

## Reading for economic difference

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### Introduction

The task of the social scientist is to make sense of the world. This is usually done by drawing on two kinds of 'tools'. One is inherited knowledge shaped into theories that have stood the test of time and seem to offer explanatory insights, the other is newly created knowledge acquired by empirical observations and interventions in the world. For the most part, making sense of the world involves organizing newly acquired empirical materials and 'reading' it in such a way as to identify patterns and repetitions that align with certain theories of connection and causality. As they arise, anomalies are important as they test out the explanatory capacity of theory and provoke new theoretical development (Kuhn, 1962). But what if the practice of making sense of the world was constraining what is possible? Indeed, what is the relationship between making sense and making possibility?

Increasingly social scientists are appreciating that how we represent and theorize the world around us actually has performative effects, that is, we make the world we inhabit as we understand it (Butler, 1993; Law and Urry, 2004). How we apprehend the world sets the stage for how we act in that world. Indeed, the entities we 'make more real' can even gain agency in ways we can barely imagine (see Chapter by Miller in this volume). So if, as social scientists, we are interested in enlarging the scope of action and knowing in the world so as to change it in ways that increase wellbeing and minimize suffering, then we must be attentive to how we go about 'reading' the world around us.

This is particularly important when it comes to reading the *economic* world because this world is usually seen as the ultimate 'real'—the obdurate container and constrainer of life. 'The Economy' sets the stage for the story of life and we can only ever relate to it as a reader of a page turner novel, passively awaiting the next chapter—will it open up the

happy ever after pathway? or the ‘go back to the start, do not pass go, do not collect \$200’ dead-end? We can either retreat into the passive embrace of the couch reader who lets the text/world lead and refuses to interrogate the author about motive and outcome, or we can act as more engaged and feisty readers who battle with the story and try and shape it. A technique for doing so involves the practice of reading for economic difference. This chapter introduces this method.

In what follows I discuss reading as a practice of knowledge production. I introduce the project of ‘critical reading’ and argue that this is a reading for dominance. I then turn to the techniques of deconstruction and queering, both forms of reading against dominance and for difference. The last section of the chapter illustrates reading for economic difference with respect to activism in place and across a world region.

### **Reading as a practice of knowledge production**

...as there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of.

Louis Althusser, 1970: 14

The term ‘reading’ is being used here in a rather specific sense. When we read a written text we are not just comprehending words in sentences and paragraphs that convey their meaning in a straightforward way—although this may be the way we read a novel for pleasure where we want to find out who did what and how the story will turn out. What makes a ‘scholarly’ reading is the requirement that we critically interrogate the motives of the author and as a reader position ourselves with respect to these motives.

The task of critical reading involves a conscious engagement with the words in front of us to discern what the author is ‘doing’ by writing in a certain way about a topic. Gordon Taylor’s list of the motives that animate academic writing are an instructive guide to help readers identify how authors are positioning themselves with respect to established knowledge, points of view or theoretical framings. They include (1989:27)

- Agreeing with, acceding to, defending or confirming a point of view
- Proposing a new view

- Conceding but qualifying
- Reformulating to increase explanatory purchase
- Dismissing on grounds of inadequacy, irrelevance, incoherence or criteria
- Rejecting, rebutting, refuting
- Reconciling according to some higher principle
- Retracting or recanting in face of new arguments or evidence

To some extent this list also provides a guide for 'reading' the world around us as social scientists. As we gather new primary evidence or analyse secondary data or read other's accounts we are continually selecting and aligning, foregrounding and overlooking, splitting and lumping, differentiating and homogenizing, connecting and disconnecting, judging, accepting and dismissing. How we do this will relate to the theoretical frame to which we are attached and through which we are looking.

A strong influence on the methodology of diverse economy scholarship was Louis Althusser, whose 'reading' of Marx's *Capital* introduced the idea that reading was a form of knowledge production (Althusser and Balibar, 1970). As the quote above states, reading a text (or the empirical world, for that matter) is not an innocent activity. The meaning of the text, or the world, is not reflected as if in a mirror that one just needs to look at, register and recognize.<sup>i</sup> Reading is not neutral, it is a guilty act, it involves actions for which the reader must take responsibility. In *Reading Capital* Althusser identifies a number of these actions. First, is to make one's positionality transparent. He situates himself "as a philosopher" who poses of the text certain questions that are different to the ones asked by an economist or historian. Second, is to attend to presences and absences in the text, to identify what is invisible, what is forbidden, what is overlooked, and to analyse how these very absences are crucial to meaning making.<sup>ii</sup> Third, is to activate an 'informed gaze' produced from the standpoint of a new terrain (or problematic) that emerges from the necessity of these absences.

