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Community economies: Responding to questions of scale, agency, and Indigenous connections in Aotearoa New Zealand

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THIS COMMENTARY WAS invited by the special editors of this issue and is partly based on the Community Economies session that the four authors organised at the Social Movements Conference III: Resistance and Social Change in Wellington, 2016.¹ In the Community Economies session, we (the authors) reviewed the diverse-economies framework and

1 We'd like to thank the audience participants from our conference session for their generous questions and engagement. We have avoided naming these participants as our memories are a little hazy, and we do not want to mis-attribute anything. We'd like to thank Irene Boles for her valuable participation in the workshop session on which this is based. We'd also like to thank the special-issue editors for their helpful feedback.

showed how it translates into a politics grounded in economic difference, specifically non-capitalist economic practices. We gave various examples of how people enrol different practices into the formation of community economies that prioritise ethical interdependence among people and with the planet. Stephen reviewed a collaborative research project based on the solidarity-economy movement in the United States of America; we showed and then discussed a film that focused on alternative food-movement organisations; and Kelly and Irene presented their work (co-authored with Gradon) on post-quake commoning practices in Christchurch. Gradon shared his experiences researching and working with the Wellington Timebank, and Joanne presented on multiplicity and diversity in Māori political participation.

During the session, a number of questions were asked by participants. Some of these questions were new for us, while others have been asked of Community Economy scholars² before. All of the questions however, point to ongoing pressing concerns around how to act ethically with human and non-human others in ways that decolonise our colonial, capitalist-oriented economy and society. In what follows we briefly outline some key theoretical underpinnings of Community Economies scholarship, and then provide some reflections on the questions asked during the 2016 conference session.

2 Stephen, Kelly and Gradon are members of the Community Economies Collective (CEC) and identify as Community Economies scholars. Joanne is a kaupapa Māori researcher who is a member of the Community Economies Research Network (CERN). Irene Boles is, among other things, chair of the board of Christchurch organisation Life in Vacant Spaces, and is also co-authoring an article on commoning in Christchurch with Gradon and Kelly.

Community economies scholarship

The Community Economies Collective (CEC) emerged out of the work of J-K Gibson-Graham's feminist critique of political economy.³ Gibson-Graham argued that there are two main issues with conventional understandings of the 'economy'. Firstly, the economy tends to be understood as inevitably capitalist and, secondly, as separate from ecology or the non-human world. To challenge what Gibson-Graham called 'capitalocentrism', Community Economies scholars (and others) understand the economy as a wide range of diverse practices, bound up with planetary-ecosystem processes. This focus on diversity (rather than just capitalist exchange) encourages us to see the multiple ways of enacting transformation in our societies. To try to mobilise this transformation, Community Economies scholars have worked in three broad areas: a politics of language, a politics of desire, and a politics of collective action. First, we identify and develop a new *language* of the diverse economy that reflects the already existing diversity of socio-economic practices that sustain people and communities. The image of the iceberg (Figure 1) is often used to illustrate this diversity in a way which begins to shift our focus away from only wage labour and the capitalist economy.

