographic theorising was timely and transformative. Their intervention into rethinking the economy in the 1990s was important not just in terms of the economy in economic geography, but the way geographers use theory in general (Barnes 2009). Theory was not about a realist, rationalist account of how a 'real' object of study (such as the economy) worked, but also became conceived of as "a vocabulary to achieve new ends, rather than mirroring the object of investigation" (2009, p 319). For Gibson-

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Graham, 'promiscuity' in theory was thus valuable, as they drew together various theoretical influences from a range of writers outside geography, including Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, George Demartino, Arturo Escobar and more. Theory was intentionally adopted to *perform* different kinds of possibilities and even realities. This playful engagement with theory involved a different kind of affect than the seriousness of Marxist materialist theorists and thinkers – and indeed the quantitative economic geographers who had dominated prior to them (Barnes 2009). Yet playfulness did not mean a lack of commitment to serious topics that required intellectual and activist attention, for the ethics of both feminism and Marxism involved commitment to real and grounded change.

The form of action research taken up by JK Gibson-Graham and their collaborators, thus built on both an attention to affect and performativity. The approach requires research participants to *feel* and *act* differently in order to understand economy as a space of affect and potentiality. Committing to an ethic of action and hope meant that action researchers worked alongside communities, often with community researchers, to *intervene* in their economies through activities that encouraged different kinds of subjectivities, collective action and language. This means that despite the apparent playfulness of their theoretical approach, very often their work has on the ground impact as the research itself unfolds, as demonstrated in partnerships with various groups in the Philippines, the Pacific, rural Australia and US, and many more (CEC 2001, Gibson-Graham 2005, Healy and Graham 2008, Mckinnon et al 2016, Dombroski, Duoje and McKinnon 2022).

An approach that highlights action, affect and engagement enabled Gibson-Graham to embrace an even more expansive collective from the mid-2000s. As the degradation of the planet and the climate crisis became more publicly visible, the authorial persona of Gibson-Graham partnered with environmental humanities thinkers and others to start thinking about diverse and community economies with reference to the more-than-human. Given the many compounding crises of climate, environment and economy, this work has sought to perform different kinds of economic relationships by highlighting the possibilities of building on what is already done, always in collaboration in more-than-human collectives. In later publications, the role of a butterfly hovering at ecofeminist Val Plumwood's funeral, the presence of the Georges River in thinking about ecology and economy, the ongoing collaboration of JK Gibson-Graham beyond Julie's death, and the co-authorship with a wider group through the 'Community economies Collective' all point to the importance of a collaborative authorship intellectual work (e.g. Gibson-Graham and Miller 2015, Gibson-Graham et al 2021).

One consequence of this shift in the disposition of scholarship is that the work of JK Gibson-Graham, and this wider collective, has been critiqued for not offering a complete answer to the problem of capitalism, or for being overly optimistic in its reading of the economy as a site of possibility. As Soaita (2022) identifies, the 'optimism' of Gibson-Graham is not about a dismissal of the failures and inequities of capitalist economies, but a choice of focus (see also Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020b). Gibson-Graham and colleagues recognise that, firstly, there is plenty of existing scholarship that describes exploitation, welfare insecurity, challenges of scale and co-option – but not so much that brings to light the times when these things offer hope and

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possibility for 'making other worlds'. Secondly, the critiques often stem from an ontological elision between the diverse economies project of performing and bringing into being new economies, and the realist project of describing what is 'actually' out there. These are fundamental differences in understanding the purpose of research and means that the answers to critique rarely satisfy.

Despite these concerns, the influence of Gibson-Graham's work has continued to grow and the generative potential of their vision for a radically rethought economy and a decentralised process of global transformation, continues to have a growing influence for scholars and activists well beyond the boundaries of geography as a discipline. The Community Economies Research Network (CERN), established to connect scholars, artists, and activists from around the world who are engaged with Gibson-Graham's work on diverse and community economies, is evidence of this. By 2022, the Community Economies Research Network had over 350 members worldwide and, supported by the not-for-profit Community Economies Institute, members are enacting change grounded in Gibson-Graham's thinking around place-based yet global vision:

Rather than 'waiting for the revolution' to transform a global economy and governance system at the world scale, we [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. (Gibson-Graham, 2016 p.132)

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