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The relationship between neoliberal governance, globalization, and capitalist development continues to be a dominant focus in contemporary economic geography. This scholarship variously conceives of neoliberal capitalism as a singular force or as a term that describes the variegated connections between capitalism and an enabling state and society. Much of this scholarship charts how neoliberal capitalism has emerged over the past half-century through processes that govern economies the privatization of state assets, economic deregulation, technologically assisted internationalization, financialization, and so forth. These processes are linked to the gradual expansion of a neoliberal governmentality, the way that institutions and individuals alike internalize its competitive spirit and metrological culture.

The past decade, however, seems to suggest that the global order neoliberal theory attempts to name is beginning to fray. Just as neoliberalism is understood to have displaced the more interventionist state and a regulated global trade that followed World War II, there are signs that neoliberalism itself may be displaced. Scholars in multiple disciplines argue that the decade following the Global Financial Crisis might be better understood as a kind of global interregnum, setting the stage for a postneoliberal era.

Over this same period of time, there has been an intensifying, global-scale interest in alternative economies, explored particularly in geography and other social science disciplines but also in wider civil society. The past decade has seen the rise in prominence of social movements that aim to transform both the relationships and normative commitments that define economic space. The name given to alternative economies has multiplied: degrowth, steady state and circular economies, peer to peer, community, cooperative, sharing, social and solidarity economies, *buen vivir*, and Ubuntu economies more prominent among them. Many of these movements are motivated by the perceived failures of Business as Usual (BaU) most prominently deepening economic inequality and increasingly dire ecological challenges that have become more stark over the past half-century. One common thread connecting these movements is an economics that departs from BaU: other ways of organizing production, labor, exchange, ownership, investment, consumption, and governance. Another thread that connects them is how these alternative economic spaces and practices provide salutary contexts for shared normative commitments to more inclusive, equitable, sustainable, and democratic economies. Within geography and cognate disciplines, there are two ways of understanding these alternative economies. The first is a realist approach in which the alternative economy is simply imagined to be something other than a presumptively dominant capitalism and its associated systems of neoliberal governance that enforce economic, policy, and cultural conditions felicitous to capitalist development. A second understanding of the alternative economy coalesces around an epistemic break, which posits the economy as an always already intrinsically heterogeneous space. This second approach not only represents the economy as a field of difference

but possesses the potential to reconfigure scholarly research within economic geography.

While the burgeoning social movements referred to earlier testify to the considerable excitement around the idea of alternative economies, it remains a marginal point of

interest because of an underlying and frequently unnamed commitment to a scalar hierarchy that governs its academic (and popular) representation. In many representations, alternative is synonymous with self- consciously intentional efforts undertaken on a local scale. This association renders what it describes as peripheral and relatively powerless, vulnerable to cooptation or even state repression, or, alternatively, as spaces of privilege populated by those who are blind to the “realities of power,” particularly the power ascribed to neoliberal capitalism. From the outset, many scholars see the alternative economy as socially insignificant and thus unworthy of attention.

What is required to combat this double marginality is a theoretical framework that diverges from the conception of the alternative economy as local and intentional. The first step in developing such a framework is to recognize that the marginality of the alternative economy comes from defining something as alternative in the first place. The second step is to produce an ontology of economic difference that highlights the ubiquity (in place) of nonmarket and noncapitalist practices alongside the variety of capitalist forms and in the context of economic geography diverse economies scholarship has made a decisive contribution. A third step is to then begin the task of developing a scholarship that explores the open-ended set of conditions that allow alternative economies to stabilize and endure as social relations. Insights from Science and Technology Studies (STS) and other traditions focusing on economic performativity have been particularly helpful in understanding the material, social, and practical conditions possibility of other forms of economies, but also in suggesting an entirely different mode of scholarship where both critical and imaginative faculties are repurposed for the enactment of other economies.

### The Trouble With Alternatives

The term “alternative,” by its very nature, underscores a foundational insight from modern linguistic theory that no term derives its meaning self-referentially. The existence of an “alternative” economy implies that there is a dominant or mainstream economy against which the alternative is defined. Moreover, the perceived spatial extent and viability of alternatives are shaped by how one understands the dominance of the mainstream economy. Not surprisingly, this issue is a principal point of contention among scholars interested in alternative economies.