3 J-K Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

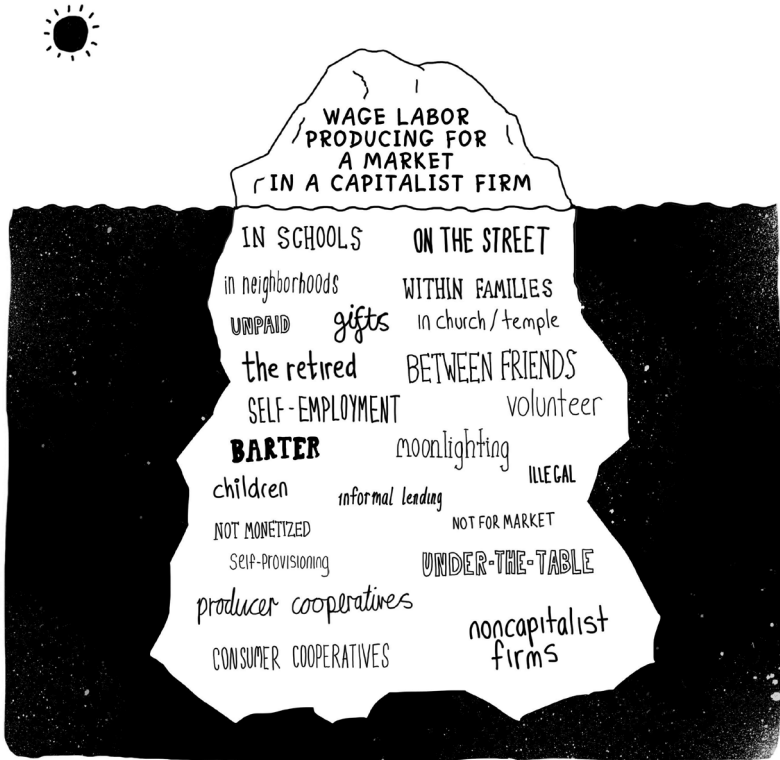


Figure 1: The Diverse Economy⁴

Second, as a consequence the economy is no longer a space of only (capitalist) necessity: difference allows us to see the economy as a space of other choices, other *desires* as well as felt obligations. The language of diverse economy greatly expands the number of

4 Source: 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), 11.

people who see themselves as agents of economic change reshaping the world in ways that matter for people and planet.

Third, ethical economic actors can recognise one another in more and more places and relationships, enlarging the field of *collective* action. To illustrate this, Community Economies scholars and others have been exploring how commons function. In this tradition, we might understand a commons to be a property, practice, or knowledge that is shared and cared for by a community.⁵

Drawing on Linebaugh's work,⁶ we can frame commons as a verb, as 'commoning' that involves certain labour and the negotiation of rules around how to manage access, use, benefits, and responsibilities in relation to the commons. By focusing on how commons can operate in different contexts (for example, the atmosphere, for water, for food, in libraries, and digital commons) we can start to trace how diverse communities' socio-economic practices already are, and thereby widen out our post-capitalist practices. The interconnected politics of language, desire, and collective action allow us to imagine the post-capitalist world as something we can enact in the here and now.

Community Economies scholars therefore tend to begin with the everyday and diverse practices of people and relationships, paying attention to the presence of both the human and non-human. As Community Economies scholars we understand community as 'a never-ending process of being together, of struggling over the boundaries and substance of togetherness, and of coproducing this togetherness in complex relations of power'.⁷ A

5 Ibid; J-K Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, Kelly Dombroski, Stephen Healy, Ethan Miller, and Community Economies Collective, "Cultivating Community Economies: Tools for Building a Liveable World," accessed July 4, 2017, <http://thenextsystem.org/cultivating-community-economies/>.

6 Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

7 Gibson-Graham et al, "Cultivating Community Economies," 5.

central research concern is the nature of these diverse community processes and the ongoing democratic struggle involved as people seek to collectively negotiate and renegotiate their material and cultural survival. Community economies never take a final form: new dilemmas emerge alongside new possibilities and the questions are asked anew, in settings like the Social Movements, Resistance and Social Change conference. This point connects to the understanding that the ‘economy’ actually refers to ‘all of the practices that allow us to survive and care for each other and the earth.’⁸ For example, as some of us recently wrote in a CEC-authored piece:

We believe in starting where we are, building other worlds with what we have at hand. Our *particular* focus is on identifying, gathering, and amplifying ethical economic practices that already exist—and that are prescient of ‘the world we want to live in’.⁹

While there are real and powerful forces that attempt to enclose common resources, exploit and dehumanise people for profit, and reduce the beauty of the non-human world to commodities, we also seek to ‘cultivate representations of the world that *inspire*, *mobilize*, and *support* change efforts even while recognizing very real challenges’.¹⁰

As mentioned earlier, the general trajectory of our conference session moved from introducing the concept of diverse economies to illustrating examples of community economies in different contexts in a way we hoped would connect to the work of community activists in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our guiding assumption was that we were speaking to an activist audience,

8 Ibid., 5.

9 Ibid., 3.

10 Ibid., 4.

with the session providing an opportunity for its members to reflect on how their work could be understood as ‘taking back the economy for people and planet’. What we took away from this session were the questions the audience asked *us*, which prompted us to reflect on issues of context in Aotearoa New Zealand, and led to the following (edited) exchange of reflections via email.

