

# Post-Capitalism Now: A Community Economies Perspective

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Please cite as:

Jenny Cameron, 2021 (forthcoming) Post-capitalism now: A community economies perspective. In Samuel Alexander, Sangeetha Chandra-Shekeran & Brendan Gleeson (eds), *Post-Capitalist Futures*, Palgrave.

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**ABSTRACT:** A community economies approach to post-capitalist futures starts in the here and now with what is ‘at hand’ to build a more just and a more sustainable world. Community economies scholars and activists focus their attention on the economic diversity that already exists but which is marginalised each time the world is referred to as capitalist. For community economies scholars and activists, diverse economic activities and relationships are the raw materials from which more ethical economies are already being wrought. Using examples from various urban contexts, this chapter provides examples of post-capitalist practices and highlights two strategies that community economies scholars and activists use to help strengthen these practices. One strategy is to identify existing economic diversity and the ways it is being used for more just and sustainable economies; the second is to engage in actions to strengthen these economies.

## **Post-capitalism is already here**

Post-capitalism is most commonly understood in temporal terms as a new political economic stage that will follow capitalism. Great hope is attached to the idea that capitalism will inevitably unravel, and that in the current period this might be triggered by the seriousness of the environmental emergency and gathering socio-economic tensions. There is, however, a different understanding of ‘capitalism’. What if capitalism is understood as a way of framing the world, and what if this framing is understood as having powerful effects that include normalising one vision of economy and establishing one set of options for political action? The understanding that capitalism is one way of framing the economy is the starting point for a community economies approach to capitalism—with implications for how post-capitalism is understood.

Community economies is associated with the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham and her two major works, *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (1996) and *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006). In community economies scholarship and activism, the idea of capitalocentrism is pivotal. The term was coined by J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996) to describe how capitalism is widely understood not just as the dominant economic system but as the ultimate determinant of so much that goes on in the world. The effect of a capitalocentric framing of the economy is to privilege capitalist economic activity and relationships, and to demote and devalue other economic activities and relationships. Community economies scholarship and activism recognises that there is a diversity of economic activities and relationships that are not capitalist and that are not necessarily subsumed to capitalist dynamics. This economic diversity that exists across the globe, including in so-called capitalist economies, is valued because it is what we have ‘at hand’ to nurture economies that are more socially, economically and environmentally just. In this way of thinking, post-capitalism is already here but only dimly visible when capitalism is given centre stage and accorded the central role.

Community economies scholarship and activism contributes to strengthening the post-capitalist world that is already here through two overarching strategies: first, by making existing economic diversity more visible; and second, by working with others to help strengthen the existing economic activities and relationships that are already enacting the type of post-capitalist world that so many of us yearn for. This chapter discusses these two strategies, and it uses examples from a range of urban contexts to illustrate how these strategies are being put into practice by community economies scholars and activists.

### **Making Economic Diversity More Visible**

One of the tools used in the community economies field to communicate economic diversity is the image of the economy as an iceberg (see Figure 1). The small portion of the iceberg that sits above the waterline represents those economic activities that are associated with capitalism: workers employed in capitalist enterprises and being paid a wage to produce goods and services that are sold through commodity markets. Below the waterline is a diverse array of economic activities and relationships, some of which are easy to recognise as being economic in nature (such as fair trade and bartering) and some of which seem to be less obviously economic (such as photosynthesis and composting) but which nevertheless provide the ecological ‘work’ on

which societies rely. The iceberg image is one counter to capitalocentric thinking that privileges capitalism as the dominant economic form and driver, and casts into shadow the diversity of other economic activities and relationships which are prevalent across the globe, which have their own dynamics and which are already being used (or have the potential to be used) to enact a post-capitalist world now.