These 'methods' have been crucial to analysing economic discourse from a critical perspective. Take, for example, the reading of economic texts by feminists who bring to the task questions of how the work of women is acknowledged and positioned in theories of

economic functioning. Even a cursory reading of texts about national economies and their development will reveal the absence of women's work in the home and community. Marilyn Waring's landmark 1988 *Counting for Nothing* and Nancy Folbre's 2001 *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values* both attend to this lacuna. Feminist readings of the economy have proposed that this absence is symptomatic of the political valuing of 'men's work' in the sphere of production over and above 'women's work' in the sphere of reproduction (See the chapter by Clement-Couzner in this volume). When the economy is read 'as a woman' (as opposed to as a philosopher, or as a seemingly gender neutral economist) we are prompted to ask why is there is no need to account for those activities, largely performed by women, that sustain lives directly? while those that sustain lives indirectly, that is by being priced, bought and sold, are documented and accounted for. From the standpoint of the feminist, the identification of this difference generates a critically 'informed gaze' that troubles the settled nature of economic knowledge.

At this point in the feminist reading project there has been a proliferation of strategies for making and reshaping worlds. One has been to read the invisibility of women's work in the sphere of reproduction as essential to the smooth workings of capitalism and shaped by the 'needs' of the capitalist sphere of production (Mackenzie and Rose, 1983; Battacharya, 2017). This is a reading that that offers a powerfully encompassing narrative that foregrounds the, at times uneven, but ultimately sympathetic alignment of spheres of production and reproduction in an evolving trajectory of capitalist development. It performs what could be described as a reading for dominance—a kind of reading that is typical of critical, or radical, social science.

### **Critical reading**

Karl Marx was a proponent of what he called a 'radical' reading of history—one that pierced the veil of ignorance produced by established, mainstream knowledge and delved deep into the root causes of inequality and oppression. His reading was famously aimed at not only understanding the key relations that structured social life but advocating fundamental change. Marx's reading of capitalist society inspired subsequent critical social scientists to identify underlying structures that are not evident on the surface, to identify these powerful structures in dominance and show how they are changing and reshaping the world. This

kind of reading rests on the practice of critique whereby existing readings are shown to be inadequate, irrelevant, incoherent, but most importantly, ideological in that they support a capitalist status quo.

Critical readings are readings for dominance in that they are focused on identifying the ways that capitalist relations are ever inventively shaping social, economic, political and ecological realities. The role of the researcher/reader is to use her critical expertise and healthy scepticism to see below the surface of life as it is lived and help educate the masses as to what is 'really' happening. Reading for capitalist dominance offers a particularly persuasive way of narrating change—indeed it offers a 'strong theory' in which events are organized into seemingly coherent and even predictable trajectories (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 4, 204; Sedgwick, 2003). Since the emergence of mercantile capital and later capitalist industrial enterprise, strong theories of capitalist reorganization have dominated understandings of economic change. Processes such as the enclosure of common property, proletarianization, marketization, commodification, the accumulation of capital, globalization, technological change and the neoliberal privatization of state resources are all read as 'capitalist dynamics' and represented as strengthening or bringing capitalist relations into being (Gibson, Cahill and McKay 2010). It is tempting to align small facts with these large issues of economic import, employing what Clifford Geertz has called 'thin description'. Thin description jumps too quickly to name an action in culturally (or economically) loaded terms and runs the risk of bleaching human behaviour of complexity (Geertz 1973:7). But a strong theory of capitalist dominance endows 'thin description' with added veracity privileging evidence of identification (of new capitalist forms), extension (of existing capitalist reach), and completion (of capitalist projects).

For critical social science, it would appear that no amount of 'thick description' of details, multiplicity, counterfactual or contradictory evidence is sufficient to dislodge the powerful capitalist narrative (Geertz 1973; Gibson-Graham 2014). For example, whereas a thin description of rural change might make small changes associated with the exchange of cash for harvesting or planting labour speak to the large issue of advancing proletarianization of the countryside, a thick description might attend to the specificity of multiple transactions of allegiance, gifting, reciprocity or coercion that are bound up in the cash payment (see

chapter on reciprocal labour exchange by Gibson in this volume). But in an economy that is strongly theorized as *becoming capitalist* the appearance of cash payments is read as evidence of the increasing hold of capitalist relations of production.