Reflections on questions asked at the conference

Question 1: How does Community Economies theory help us to consider and respond to commoning practices in contexts where land/resources were appropriated and stolen from others through colonisation?

Kelly: This question was asked by the audience partly in response to the way we were using the Take Back The Economy Commons Identi-kit (see Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013) in our talk about the space known as The Commons in Christchurch (which is on Christchurch City Council owned land). The issue was that we failed to trace the history around this piece of land back to the colonial dispossession from Ngāi Tahu. In this talk we were de-emphasising property ownership and highlighting all the other aspects of ‘commoning’ that make it work as a social/group practice in this context. But as Joanne points out below, even progressive movements can neglect to consider the effects of colonisation when it comes to commoning. We tend to think of commons as ‘open to all’, but the process of commoning implies an exclusion as well as an inclusion, since a commons always needs a com-

munity to care for it.¹¹ For Māori and other Indigenous people, there is often a real political need for a politics of exclusion, that is, where Indigenous communities are able to practice commoning exclusively within an appropriate cultural context, which at this point in time involves reclaiming legal ownership of stolen land (not just social practices of care, as we emphasised in the talk). In Aotearoa New Zealand, this is still commoning as it is not then privately owned but moved into common ownership by iwi. In the context of commoning in Christchurch in our work, yes, I think we need to better acknowledge the sovereignty rights of Ngāi Tahu.

Joanne: Responsiveness and responsibility to Indigenous people is a challenge to ‘progressive’ movements. For example, the Occupy movement’s ignorance of the fact that Turtle Island (North America) was already occupied illustrates the myopia of attempting to counter capitalism without addressing colonisation.¹² Limitations of diverse or community economies in a Māori context have previously been highlighted by Bargh and Otter.¹³ Examples include assuming the ‘neutral ground’ of a commons, which erases contested spaces and Indigenous histories; expressing the need to foster communities when whakapapa and whanaungatanga show these already exist; and the narrow critique from some commentators on the Left who categorise iwi entities as merely corporate/capitalist structures (i.e. negative/bad), when they have more ultimate emancipatory goals. For instance, profit

- 11 Gradon Diprose, “Negotiating Interdependence and Anxiety in Community Economies,” *Environment and Planning A* 48 (2016), 1411-1427; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1991).
- 12 Miranda J. Brady, and Derek Antoine, “Decolonize Wall Street! Situating Indigenous Critiques of the Occupy Wall Street Movement,” *American Communication Journal* 14 (2012), 1-10.
- 13 Maria Bargh, and Jacob Otter, “Progressive Spaces of Neoliberalism in Aotearoa: A Genealogy and Critique,” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 50 (2009), 154-165.

isn't sought for the benefit of the traditional shareholder to pay a dividend. Rather, profit for iwi is to invest in our communities as well as to actualise tino rangatiratanga by relying less on the state through control of our own resources.

In my emerging work, I am exploring the diversity of Māori political participation outside of parliament. The research must navigate all considerations carefully and I'm still working on how I will do this. As a kaupapa Māori researcher I am cognisant that any methodology not informed by te ao Māori requires a critical Indigenous analysis. But I trust my approach will also be informed largely by the kōrero of my participants and a lot of reflection and discussion. A kaupapa Māori adaptation of the Community Economies framework can provide a pragmatic expression of the amazing work my participants are doing, without necessarily being defined by Community Economies theory.