Those who understand dominance from a realist epistemological perspective believe that it is possible to gauge relative degrees of power and the extent of vulnerability or powerlessness. They therefore almost always see alternative economies and organizations as weak and likely to be short lived. Those who understand dominance as performative, on the other hand, see it as predicated upon and produced by the dissemination and repetition of knowledge. Neoliberalism, for example, has become hegemonic in large part because academic knowledge, policy discourses, protest movements, and bureaucratic technologies of enactment have made it the focus of belief and action, bringing it into being in both authoritarian and democratic settings. From this perspective, the continual interruptions, large omissions, and widening gaps in the performance of neoliberalism are openings for the other discourses and technologies that are always already participating in bringing different economies into being.

The question that continues to be centrally important is this: whether the alternative economy really is a marginal set of activities or if it is performatively marginalized. The answer to this question will determine the future direction of research into alternative

economies. One interesting feature of this debate is that adherents of the performative perspective are frequently regarded by those adopting the realist perspective as idealists who imagine that thinking differently an intellectual commitment to celebrating noncapitalist spaces and practices is all that is required to change the world. Celebration here is effectively a code word for an idealist naiveté that ignores the reality of capitalism and a devolved neoliberal state dedicated to its expanded reproduction. But what if the way in which this reality is invoked to rein in the potential study of something other than capitalism is itself part of what keeps capitalism dominant? Perhaps, the persuasiveness of the argument that capitalism is the real economy, while the alter- native economy is fanciful celebration, is the ultimate confirmation of performativity.

Research based on the realist vision of the alternative economy tends to focus on how self-consciously alternative economies are defined by their vulnerabilities how their marginal status undermines their normative commitments or how they are always in danger of being outcompeted by the mainstream or in coming to resemble BaU. Alternative food movement spaces such as farmer's markets and Community Support Agriculture, food and consumer cooperatives are regularly treated by scholars as marginal food spaces that replicate forms of class privilege and racial exclusion, while longstanding successful experiments such as the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation are represented as having betrayed their principles through their strategic decisions around internationalization. The trouble here is not that the alternative food movement space can be exclusionary or that Mondragon may well have become a form of collective capitalism. Indeed, these are real possibilities, but when we read these particular outcomes as evidence of an intrinsic deficiency, the term alternative comes to signify inevitable compromise, cooptation, or failure.

This a-priori assumption creates a theoretical blindness. When market forces, government institutions and cultural norms are presumed to be arrayed against alternative economies, we do not look for the circumstances where they might enable their development. And under those conditions, almost inevitably, alternativeness is reduced to sameness. The continued existence of alter- native economic institutions community-based credit unions, for example is seen as threatened by the dominant ideology that governs finance; the laws of local, state, and national government; and the market forces that favor large capitalist firms. At the same time, it is imagined that alternative economic practices and institutions, such as local economic trading systems exist only in spaces of deprivation where they are a necessity or, conversely, in spaces of privilege where they can be indulged in. The premise here is clearly a binary opposition in which superior qualities are ascribed to the capitalist-mainstream. While alternative economic institutions are conceived as existing only in contingent circumstances, the presumed dominance of mainstream financial institutions creates the appearance that they exist autonomously, independent of conditions. More recently, this same logic now presumes to tell us what will transpire in the domain of the online sharing economy: that platform capitalists like Uber, will live up to their name, inevitably triumphant.

Foreseeing the term alternative as an epistemic bear trap, Gibson-Graham in, *The End of Capitalism*, attempt to replace the binary opposition of mainstream and alternative with a conception of the economy as a space of difference. In this vision, self-consciously alternative economic activities constitute a fraction of the noncapitalist and alternative capitalist activity within a differentiated economic landscape. The economy is

understood as being composed of many different processes of production, exchange, ownership, work, remuneration, and consumption without the presumption of necessary relations of dominance and subordination. The alternative economy as economic difference constitutes a distinct economic ontology that of diverse economies: a scholarship that centers community engagement and action research as the basis of its performative efficacy.