The paradox of critical reading is that the desired aim of understanding the world in order to change it is undermined by the performative effect of reading for dominance. If one's reading continually exposes the dominance and inventiveness of a system of economic relations that exacerbates inequality and environmental destruction, or a form of neoliberal governance that shores up capitalist hegemony, that is what gets reinforced as 'reality'. The possibility of change evermore diminishes. We are less able to identify openings, emergence, prefiguration, possibility. In the process of apprehending the world we become less able to perform other worlds. For this to happen, our reading must shift its focus to read for difference and we must consciously work to open up possibility.

### **Deconstruction and queering—reading against dominance**

Why might we want to read for difference? And how might we do it? These questions have been partially answered by the philosopher Jacques Derrida who developed a reading practice that worked against what he called the "metaphysics of presence" (1978). Derrida was part of an intellectual movement that rejected the Eurocentrism of structural theory that posited underlying systems and relationships universally ordering all social phenomena. His 'post-structuralist' approach troubled the recurring pattern whereby meaning is produced in Western thinking traditions via a binary of positive and negative (e.g. A/not A; economic/non-economic) (Derrida, 1978; Gibson-Graham, 2000). This structure of meaning that he named *logocentrism*, endowed one term with positivity, presence and value at the expense of its 'other'. His project of reading revealed the way that certain terms were represented as dominant, stable, bounded, while their 'other' was subordinate, unstable, unbounded. In Western thought the following binarisms are associated with this uneven valuation:

**Man/Woman**  
**Mind/Body**  
**Reason/Emotion**  
**Objectivity/Subjectivity**  
**Economy/Society**

**Production/Reproduction**  
**Factory/Household**

Attempts to (re)value the subordinated or absent term in a binary hierarchy are easily undermined. This is because, as Sassure (1966) pointed out, the dominant master signifier stabilizes relations of difference defining all subordinate terms only in relation to the dominant term with no independent identity, positivity or value.

But not only is every un-bolded term positioned in relation to its bolded partner, *all* the terms in bold congeal into a strongly interlinked knowledge formation. Feminist poststructuralists picked up on Derrida's extended neologism *phallogocentrism*, to highlight how the figure of the masculine (the phallus) fixes meaning by anchoring together the disparate qualities and identities in bold (Cixous and Clément, 1975; Grosz, 1995). Power and effectivity is linked to the 'masculine' side of the binary, accommodation and diffused (ineffectual) agency attached to the 'feminine' side.

Economic thinking is similarly influenced by *phallogocentrism*. As we have seen, when reading the economy 'as a woman' the sphere of production is endowed with presence (accounted for and reported on), positivity (where growth and dynamism is located) and value (priced). By contrast the sphere of reproduction is seen as amorphous (encompassing disparate activities taking place in households, communities and government agencies), a negativity (soaking up wealth and taxes and putting a brake on growth) and unvalued (until recently, unmeasured by national statistical agencies). But we need not stop there. The economy is associated with other dominant activities that are literally valued (priced) and others that are seen as subordinate, passive, unproductive and inefficient:

**Commercially traded goods and services**/gifted, bartered, shared goods and services  
**Waged and salaried labour**/unpaid labour, cooperative labour, reciprocated labour  
**Employment**/ unemployment  
**Capitalist business**/self-employment, cooperatives, social enterprise

Drawing on the readings of poststructuralist philosophy and feminism together, J.K. Gibson-Graham coined the term *capitalocentrism* to capture the way that economic difference was disciplined and subordinated (1996: 6, 35). This neologism refers to the way that all economic activities and identities are given meaning only with reference to the master

economic signifier of Capitalism. So any economic activity that is on the right hand side of the binaries listed above is seen as “fundamentally the same as (or modelled upon) capitalism, or as being deficient or substandard imitations of capitalism; as being opposite to capitalism; as being the complement of capitalism; or as existing in capitalism’s space or orbit” (after Gibson-Graham 1996:6; see Introduction in this volume).

The recognition of capitalocentrism came from a *deconstructive* reading of economic thought and practice. Deconstruction identifies dominance and the tenuous hold by which stable presence is maintained. Identifying dominance is thus the grounds upon which a reading for difference takes place. Reading for economic difference starts by making the subordinated identities and activities more visible and allowing the possibility that they have independent agency (see for example Roelvink, 2007).