Kelly: The other response we have been discussing, is that commoning can be thought of as the reverse process of enclosure. That is, what is being commoned is what was previously enclosed. I wonder how this relates to changing and diverse Māori understandings of ownership and the imposition of Pākehā legal structures that are prerequisites for settlement Joanne kind of touched on? In the Christchurch situation relevant for our paper at the conference, I'm thinking of the compulsory adoption of the corporate structure of Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu (TRON), a non-negotiable prerequisite to receiving settlement funds, which has created a whole new corporate culture and entity of which some iwi members are critical. But again, this isn't really private property and, as Joanne notes, is not merely a corporate structure. It could even be a form of commoning since TRON is owned by the iwi members and benefits are mō [rātou], ā, mō kā uri ā muri ake nei (for the current generation and those that come after). Stephen has a paper coming out in relation to thinking about corpo-

rations and commons more generally and it would be interesting to make some connections here to contemporary Indigenous iwi corporate arrangements in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Stephen and I also recently went to a talk in Boston by Dianne Rocheleau, who said something like ‘it is pretty much only Westerners that see territoriality as being about borders and boundaries, keeping some out and others in’. While I think this is possibly quite a generalising claim, what was useful is that for the Mayan groups she was working with, territoriality is about commons: about who (or which collective group) uses and cares for the territory, among other things. I would be interested in exploring this idea more in relation to different understandings of ownership, because the Commons Identikit as exemplified in Gibson-Graham *et al* seems to mostly understand ownership in a legal sense rather than a moral/traditional sense.¹⁴

Joanne: In terms of ownership and the commons, I guess it partially depends on what ownership refers to. Is it just land? For Māori, traditionally ownership wasn’t really a concept in reference to land. People belonged to the land rather than the other way around. European individualisation and commodification of land title has not shifted that fact. Despite a more recent focus on economic development and maximisation of land use, Māori are also reaffirming their role as *kaitiaki* (custodians). For example, in one of my case studies that profit-driven trend has reversed for one hapū. Instead of receiving minimal revenue from farmers to graze cattle and ruin the soil and streams, *whānau* in Tikitiki (Tairāwhiti) are tapping into DOC funds available for conservation. They seek to restore their land in native trees and restore the health of their waterways. It’s a form of decolonisation in

14 Gibson-Graham *et al*, *Take Back the Economy: An ethical guide for transforming our communities*.

itself, reconnecting with the intrinsic value that the land holds rather than pursuing whatever means you can to pay the rates.

Question 2: Following the showing of the video by Mahi Pai media and Jenny Cameron about the Beanstalk food cooperative in Newcastle, Australia,¹⁵ someone asked whether community economies are just for privileged white, urban people?

Joanne: Certainly, many initiatives fall into this category because more affluent people have the resources (time and money) to participate. However, the diversity of community economies around the world show a participation at varying levels of socio-economic status. There are many examples of community economies in traditionally marginalised communities!

Gradon: I think this question reflects a common misconception that may possibly be related to the examples we talk about at conferences in Minority World contexts? However, as Joanne mentioned, there's a wide range of examples of Community Economies from majority world contexts and in money-poor communities elsewhere. They range from Ann Hill's work on community gardens, urban agriculture and alternative food networks in poorer urban areas in Manila, Philippines;¹⁶ to Amanda Huron's work on housing cooperatives in poorer neighbourhoods in Washington DC;¹⁷ to Gibson-Graham's work in poor post-coal rural

15 Mahi Pai Media and Jenny Cameron, "Negotiating and Cooperating in Food Cooperatives," accessed July 4, 2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_DeDTKkCDk&feature=youtu.be.

16 Ann Hill, "A Helping Hand and Many Green Thumbs: Local Government, Citizens and the Growth of a Community Based Food Economy," *Local Environment* 16 (2011), 539-553.