### Theorizing Economic Difference

The commonplace view is that economic alternatives are tiny islands awash in a sea of capitalism. To the extent that difference is recognized alternatives to capitalism or alternative forms of capitalism this difference is seen as contained within or conceptually subsumed to capitalism as such. The first problem facing theorists of economic difference is how to define capitalism so that it is no longer seen as that which contains and subsumes difference.

Following Resnick and Wolff, Gibson-Graham turns to a close reading of Marx's *Capital* in order to more precisely define capitalism. From her perspective, what distinguishes capitalism is the specific way in which surplus labor is produced and appropriated or what Resnick and Wolff term the "class process." Capitalism involves the use of free wage labor in the production of goods and services, usually for a market. Wage laborers produce a surplus that is appropriated by nonproducers a sole proprietor or the board of directors of a capitalist firm who distribute this surplus in ways that they wish, though they are usually constrained to direct much of it to reproducing the firm and its exploitative class process.

This minimalist definition of capitalism carries with it the implication that particular capitalist firms might operate under a variety of conditions. A capitalist enterprise may or may not accumulate capital (in other words, invest appropriated surplus in expanding plant, equipment, and workforce), may or may not own the means of production (plant and equipment may be leased or borrowed), may or may not be in a dominant position with respect to the wage laborers employed, and may or may not strive to maximize profits or market share. It is this minimal definition of capitalism that allows us to see capitalisms in all of their specificity and particularity at the level of the enterprise.

With capitalism reduced from a systemic entity coextensive with the social space to a type of enterprise scattered (or perhaps concentrated) in a larger economic landscape, it is easier to see the other ways in which goods and services are produced and exchanged. In the United States, for example, it is possible to find instances of goods and services publicly provisioned or produced for exchange by people who labor without freedom of contract in what might be seen as a slave class process (prisoners, members of the armed forces, indentured migrants, and children). Likewise, as feminists inside and outside of geography have argued and demonstrated for quite some time, household-based, noncommodity production of goods, and services account for 30%–50% of total economic activity in both rich and poor countries.

The understanding of economy as a space of difference is partially captured in the open-ended conceptualization of a diverse economy in [Fig. 1: The Diverse Economy Framework](#).

Just as productive activities can be read for difference in class terms, it is possible to theorize diversity in exchange relationships, forms of labor/compensation, types of tenure, and mechanisms for investment. While many goods and services are produced for

exchange on markets, they are also allocated in other ways via gifts, state transfers, barter, theft, and so on. Similarly, many people in a society may be paid a wage for some of their labors, but likely do other work that is unpaid or alternatively compensated for example, by payment in kind or in a reciprocal labor exchange. While land, resources, and knowledge can be privately held, there are a wide variety of tenure practices in societies around the world including the common use and stewardship of resources from fisheries to open-source software. Likewise, innovations in digitally based peer-to-peer systems lending and finance are part of a long history of diverse forms of finance from equity investment to rotating credit schemes.

<b>Labor</b>	<b>Transactions</b>	<b>Property</b>	<b>Enterprise</b>	<b>Finance</b>
Wage	Market	Private	Capitalist	Mainstream markets
ALTERNATIVE Self-employed Reciprocal labor In-kind Work for welfare	ALTERNATIVE Fair trade Alternative Underground market Barter	ALTERNATIVE State-managed Customary land Community land Indigenous Intellectual	ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST State owned Environmentally responsible Socially Non-profit	ALTERNATIVE Cooperative banks Credit unions Community-based financial institutions Micro-finance
UNPAID Housework Volunteer Self-provisioning Slave labor	NON-MARKET Household sharing Gift giving Hunting, fishing, gathering Theft, piracy, poaching	OPEN ACCESS Atmosphere International Open source IP Outer space	NON-Worker Sole Community Feudal Slave	NON-MARKET Sweat equity Family lending Donations Interest free loans

Figure 1 The Diverse Economy Framework.

The diverse economy diagram is an evolving, open-ended catalog of diverse economic practices. Unlike the term alternative economy, the diverse economy is not to be understood in the first instance as a normative framework. It captures both desirable (cooperative) and undesirable (slavery) economic diversity. In the context of the diagram the performative function of the term “alternative” is specific, it serves to distinguish capitalism from activities and processes with which its frequently conflated. In turn, both capitalist and alternative are contrasted with noncapitalist relationships, practices, and organizational forms that are evident in economies around the world.