A related reading technique, also a precondition of reading for difference, is that of queering. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick pioneered the practice of de-aligning, or queering, dominant terms. Not only is the A/not A distinction hard to maintain, but all the A’s that line up together against all the not A’s are not perfectly aligned. She famously listed the dominant meanings of the heteronormative family (Sedgwick, 1993: 6).

- a surname
- a sexual dyad
- a legal unit based on state-regulated marriage
- a circuit of blood relationships
- a system of companionship and succor
- a building
- a proscenium between "private" and "public"
- an economic unit of earning and taxation
- the prime site of economic consumption
- the prime site of cultural consumption
- a mechanism to produce, care for, and acculturate children
- a mechanism for accumulating material goods over several generations
- a daily routine
- a unit in a community of worship



- a site of patriotic formation

Sedgwick showed how this dominant meaning formation was challenged by LGBTI relationships and queer families. The legalization of same sex marriage in many countries has been an outcome of struggles to de-align these terms, objects and practices and allow for different configurations of relationship and alignment (see chapter by Brown in this volume).

So reading for difference is not just about identifying the shaky grounds upon which certain valued presences are defined at the expense of others, but also about unpicking the alliances that yoke certain presences together. When it comes to the economy it is clear that commodified transactions, capitalist business and waged labour are lined up in a capitalonormative formation and that these activities are associated with certain subjectivities and practices and not others. The practice of reading for difference is to unravel capitalonormativity and to highlight the radical heterogeneity of economic identities and relationships and trajectories.

The third aspect of reading according to Althusser was to activate an ‘informed gaze’ produced from the standpoint of a new terrain that emerges from the necessity of the absences, and we might add the alignments, that deconstruction and queering has revealed. The diverse economies research agenda is conducted from such a standpoint—one that seeks out economic difference in order to explore the possibility of creating more just and sustainable economies. In the next section of this chapter I illustrate different ways of reading for economic difference in contemporary social research and historical archival research with this agenda in mind.

### **Reading for economic difference**

A first thing to note about reading for economic difference is that it requires the researcher to actively adopt an open, exploratory stance. The purpose of reading for difference is to proliferate what we have to work with in terms of economic identities, and to challenge ingrained alignments of power that shut down the potential for multiple trajectories of possibility to take flight. In a world where ‘progressive’ critical analysis takes perverse joy in

its grasp on the ever increasing power of neoliberal capitalist patriarchal globalization one must make a conscious decision to read 'against the grain'.<sup>iii</sup> A second thing to note is that a reading for difference will never achieve the explanatory power of dominant narratives. By reading against strong theory, the researcher can only ever produce a weak form of theory—one that foregrounds detail and description and tenuously performs connections. This is not to say, however, that a weak theory of economic difference might not have powerful effects—for example, unleashing desires to experiment with non-capitalist economic forms. A third thing to note is that highlighting economic difference *differentiates* the world (Latour 2000; Gibson-Graham ad Roelvink 2009:325) and this intervention is not to be easily dismissed. A world that is more differentiated is a world where more unexpected innovations and unforeseen developments might be fostered. Reading for economic difference thus becomes a first step in many new kinds of interventions and collective actions.

#### **Reading for economic difference in interview transcripts.**

Jenny Cameron's qualitative study of the gendered dynamics of households in which women were full time employees in the paid workforce employed in depth interviews with women about their household work and the division of labour in their domestic settings. Starting from a feminist standpoint, Cameron listened to her interviewees to hear some of the ways that domestic labour was positioned in their eyes. In one close examination of a single interview transcript (Cameron, 1996), she read against the dominant narrative of patriarchal household oppression, seeking out the differences in expressions of gender identity, desire and sexual power that did not necessarily 'line up' with a heteronormative and patriarchal mode of production. Her reading for difference sought out moments of instability and disruption and ventured into new theoretical terrain by, for example, describing her subject Pam (who talked of the pleasure and power she gained from being in charge of a large range of household tasks at home over the weekend) not as a domestic slave but as occupying a self-appropriating class position that allowed her to perform a preferred gender identity two days a week, while acting out a very different identity during the work week when she lived in town. Reading for difference in the alignments of sex, gender and desire made the multiple identities of Cameron's research subjects more real.<sup>iv</sup> This mode of research makes space for there to be multiple ways of performing gender equity, not just one.