17 Amanda Huron, "Working with Strangers in Saturated Space: Reclaiming and Maintaining the Urban Commons," *Antipode* 47 (2015), 963-979.

areas of Southern Australia;¹⁸ to Kevin St Martin's work with fisher people and ocean-commoning practices on the eastern seaboard of the United States.¹⁹ For me these varied examples point to the huge diversity of reasons people enact community economies. Sometimes their involvement may be driven by a material need for food, shelter, and clean water. Other times by a desire for more meaningful connections with human and non-human others and, ultimately, a more 'liveable' and meaningful life beyond the limited subjectivities and joys constructed through capitalism.

Kelly: At the 2017 Association of American Geographers Conference there was a session on degrowth where a guy was talking about all the incredible collectives and forms of commoning and community economies emerging after the financial collapse of Greece. So a counter-argument could be that these forms emerge in times of need! Stephen's current work on Worcester Roots and solidarity-economy initiatives would also indicate this, as he outlines below.

Stephen: The work Maliha, Craig Borowiak, Marianna and I have done on solidarity-economy initiatives suggests that they take vastly different forms. The solidarity economy is a social movement with a long history but one that shares a similar understanding of a diverse economy to the Community Economies framework. In the racially segregated city of Philadelphia, the formal solidarity economy entities—cooperatives, and credit unions—show up in border neighbourhoods between white, African American, and Latino communities, while more informal solidarity-economy practices show up more widely. In New York,

18 Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*.

19 Kevin St Martin, "Disrupting Enclosure in New England Fisheries," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 16 (2005), 63-80.

only some boroughs have significant solidarity-economy activity and their cooperatives in particular are predominantly run by women from communities of colour. In Massachusetts many of the significant solidarity-economy institutions are actively anti-racist in their organisational form and have been allied with Black Lives Matter (BLM). In fact, the weekend after this conference, BLM activists sent a delegation to Standing Rock to protest the construction of an oil pipeline there, standing in solidarity with Indigenous peoples from throughout the world. There is, of course, a lot more work to do to decolonise the solidarity economy to make it more explicitly anti-racist though.

Question 3: Do all of these ‘nice’ examples of community economies actually challenge or change the broader capitalist economy? In other words, are community economies just about tinkering at the edges and have no real significant political and economic effects?

Stephen: I find myself wanting to give a different answer now to the question about scale and power that other Community Economies scholars might provide. Lately I have been thinking about how the ‘electoral mutiny’ in the US, UK, and elsewhere, what Wolfgang Streeck calls the return of the repressed,²⁰ has shown the vulnerability of the globalisation project that makes me wonder how ‘powerful’ and ‘significant’ institutions and processes like the TPPP, the European Union, and ‘global capitalism’ were in the first place. In fact, Streeck, in his more elaborated reflections, demonstrates to me that ‘global capitalism’ is, in fact, falling apart on its own terms. If you were to explain to your average neoliberal critic in 2006 that there would be a resurgent nationalism, an

20 Wolfgang Streeck, “The Return of the Repressed,” *New Left Review*, 104 (March-April, 2017).

embrace of protectionism, and a deliberate effort to reintroduce racism into everyday politics in ten years' time, like we've seen in the United States and the United Kingdom, not many people would have believed you. I think what Streeck would say, in a kind of structuralist vein, is that the globalisation-fix of capitalism's perennial problems since the seventies—declining economic growth and stagnant markets—has run its course. It's not clear to me that a politics of protectionism, nostalgia, and racism is being offered as a serious alternative. Is it instead an admission that the elite are all out of ideas? For me this also has implications for the so-called 'privileged' nature of improvisational/communitarian responses to what is likely to become a very different landscape that we (including the critical Left, including me) have treated as kind of fixed and solid: expert-governance, free market triumphalism, etc. We may indeed be tinkering on the 'edges', and the results of this tinkering are indeterminate. On the other hand, I am not so sure about the prospects for what's in the centre either.