In the past decade, theorists have made use of the diverse economy framework in other contexts, directed by different performative intentions. Diverse economies scholars working in the “monsoon Asia” region have documented forms of reciprocal exchange and labor practices that have allowed communities to survive the cyclical monsoon seasons and whose continuity may allow for more robust responses to climate change. Others have begun to use the diverse economies framework as a way of broadening conceptions of gender equality in contexts like the Solomon Islands, where people are defined, in part, by complex livelihood strategies. In each case, diversity lays out a different ontological framework for thinking about economic possibilities, in particular how different elements of a diverse economy can be combined or connected in

potentially salutary ways that vary across space and time. This has enabled the diverse economies approach to track particular examples through the course of their development. For instance, in earlier work, the Community Economies Collective documented the role that gifts and other forms of finance played in enabling the formation of Collective Copies, a worker-owned enterprise borne out a struggle over unionization with its previous capitalist owners. In the past decade this cooperative has come to play a central role in developing a regional cooperative organization, the Valley Alliance for Worker Cooperatives, which advocates for cooperative development throughout the region. Elsewhere in the world, diverse economies scholars have documented the enabling relationship between diverse forms of finance, commoned resources, cooperative, and social enterprises in a range of settings from post-quake Christchurch New Zealand to indigenous diverse economies in Quebec.

Two developments in contemporary social theory have enabled diverse economies scholars to produce this wide archive of diverse economic practice. The first is a reconceptualization of (economic) space in the context of a flat ontology where economic space is the product of negotiated relations between provisionally equivalent rather than hierarchically arrayed practices. The second is a corollary theoretical recognition that the viability and durability of any economic practice, relationship, or institution depends upon a larger assemblage of felicitous conditions. Diverse economies scholars, following on from the insights of STSs, reposition alterity by focusing attention on the specific ecological, material, and social conditions of possibility that attend any given economic practice, relationship, or institution.

### Spatialities of Alterity and Difference

For those who focus on neoliberalism as well as those who are interested in the self-consciously alternative economy, the economy is generally structured by a hierarchical spatial ontology in which the local is nested within the regional, national, and global scales. Viewed as containers, activities on a global scale international financial markets, for example are assumed to have more determining power than local projects that appear to be contained a barter network, a worker cooperative, and so on. In this way, a hierarchically ordered space effectively affirms the dominance of (global) capitalism while consigning economic experiments to relative powerlessness.

The metonymical pairing of global capitalism and local alternatives structures our understanding of economic space even when an alternative economic practice becomes global in scope. Alter-trade (or fair trade), despite its expanding presence in the global marketplace, is dismissed by its critics as small in relation to global trade as a whole (as, of course, are many sectors of international trade) and vulnerable to competition and cooptation. What is remarkable about this depiction is that alter-trade could just as easily be represented as a powerful innovation, one that has injected an ethical sensibility into trade that did not exist 20 years ago, where its rapid dissemination has been aided by advances in digital technology. Alter-trade is energized by an ethical dynamic of growth (rather than by a structural dynamic of competition and increasing market share) that works against cooptation, draws increasing numbers of products into fair-trade marketing, and links together more and more people. Perhaps in order to see the potential of alter-trade, what is required is a different spatial ontology that does not presume in advance the connection between scale, size, and power.

If capitalism's presumed dominance is a function of a scalar, hierarchical ontology

then the visibility, political, and practical significance of the diverse economy is clarified in what Marston, Jones, and Woodward termed a flat spatial ontology. In the context of this ontology, site is a product of an unfolding materiality that constructs and reconstructs space through its often uneven and temporary connection to other (distant) sites. In this conception there are no spatial categories or containers that prearrange the world into ordered spaces, any relationship hierarchical, horizontal, cooperative, or exploitative is a product of conjugation. Indeed, Doreen Massey, further developing this same ontology uses it to describe the unstable configuration of power geometries. Correspondingly, Gibson-Graham's feminist political imagining of the diverse economy premised on a geography of ubiquity has a similar, flattening effect. Because women are everywhere, local and household-based feminist projects can be globally transformative; because diverse economies are everywhere, the projects of local economic activists can have world-changing effects. Linked semiotically rather than organizationally, these projects have the potential to configure a place-based global movement for economic transformation.