Building on the iceberg image, community economies researchers and activists have developed a systematic means of reframing the economy by considering the diversity of five economic dimensions:

- The forms of **labour** that are used to secure what people need to survive. This includes paid labour, but also unpaid labour, such as housework, and labour that is paid in other ways, such as reciprocal labour.
- The types of **enterprises** through which surplus value is produced and distributed. This includes capitalist enterprises, but also other types of capitalist enterprises, such as social enterprises (which like capitalist firms have an owner/worker structure but are based on motivations other than profit maximisation), and non-capitalist enterprises, such as worker-owned cooperatives.



Figure 1: The Diverse Economies Iceberg

Source: Diverse Economies Iceberg by [Community Economies Collective](https://www.communityeconomies.org/) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/). Available from <https://www.communityeconomies.org/resources/diverse-economies-iceberg>.

- The means of **transacting** goods and services. This includes monetary-based market transactions, but also non-market transactions, such as household flows and gift-giving, and the transactions that take place through non-monetary-based markets, such as local trading systems).
- The forms of **property** through which resources are managed (or mismanaged). This includes private property, but also open access property, such as the atmosphere and open source software, and collectively ‘owned’ property, such as Indigenous land and state-managed assets.

- The types of **finance** used to support economic and other activity. This includes market-based finance, but also non-market-based finance, such as sweat equity, family financing and rotating savings and credit associations, and other types of financial markets such as state-based lending).

The recently published *Handbook of Diverse Economies* (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020) is based around these five economic dimensions and includes framing essays that overview each dimension and chapters that investigate specific economic activities and relationships that fall within each dimension.

This work on economic diversity sheds light on the array of economic activities and relationships that are present across the globe; and it helps direct attention to those existing activities and relationships that are already enacting the type of post-capitalist world that is too-often consigned to the future and to those activities and relationships might be used to build post-capitalist worlds now.

The way in which recognising economic diversity might contribute to building post-capitalist worlds is demonstrated by recent studies conducted by members of the Community Economies Research Network in very different urban contexts. One study by Christian Anderson (2020) was based on three years of ethnographic research in the far West Side of Midtown Manhattan in New York City, an area known as Clinton/Hell’s Kitchen. This neighbourhood can easily be understood through a capitalocentric framing with the processes of gentrification and displacement that the neighbourhood is experiencing explained in terms of dynamics of capitalist accumulation and capitalist value making, dynamics which are ‘played out’ through real estate speculation and which are transforming this previously run-down neighbourhood.

However, one of Anderson’s key informants, a resident and tenant organiser in the neighbourhood since the late 1970s encouraged Anderson to consider other framings. Bob explained to Anderson that he was not that interested in an analysis that focused on structural forces and which emphasised how powerful those forces are. Although he agreed with the basis for this analysis, for Bob it was not that useful as it did not offer him “traction to think differently or to undertake different forms of practical action in his own situation and struggles” (2020: xv). Bob’s explanation for why he is interested in a different type of analysis parallels Gibson-Graham’s explanation for why she came up with the term capitalocentrism. In a recent podcast interview, Gibson (2020) reflects on how scholarship and activism that seek to understand capitalism in order to bring about economic change too-often quash possibilities for change by reproducing over again a narrative of capitalism as a dominant force with a

seemingly never-ending capacity to adapt and conquer. Like Bob, Gibson-Graham is interested in understandings that might open-up rather than close-down avenues for economic and political action and change.

To open-up options, Anderson drew on a diverse economy framing of the Clinton/Hell's Kitchen neighbourhood and attended to the everyday and seemingly mundane economic and political activities of those who live and work in the area. One thing that stood out from the research was the strength of people's collective endeavours to shape the neighbourhood and secure livelihoods in a context in which paid work was becoming increasingly precarious. It is here in the collective endeavours of those who live and work in the area that Anderson sees the potential for transformation, as he writes "the people of the neighbourhood as a whole have more collective social power and social wealth among themselves than ever before" (2020: 214). For a tenant organiser such as Bob, this research points to the value of economic and political activism that is directed towards supporting and fostering cooperation. In terms of post-capitalism, this research points to the possibilities for economic and political collectivity that already exist in a neighbourhood such as Clinton/Hell's Kitchen and that might be strengthened (potentially by tenant organisers such as Bob).