Gradon: That's really helpful, Stephen. I've been thinking a lot about attachment recently, and the various ways current political and economic uncertainties (Trump, Brexit etc) are creating anxiety at individual and collective scales. I wonder if in some ways it has often been easier to represent 'global capitalism' as certain because it is less anxiety-inducing to actually live with the uncertainty of not believing this. Kind of like having a repressive, authoritarian parent who you rail against, but who ultimately provides more certainty than having no parent! This question of scaling up and overthrowing 'global capitalism' has always left me feeling hopeless. If 'global capitalism' is the problem and I have no ability to change this, then what do I do? That is why I've been drawn to the Community Economies performative approach of 'starting where we are'. For me that means my

local community, and seeking to amplify and work with others who are already doing good things and in the process, help shift my (and others') attachments to better practices.

Question 4: There was a question about how hope intersects with this question of scale and community economies. How do we maintain hope and a sense of agency in the face of all of the horrible aspects of the broader capitalist economy?

Stephen: In relation to autonomy and scale, I met an artist/geographer who works in Detroit who suggested that we need to stop seeing the state as the answer to our problems. Over the last 20-odd years there has been a focus by critical Leftists on the neoliberal retreat of the state, and, more recently, on austerity measures imposed following the global financial crisis. Some critical Leftists have also criticised community-economy type initiatives for stepping in and filling the state's role in the provision of welfare and other services. However, as this artist/geographer pointed out, often this critique is totally inappropriate because the state first has to *be there* in order to *abandon* you. What if the state was never there, which is often the case for our most marginalised communities? It reminds me of the quote from my favourite movie, the 2004 reboot of *Dawn of the Dead*, when the survivors of the zombie-apocalypse realise they are alone: 'Fort Pastor is gone, there's no help coming'. In the United States at the moment, it seems to be that communities in cities like Detroit (and there are many others) cannot expect help from the federal government and in many cases the state government.

Granted much of what's taking the place of the global certainty of the last few decades makes me pretty nauseous. For example, there seems to be in many societies an emboldening of a racist politics of the worst sort, definitely in the US and in much of Europe, and the thing is, when global warming kicks in even

more in the next few decades, these politics are likely to become more pronounced. But this is all the more reason to focus on what works for us because, at this point, I think anyone who is confident that they really know what's going on, what can be counted on, what's 'powerful', is, in fact, full of shit. Really where we are is, as Stuart Hall said many years ago, in a space of politics without guarantee.²¹

Kelly: Agreed Stephen! I think this question of hope, agency, and scale also needs to be considered from a multi-generational perspective too. For example, in the audience someone mentioned that Ngāi Tahu and other iwi have sustained a multi-generational battle for change in Aotearoa New Zealand and are only starting to see results in the last few decades. So, how do we also maintain solidarity and hope while working towards change over multiple generations? Probably by not slagging off the great stuff people are doing and calling it 'pointless' in the face of global capitalism.

Joanne: How often have broad movements emerged to challenge major structural inequality? Any movements—women's liberation, civil rights, and Māori rights—surely begin with a group of people saying 'No we are not going to accept this any longer'. I have been inspired by Tina Ngata aka Non-Plastic Māori (Ngāti Porou kaitiaki, educator) who has divested from plastic and talks about the way to challenge capitalism and these massive systems is to disengage with them wherever possible. One major way of doing this is through food sovereignty, which reflects what many people are also doing in the Community Economies area. Just because capitalism is a broad monolithic system doesn't mean the response to it will be. As Gibson-Graham has already stated,

21 Stuart Hall, "The Problem of Ideology-Marxism Without Guarantees," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10 (1986), 28-44.

the Left has been waiting for that for some time to no avail. Do we continue waiting for a tide of socialism to sweep the planet? For Māori and other Indigenous groups, expecting the state to come solve our problems is futile because it is the state which was responsible for these problems in the first place. While redress and resources will assist with the process of achieving the aspirations of our tīpuna and the birth right of mokopuna, we will only move forward if we take back our autonomy in the ways that we can. Moving forward, it is at the hapū/ community level where we find strength and solidarity so we can't wait for the Left to get its shit together because they might not take us with them anyway.

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