When capitalist class relations are no longer to be regarded as necessarily dominant, it becomes more difficult to imagine that other social sites and processes (e.g., households) are bound to the task of capitalist reproduction or that economic alternatives are awash in a capitalist sea. Instead, we are all in the same soup. This flattened, feminist-inspired relational ontology allows us to see economic diversity as globally dispersed, while at the same time creating potential connections among disparate locations and processes. In the flat space of economic difference, economic geographers interested in contributing to alternative economies might play a constructive role in translating experiments from one location to another, formalizing lessons learned from experiments in one place for other places, and working imaginatively with individuals, communities, and regions to produce and disseminate economic innovation. Given the ubiquity of potential sites for these sorts of academic interventions households, enterprises, communities, and regions they could conceivably be conducted on a global scale. This is precisely the agenda that has directed diverse economies scholarship over the past decade. But in conceptualizing this politics of research and the future direction of scholarly interest in alternative economies, it becomes crucial to return to the concept of performativity and the way that it differs from both idealism (simply "electing" to think differently) as well as realist understandings of difference (alternative economy).

### Performativity, Economic Difference, and the Politics of Research

A decade ago, Colin Williams observed that in the United Kingdom, nonmarket, reciprocal exchanges remained widespread and, in fact, were more entrenched in the sociality of middle- and upper-class communities than for people on the social and economic margins. This finding posed a significant challenge to the received wisdom that market exchange/commodification displaces other exchange relations in the course of capitalist development. As Williams notes, the commodification thesis circulates as a widely accepted idea, and yet it remains, essentially, an assertion that has yet to be theoretically or empirically substantiated.

The crucial insight from Williams' work is that the persuasive power of the commodification thesis is itself a testament to operations of performativity. The persistence and ubiquity of nonmarket exchange in the United Kingdom remain obscured



because it has been configured discursively as subordinate. The persistence of diverse forms of exchange, even in so-called advanced postindustrial societies, has a particular pertinence in the present moment. The digital disruption now widely known as the sharing economy, in its infancy in 2008, has upended both the practice and understanding of exchange relations. For some, the quick rise of platform capitalist enterprises like AirB&B and Uber represents the apotheosis of individualized neoliberal capitalism employment reduced to contract that facilitates exchange, terms, and conditions in which risks are distributed to workers and consumers while profits accrue to the platform. Other voices, however, from within geography and in fields like critical legal studies, point out that the triumph of platform capitalism is far less certain. These larger players have inherent legal and fiduciary vulnerabilities while the platform model itself can (and in some cases has) accommodated other organizational forms including cooperative organizational forms. As a whole the platform economy underscores what STS scholars emphasize as a process of economic performance how a specific configuration of technologies, relationships, patterns of behavior, and shifting social norms around trust have managed to lift the sharing economy from obscurity in 2009 when the first edition of this encyclopedia was published into widespread use in cities and communities around the world. Each version of the sharing economy from Uber to platform cooperatives require legal theorists, policy makers, union representatives, academics, and the broader public to rethink the meaning of fundamental economic categories. Contractual relations that define work, property ownership, schemes of taxation, allocation of public resources (like parking), the reach of tenancy covenants, zoning, and much else besides are all suddenly up in the air. Pretending to know in advance how all of these relational, legal, and practical concerns will play out, what will emerge and what will be preempted could also be a somewhat ironic testament to the performative power of theory to enact the reality it seeks to describe.

It is in this sense that thinking economic difference in performative terms is not simply a process of understanding the conditions of possibility for any given economy but rather an invitation to consider the critical role that scholarship itself can play in either making or delimiting possibilities. In the open and indeterminate space of a diverse economy, the space of academic engagement is correspondingly enlarged; the question becomes how do we understand and engage with economic difference when it is no longer positioned as the subordinate term within a binary opposition? One answer might be to see the space of economic difference as a space of self-conscious and unconscious experimentation in becoming, where marginality or dominance, success or failure, cannot be known in advance. Viewing the economy as a space of experimentation/becoming has another important implication in that the recognition calls forth and depends upon a new form of activist scholarship. The goal of this scholarship is to examine economic practices that are potentially valuable but discursively subordinated, bringing them to light and engaging with the actors to build or strengthen diverse economies that are, indeed, alternatives to a present order. These scholarly interventions highlight the ethics and politics of language and representation, recognizing that acting differently requires thinking differently, and that conscious change begins with the recognition of possibility opening the space for more engaged, participatory and collaborative forms of research focused on experimentation and enactment of other economies.