Other studies in this part of the world draw similar conclusions. Lauren Hudson's research on the solidarity economy in New York City finds that the food cooperatives, community land trusts, credit unions, mutual aid organisations, community gardens and housing cooperatives that form part of this economy are based on values of social justice, ecological sustainability, cooperation, mutualism and democracy (see Cameron 2020). Hudson notes that much of the work of creating and sustaining economic possibilities in the city is being carried out by black women and that the work is both a material necessity to secure what is needed for survival but also a political commitment to live in the world in solidarity with others. For Hudson, this research is a means of showing "how things that are usually managed privately within the household can be managed in cooperation and ... how there is a viable alternative to individualised ways of living in the city" (cited in Cameron 2020).

In the very different context of the Kalyanpur slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Waliuzzaman (2020) also highlights how economic diversity is the basis for economic and political activism. Slums have long been seen as a product of capitalist economic development starting with Engels's depiction of the slums of Manchester in the 1840s and the horrors of industrial capitalism. Waliuzzaman is equally concerned with addressing living conditions in the Kalyanpur slum but, like Anderson and Hudson, he starts with the diversity of existing economic activities and relationships in this urban locale. He finds that slum dwellers are

contributing their time, effort and creativity to protect their families' livelihoods and maintain the liveability of the slum through initiatives such as forming small cooperatives that help to secure financial security, establishing a community-based waste collection system (to which households pay a small monthly fee which is used to employ five slum dwellers to run the system), and voluntarily managing and maintaining the shared toilets and tube wells. Waliuzzaman argues that the slum-dwellers are creating an urban commons "not out of the desire of the people to be revolutionary or to protest against the hegemony of global capitalism but out of the common urge of earning a living and securing a place to live. In that process, they collaborate, help, care, negotiate, avoid, and sometimes are in conflict with others" (2020: 191). The economic work of creating and maintaining this urban commons is intertwined with political activism including resisting evictions and protesting the actions of local MPs in order to take a stand against land grabbing by the state and political elites.

These studies that shed light on existing economic diversity in urban contexts highlight how economic diversity is associated with efforts to build urban economies that are based on values such as cooperation and collectivity. In so doing, those who live and work in these places are contributing to the project of building post-capitalist worlds now. Identifying economic diversity and the ways it is being used for more just and sustainable economies is one strategy used by community economies scholars and activists. A second is to engage in actions that might strengthen these existing economic activities and relationships.

### **Strengthening post-capitalist worlds**

One of the characteristics of community economies scholarship and activism is that there is no predetermined blueprint or recipe for how to proceed with strengthening post-capitalist worlds. Instead, community economies scholars and activists are interested in the multitude of ways that diverse economic activities and relationships might be harnessed to build more ethical economies. This means moving from the inventorying of the five economic dimensions (above) to considering the ethical potential of these dimensions, as follows.

- How might diverse forms of **labour** be used to help us to survive well, especially when we take into account not just our own wellbeing, but the wellbeing of other people and the planet?
- How do different types of **enterprises** produce and distribute surplus in ways that contribute to the social and environmental health of the world around?

- How are **transactions** of goods and services occurring so that relationships between people and environments are being nourished, including those in distant places that provide vital inputs to meet others' needs?
- How are different forms of **property** being used to maintain, restore, and replenish the gifts of nature and intellect that all humans rely on?
- How is **finance** being used to store and use our surplus and savings so that people and the planet are supported and sustained?

The shift from inventorying economic diversity to considering how economic diversity is already being used or might be used to build more ethical economies is explored in the 2013 publication *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming our Communities* (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). This book features actions that include direct action by groups of people to develop ethical economic initiatives and policy development that will provide support for these initiatives. What follows is just a glimpse into how community economies scholars and activists are engaged in direct and policy action in various urban contexts.

