

# **Economic Geography, Manufacturing and Ethical Action in the Anthropocene: A Rejoinder**

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We are thrilled by Vicky Lawson's deeply appreciative response to the Roepke Lecture and the written article. In her response, Vicky does more than we could ask for by inviting economic geographers to think with us about ways of reworking manufacturing (and other economic activities) that center on care for the well-being of people and of the planet. Vicky goes to the heart of our project by highlighting the importance we place on looking for the ethical openings that arise in the current context of climate change and growing socioeconomic inequality. As she identifies, part of our armory includes tactics of attending to already existing possibilities that are hidden from view and reframing understandings of what an economy is for.

As she is also ready to admit, her well-schooled critical sensibilities cannot let us get away with too much, and so she finds herself raising a series of edgy questions including about the conditioning role of the "political-economic conjuncture and associated power

relations” (Lawson 2019, 5) in limiting and shaping possibilities for creating diverse and ethical economies, and about the incompatibility of justly sustainable manufacturing that still rests on “the commodification of more-than-human lives” (9) and “normalized forms of violence” (8) toward those lives. We welcome the opportunity to think with Vicky, and other economic geographers, about these questions as they are ones that we frequently pose ourselves as we engage in fieldwork and reflect on research findings.

It was Althusser who urged Marxists to broaden their too narrow economic analytical focus to include the overdetermining influence of interdependent social, political, economic, and ideological contradictions in any one conjuncture. Geographers have long appreciated the antiessentialism of this theoretical move, and we have been keen to identify the geographic specificity of conjunctural relations. We hope that in our article we have given a sense of the interplay between powerful global forces such as the international dominance of neoliberal economic policy and the particularity of grounded power relations in the Australian polity evidenced, for example, in the relative normality of paying award wages in the manufacturing sector. But we are also interested in extending an antiessentialist epistemology by reframing *the* conjuncture as an assemblage, or even multiple coexisting assemblages, shaped by processes of economization, normalization of various social identifications and practices, and materialization of life-supporting infrastructures. It is this attention to multiple realities and processes that allows us to acknowledge the powerfully assembled barriers to experimentation and yet navigate toward the cracks where new assemblages are gathering and connecting. The challenge for researchers is to identify conditions of possibility and work with them.

For many manufacturers in Australia seeing workers get a fair go is acceptable. This established norm has been created by an assemblage of unions, unions members, government agencies, lawyers, universities that train the lawyers, media outlets, etc. working to secure decent wages and to ensure that these conditions are maintained as governments of various political hues come and go. We could see this sensibility as a dormant condition of possibility for opening up additional ways of taking care—including of environments and nonhuman lives. In our workshops, we have used the discourse of just sustainability to reflect back and amplify elements of explicit enterprise policy that build on the fair go and further extend it to socioeconomic inequality and environmental impact. In this process we are helping to assemble a new culture of manufacturing for the Anthropocene.

This is not to deny that there are social and political arrangements that normalize and routinize certain violences. Vicky uses the example of Gillespie’s (2018) confronting book *The Cow with Ear Tag #1389* to highlight how we have become inured to the violence that is perpetrated against cows on dairy farms to keep the rivers of milk flowing. This is a useful reminder of what our colleague Plumwood, calls shadow places, those dark places “that provide our material and ecological support, most of which, in a global market, are likely to elude our knowledge and responsibility” (2008, 139). Plumwood urges us to develop what she calls “multiple place consciousness” which means that we must take responsibility not just for those places that we hold dear but also for those places that, for example, “take our

pollution and dangerous waste, exhaust their fertility or destroy their indigenous or nonhuman populations in producing our food” (Plumwood 2008, 147).

The question that arises for us is whether manufacturers can enact responsibility for those places that, both in the shadows and in broad daylight, are enrolled in making the goods upon which we rely for daily existence. Is the commodification of more-than-human lives or indeed any of nature’s gifts necessarily violent? We would like to warn against the conflation of commodification—the rendering of something as a product that can be bought and sold—with the violence wrought by capitalist industrialization. There must be a way to produce and transact the means of living via commodities (as well as via direct giving, sharing, and bartering) while respecting the living and inert inputs and the ecologies from which these inputs came.

In the context of the Norco dairy co-operative, milk is sold as a commodity *and* matters of cow welfare are dear to the hearts of farmer co-op members. Farming methods are principally pasture-based, with nonpasture based cows in the warmer northern regions fed by grain produced on the farm. The cooperative itself is clear that so long as members are supplying milk that meets the cooperative’s quality standard, its explicit sphere of influence stops at the farm gate. However, we can see how it can influence farm practices in indirect ways. The strong milk prices give farmers the financial security to invest in on-farm technologies. Several have introduced robotic milking. For these pasture-based farms, it means that each cow now determines its own rhythm and schedule as she moves between the various fields and the milking shed. Humans are effectively removed from the cow’s daily routine. The farmers report that the dramatic reduction in human contact makes for far happier cows and, when humans do come to visit, the cows are now even more inquisitive about the human strangers (personal communication, Tony and Jillian Wilson, November 14, 2017). With concerns about cow welfare becoming increasingly present, we might see that Norco provides the conditions of existence for more of its farmers to adopt such technologies. This is not the end of the story. Dutch researchers Driessen and Heutinck propose that the ethical implications of milking robots “are not self-evident but ... part of a dynamic process” (2015, 3). In other words, the story will continue to unfold as new concerns become evident and as farmers (and technology and even cows themselves) respond. There are, of course, other considerations on the animal welfare agenda, including forced artificial insemination and the early separation of calves from their mothers, but there are some dairy farmers who are acting on these concerns. Glen Herud a dairy farmer in New Zealand is innovating with methods to keep calves with mothers, as he describes:

I wasn’t comfortable with the practice of removing calves from mothers and sending four-day-old calves to be slaughtered. I knew that if consumers really understood this practice, they wouldn’t be comfortable with it either. And that day would come.  
(Herud 2018)

His words echo those of Anderson, the founder of Interface. Anderson imagined himself going to prison because of the environmental harms of his industry and went on to lay the foundation for shifting common sense in the manufacturing sector (cited in Dean 2007). In a similar vein farmers such as Herud are helping to shift the common sense around animal

welfare. Perhaps there need not be a *logic of commodification*—we could begin to talk of an *ethic of commodification* in which responsibility for our shadow places and for maintaining the dignity of all life is honored in the process of making and transacting.

We see all the manufacturers in our study as being on a journey toward just sustainability. This is not a predictable journey; rather, it is a journey that takes unexpected twists and turns, since not just the social and political arrangements that Lawson refers to change but as legal, technological, and cultural arrangements also shift. This journey is also one that can involve fellow travelers, including economic geographers who are fellow travelers with a responsibility for multiple place consciousness.

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