

Postcapitalism

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Introduction

Development and capitalism are deeply intertwined. Mainstream development thinking is founded on the idea that linear models of progress describe how societies develop, and that classifications of nations into ‘developed’, ‘developing’ and ‘under-developed’ are simply reflections of empirical reality. Capitalist core regions, industries and organisations are similarly treated as the proverbial gold standard for whatever ‘development’ stands for: the pathway towards prosperity has been seen to rest with a capitalist articulation of productivity and efficiency, with a focus on mobilising resources and attaining economic growth by adhering strictly to market forces. The capitalist model has often been assumed to be universal, ubiquitous, and inevitable.

‘Postcapitalism’ signals an opportunity to reconsider the taken-for-granted dominance of capitalism and its linear indicators of development. Although postcapitalism has been hailed as a transformative convergence of thinkers and movements of alternatives to capitalism (see Chatterton & Pusey 2020), it is important to distinguish between two senses of the term. Firstly, in the use of some thinkers (e.g., Mason 2015), the ‘post’ in postcapitalism has a primarily temporal meaning: it denotes a global system, as extensive as capitalism is, that is coming to replace older forms of capitalist organisation, either gradually or suddenly. As the social and environmental harms and inequities of capitalism become more acute, it is argued that a new system is coming in being. In this view, emergent postcapitalism is being driven by the knowledge economy and increasingly networked and technologically connected capitalist practices. Postcapitalism in this sense proposes a nascent ‘ism’ that is set to replace ‘capitalism’ with a more equitable and inclusive, technologically driven economic system.

Secondly, there is a contrasting use of ‘postcapitalist politics’ that signals not another future system but a heterogeneous reality that is already present in the here-and-now, and in fact has

been with us all along. This kind of 'post' demands not another 'ism', instead questioning the starting point of many postcapitalist visions: the idea that there is a singular, primordial and globally extensive capitalism. It invites us to examine how our economies and livelihoods have always already been built on a range of more-than-capitalist practices – and what kind of rethinking of 'development' such a turn might yield.

This second body of postcapitalist scholarship centers on *diverse economies*. It draws on the work of feminist economic theorist J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006; Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020), alongside postcolonial and poststructural thought and the place-based knowledges of communities around the world. It offers recognition that there are many diverse economic practices present in the world, that are dismissed and rendered invisible by what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2016) calls 'epistemicide', the denial of ways of knowing being and doing that do not conform with 'capitalism' and 'development'. This does not deny that capitalist practices, relations and organisations exist, but rather that these are seen to reside in a much wider and more heterogeneous economic landscape and are themselves crisscrossed and compromised by more-than-capitalist economies.

What is crucial to this vision of postcapitalist politics is to activate a language of economy that helps keep that multiplicity and diversity visible, and that resists economic explanations that smother rather than amplify our everyday economic agency. The idea of postcapitalist politics calls for us to bring diverse economies to the fore – why valorise capitalist practices that: subjugate people to unsatisfying or dangerous jobs; render financial systems prone to collapse due to the strain of rising debt levels or loss of 'investor confidence'; and, precipitate systems of resource extraction and usage that threaten global environmental catastrophe? Individuals and groups are already enacting economies that are more-than and other-than capitalist. This means that there are other, and often better, starting points for collective action towards liveable futures than is provided by capitalist relations of economy. A postcapitalist politics is about recognising these and finding ways to amplify them.

1 Postcapitalism/Capitalocentrism)

The main difference between the two types of postcapitalist visions introduced above is the degree to which they are embedded within, or critical of, a *capitalocentric* view of economy. Capitalocentrism means a tip-of-the-iceberg approach to economy [refer to Fig 1.], where most livelihood practices are omitted from view and a scarce set of capitalist processes dominate discourses concerning 'the economy' (Gibson-Graham 1996). Capitalist enterprises, wage labour, private investments, monetary exchange, and private property summon all the attention, while a vastly more expansive and heterogeneous set of livelihood practices –

many ways in which people and their more-than-human communities thrive, whether, for example, through indigenous economic practices that have existed for thousands of years, or newly emerging forms of social entrepreneurship and collective organisation. The capitalocentric perspective sidelines long-standing global practices of mutual aid and labour sharing (Hosseini 2019), creating and caring for commons (Waliuzzaman 2020), and Indigenous economic practices that value collective care and the obligations people owe to our more-than-human earth kin (Bargh 2020, Yates 2021).