Kevin St. Martin's work, for example, focuses on the discursive politics of resource management in the fisheries industry. Fisheries management is currently guided by the

assumption that each individual fisher is a self-interested utility maximizer. As St Martin points out, this leads to a regulatory approach limits on days at sea that generates more risk taking on the part of vessels and crews and produces the very behavior it presumes to control. Working closely with fishing communities themselves, St Martin et al have intervened using participatory GIS technologies to suggest that fishing communities themselves have both the knowledge and the requisite investment to play a role in the long-term management of the ocean's resources. The language that St Martin et al have been able to introduce into fisheries science and fisheries policy in the United States and elsewhere begins to reconceive of fishing communities as custodians of the common resources upon which they depend.

In another example, Healy *et al* have explored the potential of solidarity economy movements active in east coast US cities New York, Philadelphia and Worcester, Massachusetts to enact other econosocialities. Their work documents both the spatial distribution, economic impact, and cultural significance of a wide range of diverse economic practices that aim to organize more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable economies. This research was conducted in collaboration with civic organizations that supported the development of cooperatives and other solidarity institutions, and in the context of urban environments that grew more receptive to and supportive of these movements over time. These emergent economies were inspired by other movements, particularly in Brazil, where practices of cooperation, cogovernance at the municipal scale, and alliance building with other social movements are more developed. From a diverse economy perspective, alternative economies are performatively, experimentally, and iteratively enacted. The sharing of results and the borrowing of ideas are parts of this process, and it is in this context that economic geography and cognate disciplines might usefully lend a hand.

## Conclusion

Diverse economies researchers explore the economy as a space of experimentation and difference through a research process that involves them collaborative engagement with people in place. Far from being idealist, the performative dimension of these action research projects makes use of what already exists, hidden in plain sight, in order to develop political, ethical, and organizational potential. The performative theory of economic difference is not blind to the realities of power but emphasizes the power of representation and research in a context where all economies are “alternative” continuously and differentially (re)enacted.

The examples of Collective Copies, community-based fisheries management, and emergent solidarity economies suggest that the future of alternative economies research within economic geography might revolve around reconceptualizing research as a process of performatively enacting more-than-capitalist economies. Activist researchers could engage in disseminating and replicating such experiments in forming community economies, recognizing the powerful role these efforts might play in demonstrating how another economy might be possible.

Ironically, we might turn to the success of the neoliberal project itself for inspiration. As David Harvey points out, the basic tenets of neoliberalism articulated by Friedrich Hayek operated on the margins of economic orthodoxy for decades until the economic crisis of the 1970s gave proponents an opportunity to widely disseminate them. In the

same way, perhaps identifying alternative economic practices, conceived as part of a larger field of economic difference, might become a central part of an activist research agenda for economic geographers. Nearly 40 years after the economic crisis that propelled neoliberalism into a position of discursive dominance, it is neoliberalism that is now understood to be in crisis or terminal decline. When this failure is combined with a deepening awareness of global environmental contradictions, we may find ourselves in an ideal context in which to engage in a performative scholarship and politics of alternative economic development. The expanding presence of social movements interested in other economies as crucial to building other worlds cannot only be read as reflecting a tangible hunger for alternative economies but as a practical context for activists and activist scholars to engage in experimentation and dissemination.

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## Relevant Websites

Community Economies

<http://www.communityeconomies.org/>

The Next System

<https://thenextsystem.org/>

Peer to Peer Foundation

<https://p2pfoundation.net/>

Shareable

<https://www.shareable.net/>

Intercontinental network for the promotion of social solidarity economy <http://www.ripess.org/?lang¼en>. US Solidarity Economy Network: <https://ussen.org/>