#### **Reading for economic difference in place-based field studies.**

Many studies of diverse economic activity are grounded in place-based field research. A first step in the research process is to identify the range of diverse economic activities that people are engaged in. Reading the economic landscape for difference entails going beyond the official documentation of formal occupations, industries and paid employment, though these provide useful data. Using the Diverse Economies Framing as a guide, the researcher can use a range of methods to uncover the less visible economic practices that sustain livelihoods but are largely dismissed as unimportant or 'not economic'. Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes this work as moving from a "sociology of absences" whereby certain livelihood activities have been devalued by mainstream economic discourse or are said to have disappeared, to documenting "ecologies of difference" (2004:238). While Santos is mainly addressing the way that economic difference has been treated in the majority world context, there are similarities in all localities across the globe.

In the region often referred to as Monsoon Asia rapid urbanization and industrialization is changing the social, economic and ecological landscape. The forces of modernization are portrayed as all powerful, sweeping away traditional livelihoods and instating capitalist relations in all spheres of existence. A collaboration of minority world scholars working on South East Asia and majority world researchers living in South East Asia is reading against this dominant narrative by compiling keywords of still current livelihood sustaining community economic practices (Gibson et al 2018). Their inventory is producing a range of thick descriptions of practices trust, care, sharing, reciprocity, cooperation, divestiture, future orientation, collective agreement, coercion, bondage, thrift, guilt, love, community pressure, equity, self-exploitation, solidarity, distributive justice, stewardship, spiritual connection, and community led environmental and social justice (see also Gibson, Mackay and Cahill 2010). This work is highlighting the variety of unappreciated ways people and environments have of interconnecting that could be even more effectively harnessed towards resilience building (Gibson-Graham, Hill and Law 2016).

### **Reading for economic difference in policy analysis**

The introduction of a neoliberal framing of nature as a source of ecological services has, according to many researchers, enrolled farmers as unwitting agents of neoliberal policy, portraying them as subjects driven by economic incentives. Sophie Wynne-Jones (2014) has explored reading for difference in this contested terrain. Her research in rural Wales

revealed the many ways that farmers disrupt the neoliberal agenda by, for example, regarding the land as much more than a source of commodities, taking a nuanced view of market policy that undermines their role as providers of food security, working cooperatively and working for intergenerational, not short-term, returns. In this work Wynne-Jones has, as did Cameron, listened to the detail, given the disruptive elements of her findings equal value as those that 'lined up' with dominant readings. What is produced is a counter to the reading that privileges the depoliticized farmer subject. This research contributes to opening up a lively debate about the still unsettled politics of land management in which farmers in their multiple roles can have a voice. <sup>v</sup>

## Conclusion

By accepting that how we represent the world contributes to *enacting* that world we collapse the distinction between epistemology and ontology. Reading for economic difference is a thinking practice, a research method *and* an intervention in making worlds. It is a practice that needs careful cultivation within a scholarly environment in which strong theory is preferred. But the rewards of reading for economic difference are many. The nature of economic identity and dynamics of change become an open-ended empirical question, not a structural imperative. This allows for a different imaginary in which economic possibility proliferates and situates the researcher in a responsible position with respect to what stories she tells.

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<sup>i</sup> Althusser was critical of realist and empiricist epistemologies that conceived of knowledge as a reflection of the essence of the real object, an essence that predates the process of knowledge making (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 24-25, 35).

<sup>ii</sup> Not that this process of identification is not open ended but is specifically directed and constrained by what has gone before. As Althusser puts it "In the development of a theory, the invisible of a visible field is not generally *anything whatever* outside and foreign to the visible defined by that field. The invisible is defined by the visible as *its* invisible, *its* forbidden vision" (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 27).

<sup>iii</sup> With thanks to Walter Benjamin (1940) who famously wrote that the task of the historical materialist was to "brush history against the grain".

<sup>iv</sup> Another reading of interview transcripts that proliferates economic difference is offered in the work of Gibson-Graham, Cameron, Healy and McNeill (2019) on manufacturing companies in Australia. In this paper the authors read against the dominant narrative of profit maximizing capitalist corporations to listen for moments where commitments to economic justice and environmental sustainability are privileged as shapers of the business trajectory.

<sup>v</sup> Wynne-Jones' active refusal to accept the neoliberal capture narrative is akin to that of Ed Harris' readings of the 100 mile diet (2009). In this paper Harris juxtaposes a reading for dominance and a reading for difference of this One reading lines this form of local food activism.