When monetary market exchange or private ownership of land are treated as the necessary preconditions of economic development, a narrow view of actually existing economic relations gets to drive 'development' and set the parameters for who it is for and who has a say in it. Thus, economic representations have *performative* effects on the real world (see Gibson-Graham 2006). Capitalocentric representations, including many systemic accounts of *postcapitalism*, have particular homogenising and exclusionary performative effects. They tell stories about a capitalist 'global economy', its machinic features and its teleological stages of development, all the while missing the biases and partiality inherent in such grand visions. This has consequences. By disavowing actually-existing diverse livelihoods, capitalocentrism portrays a 'mono-economy' whose control rooms – the privileged spaces of board rooms and parliamentary committees – are reserved for a selected few. This makes it harder to recognise the transformative agency and potential of those who are excluded from such privileged sites of power.

When the term 'postcapitalism' is used to label a nascent future *after* capitalism, in the first sense outlined in the Introduction, it often repeats and performs capitalocentric biases. The emphasis continues to be placed on a narrow set of perspectives, with the assumption that they are universally relevant and applicable (see Alhojärvi 2021). Most of the currently popular literature on postcapitalism is produced in the minority world and is often heavily invested in the promises of information technologies (Mason 2015) and/or a state-centric framework of politics (Srnicek & Williams 2015). In its most blunt Anglo-Eurocentric forms, the literature reinforces the idea that "the forces that are creating post-capitalist society and post-capitalist polity originate in the developed world" (Drucker 1993, 13). In contrast, the postcapitalist politics of diverse economies aims to decentre such Anglo-Eurocentric assumptions.

2 Postcapitalism vs. Postcapitalist politics

The scholar-activists working within the broad field of diverse and community economies put forth a very different version of postcapitalist politics (Gibson-Graham 2006). Instead of proposing another 'ism' to surpass *capitalism*, practitioners of community economies suggest

re-reading our very *starting point* anew, in view of the heterogeneity that gets sidelined from capitalocentrism. It is not about how we need alternatives to capitalism, but rather that we have never been solely (or primarily) capitalist in the first place. This argument is based on scholarship that reads economies for heterogeneity. One empirical strategy in this regard entails mapping out, in a place-based context:

- different means of transaction including free market capitalism, alternative market transactions (fair trade, informal trade and barter) and non-market transactions (including household distribution, gifts, state transfers, hunter-gathering and poaching or theft);
- different kinds of labour include waged labour, alternatively paid (including work in a cooperative, reciprocal labour systems and subsistence work), and unpaid labour (including housework, care for others and volunteer work); and,
- different kinds of enterprise including capitalist, alternative capitalist (including social enterprise, or green companies) or non-capitalist (for instance communal enterprises).

This is a strategy to document and develop the language of diverse economies that uncovers the vast range of underwater economic practices that are otherwise hidden by an iceberg model of development.

Drawing on diverse actually-existing more-than-capitalist practices globally, this body of literature enacts a postcapitalist politics by employing a range of strategies for thinking through the ethical implications of different practices. Community economies literature asks: what are the diverse means by which human communities seek to survive and thrive? Who and what are involved in those diverse economics practices? Who suffers and who benefits? And, perhaps most importantly, which economic practices enable us to survive well along with our more-than-human planetary companions?

Learning *how to survive well together* thus become a practice of postcapitalist politics, and a goal that can direct development (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy 2013). Such learning requires re-centering marginalised economic practices, such as Indigenous economies which give prominence to the interdependence of human communities and communities of Earth-kin (Waitoa and Dombroski, 2020); or reproductive economies, which foreground the foundational importance of care work in what is traditionally considered 'women's work' in the home and garden.

3 Postcapitalist practices

Postcapitalist practice is about re-centering marginalised economic practices and demonstrating their ongoing contribution, and future potential to be the foundation for communities to survive well together. One of the ways in which scholars contribute to this is by pursuing Action Research projects that engage participants in identifying and experimenting with more-than-capitalist economic practices, collaborating on building future economies that will enable communities to survive well (thrive) together. One approach begins with strengths-based community engagements, using tools of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD). ABCD begins with mapping out a community's existing assets, whether "tangible (such as land and physical buildings) or intangible (such as people's knowledge, interests and skills)" (Mathie, Cameron & Gibson 2017, p. 54), underscoring that people and places possess a plurality of assets and strengths that help nurture lives and contribute to individual and collective wellbeing. Among these local wealth and capacities are indigenous and women's knowledge, longstanding adaptive strategies to environmental hazards, mutual support systems, benefits sharing practices, community-based conflict resolution, and ecologically sensitive resource cultivation and management practices. Recognising the strengths and expertise that people already hold displaces the teleological assumptions of development discourses that seek to describe linear models of progress or place capitalism as inevitable.