A current direct action by members of the Community Economies Research Network is The Interdependence, which was launched in November 2020 as an alliance that includes enterprises that produce and distribute surplus in ways that acknowledge how people and the planet's survival are interdependent and reliant on practices of mutual care (see <https://www.communityeconomies.org/interdependence>). Enterprises that sign-up to the alliance use *idt.* as a signifier to replace and displace more familiar enterprise signifiers such as Inc. and Ltd that are associated with corporate norms based on the values of competition and profit-maximisation. One of the first enterprises to sign-up was Company Drinks *idt.*, a social enterprise based in Barking and Dagenham in the east of London that was registered in 2015 as a Community Interest Company (see <http://companydrinks.info/about/>). Company Drinks *idt.* runs a range of initiatives and takes its name from its contemporary re-creation of 'picking days', a practice from the early 1800s to the 1950s when up to 250,000 working-class Londoners (mainly women and children) would leave the East End in late summer to spend weeks in the Kent countryside picking hops and fruits. On one level Company Drinks *idt.* engages in a cooperative practice of hops and fruit harvesting, beverage production and drinks trading, while on another it continues to make the urban and rural connection explicit, and links an older working class culture with the diverse cultures of recently arrived immigrants to this part of the city. Although it is in its early days, The Interdependence aims to be a worldwide alliance, and to include initiatives such as those discussed above in places as far afield as New York and Dhaka. This effort is an important illustration of how community economies scholars

and activists tackle the issue of ‘scale’. As opposed to the strategy of ‘scaling-up’ from something small to something large, community economies scholars and activists subscribe to a combined strategy of showing how post-capitalist economies are already ubiquitous, strengthening what is already here through connecting initiatives, and thereby helping to proliferate what we already have.

A recent policy initiative by members of the Community Economies Research Network involves using new tools of measurement to help value, in policy terms, the economic diversity that is usually invisible and uncounted (including voluntary unpaid labour, environmental care services, everyday ecological practices and well-being improvements). Drawing on the Community Economy Return on Investment (introduced in *Take Back the Economy*), a group of ‘community economies accountants’ have applied the tool to R-Urban, an urban commons initiative initiated in 2011 by the activist architecture practice Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée (aaa) in Colombes, a multicultural municipality on the suburban outskirts of Paris where residents have incomes below the national average and where social housing towers are interspersed with single family dwellings (Petrescu et al. 2020). Projects run through R-Urban included a micro-farm, family garden plots, teaching space, compost school and a self-constructed community recycling and eco-construction centre that included workshop space, materials storage, and a design studio and apartment. According to the calculations, the initial Community Economy Investment of €1.2million resulted in an annual Community Economy Return on Investment of 180 per cent. Such demonstration of the obvious benefit of R-Urban was not enough to convince a newly-elected right-wing municipal council to change their plans to concrete over the urban commons and turn it into a car park. Nevertheless, this community economies accounting exercise has helped the model to be replicated in three additional urban areas of Paris (in Gennevilliers, Nanterre, and Bagneux by aaa) and in London (in Hackney Wick and Poplar by PublicWorks) with funding support from the relevant municipalities. Community economies scholars and activists are not naïve in thinking that the world will easily be made post-capitalist and that initiatives such as R-Urban will be uncontested but they are committed to the ongoing struggle that is involved in making post-capitalist worlds now.

## **Conclusion**

Like all those concerned with a post-capitalist future, community economies scholars and activists yearn for a world which is more just and sustainable, and in which economic practices

serve rather than undermine such values. For community economies scholars and activists this world is already here. It is here in the diversity of economic activities and relationships that already exist but are rendered invisible each time the world is cast as capitalist. It is here in the initiatives that are harnessing this economic diversity to enact economic practices that nourish the interdependencies between people and between people and environments. This means that the attention of community economies scholars and activists is turned to strategies that might help this economic diversity become more visible, and to strategies that might strengthen those efforts that are, in the here and now, creating more just and more sustainable worlds.

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