In one action research in the Philippines, for example, the Community Economies Collective and Gibson (2009) explored the possibilities of building local enterprises based on the existing capabilities of residents and local resources in place, and whether businesses developed from them can directly improve the wellbeing of people and the environment. Among the featured social enterprises is Laca ginger enterprise that was organised by women producing powdered tea from ginger which is abundant in the rural areas of Jagna, Bohol. The women sell their products to stores in the municipality and maintain a *suki* system (vendor-customer relation) based on trust and loyalty. The women have set aside ten percent of the business income for their credit system which members can borrow with easy repayment and without interest as a way of distributing surplus that enriches social health. Members practice *hungos* or reciprocal labour which can be performed by sending another family member to fulfill work commitments in place of a worker who has gotten ill that day and routinely bring in food contributions for the shared lunch that help to build solidarity in the cooperative. They also ensure that they grow the ginger sustainably so that the quality of their tea and the viability of their enterprise will not be compromised in the long run. A capitalocentric account of these enterprises focuses on their supposed inferiority due to being local, small scale, and low capital-intensive enterprises. In contrast, the Community Economies Collective highlights the performative effect of seeing

these economic subjects and the places they are from as full of already existing potentials that can be further strengthened in light of local contexts and contingency.

Honouring diverse ways of knowing, being and doing, and making visible the more-than-capitalist wisdoms of local communities is another example of postcapitalist political practice, offering recognition that different economic practices in particular places have developed based on their own logic and contingency. In an experimental research, for example, a group of community economies researchers collaborated to create a “radically different ‘map’ of Monsoon Asia’s economic geography” using keywords (Gibson et al., 2018). This new cartography has made present an array of culturally inflected and historically situated economic practices that have been set into motion by local ethics of caring for commons, reciprocal labour, risk and wealth distribution and ecological knowledge. For instance, the keyword *sống chung với lũ* from Vietnam considers the indigenous knowledge of living with flood in the Mekong Delta. It takes into account how local people occupy a subject position that is open and adaptive to the yearly overflows of the river using multiple livelihood strategies. This ethic of adaptation greatly contrasts with infrastructural flood control solutions commonly pursued by modernist state technocrats (Gibson et al., 2018). Hence, place-based approaches to sustaining people’s lives require utmost sensitivity to the rhythms and movements of the more-than-human world that constitutes diverse livelihood-making in place.

Summary

In this entry we identify two distinct uses of the term postcapitalism. The first is the spatially and temporally totalizing idea of a nascent postcapitalism that assumes that capitalism abounds, and sees on the horizon a different economic future in which technology-driven change is forcing the emergence of a new economic system. The second draws on diverse economies thinking to propose that there are already economies in place that function differently to capitalism, but have been sidelined or altogether ignored by capitalocentric visions of development. Rather than looking for system change in the form of postcapitalism, this body of work identifies the heterogeneous practices in place here and now that are more-than and other-than capitalist. This process of identification enacts a postcapitalist politics and entails a shift in focus from noun (ism) to verbs, words for actions describing existing and potential, place-based, ecologically attuned processes of economic development.

While a postcapitalist politics based on diverse economies aims to rethink economies and development in radically transformed and transformative ways, it remains necessary to keep assessing these transformations critically. For instance, the diverse economies framework largely emanates from the still largely white academic settings in the minority world; its lessons and appreciations of ‘the local’ are mediated in ‘Global English’ that is often unwillfully

detrimental to linguistic-cultural diversity; and its language of diverse economies always risks flattening existing collective and Indigenous vocabularies of economic interdependence. Rather than a being an unproblematic exemplary of non-hierarchical praxis, postcapitalist politics presents an invitation to critically study and negotiate all the problematic heritages we still embody and struggle with. It is a call for critical postcapitalist *studies* as much as it is for an emancipatory politics (Alhojärvi 2021). The bad news is that, in a world riven with all-too-acute forms of oppression and violence, the problems are everywhere. The good news is that they are everywhere just to be transformatively negotiated, together.

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