

# Rethinking the economy with thick description and weak theory

J.K. Gibson-Graham

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## Abstract

In this paper I rehearse the thinking steps J.K. Gibson-Graham developed in order to theorize diverse economies and reveal a landscape of economic difference. Reading with and against Geertz's 1973 essay, I discuss how 'thick description' of diverse economic practices can be combined with weak theory to produce a performative rethinking of economy centred on the well-being of people and the planet. I discuss the difficulties of resisting the influence of 'strong theory'—that is, powerful discourses that organize events into understandable and seemingly predictable trajectories. I outline the diverse economy, a reframing that allows for a much wider range of social relations to be seen to bear on economic practices including, to name just some, trust, care, sharing, reciprocity, cooperation, coercion, bondage, thrift, guilt, love, equity, self-exploitation, solidarity, distributive justice, stewardship, spiritual connection, environmental and social justice. In the complexly overdetermined field of a diverse economy we are invited to trace multiple dynamics at play. It is in the apprehension of these diverse determinations that ethnographic thick description comes into its own and leads the way towards rethinking the economy. For ethnographers today, no task is more important than to make small facts speak to large concerns, to make the ethical acts ethnography describes into a performative ontology of economy, and the threads of hope that emerge into stories of everyday revolution.

223 words



Small facts speak to large issues, winks to epistemology, or sheep raids  
to revolution, because they are made to. (Clifford Geertz 1973:23)

Calls to rethink economy as a central organizing cultural frame within contemporary society have increased in number and force in recent years. From the demands of the Occupy Movement to the concerns of the climate science community, there is a groundswell of feeling that our economic theories, management practices and projection tools are insufficient to the task at hand. While the global economy shudders under the weight of financial crises and climate uncertainty, economic orthodoxy holds to the view that economies can grow their way out of danger. But economic growth, with its uneven geography and voracious appetite for earth's resources, is undermining the likelihood of a peaceful and sustainable future. On the ground as people go about their day to day lives in places around the world there is a questioning of mainstream economic growth as the panacea for all social and environmental ills. As a discipline with its ear to the ground, Anthropology is well placed to advance the project of rethinking the economy today.

The question of how to rethink economic identity and economic dynamics is one that J.K. Gibson-Graham has spent many years considering (1996; 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2007; 2008). A vast wealth of economic anthropological studies and the outstanding scholarship of anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss, Karl Polanyi, Stephen Gudeman and Arturo Escobar among others have fuelled our rethinking project. In turn, many anthropologists have found our rethinking of diverse economies useful (see for example, Yang, 2000; Fisher, 2013; Palmer, 2011; Callon 2007).<sup>1</sup> In this short paper I would like to rehearse the thinking steps involved in reading the landscape for economic difference and theorizing diverse economies. As indicated in the statement above from Geertz's seminal essay "Thick description: toward an interpretive theory

of culture” there is a ‘making’ involved in sorting out structures of signification. Reading with and against Geertz’s 1973 essay, I discuss how ‘thick description’ of diverse economic practices can be combined with a weak theory of ‘large issues’, ‘epistemology’ and ‘revolution’ to produce a performative rethinking of economy centred on the well-being of people and the planet.

### **Small facts and large issues**

Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations and tendentious commentaries, but not written in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour. (Clifford Geertz 1973:10)

The anthropological record recognizes a rich pallet of economic practices and everyday interactions associated with making a living, surviving, getting by, getting ahead, gaining respect, building a future, maintaining habitats and juggling different regimes of value. This is a chaotic landscape of complexity in which available theory has little to say to empirical experience (Narotsky 2012). It is here that thick description steps in as a method that directs interpretive attention not only to material practices but to the nuances, affects, multiple codes of meaning, silences, jokes, parodies and so on that accompany them. While theory might have little to say to such complexity, it is never absent, nor can it be by-passed. The impossible task of documentation and sorting involved in thick description can only ever be refracted through a pre-existing frame of meaning (Geertz 1973:27).

Many ethnographic studies are focused on situations in which social relations are changing. Whether it is the impact of colonialism, imperialism, globalization or post-socialism, the context of ethnographic study is rarely immune to some kind of influential economic force. And in

‘reading’ change, it is difficult to resist the influence of ‘strong theory’—that is, powerful discourses that organize events into understandable and seemingly predictable trajectories. Since the emergence of mercantile capital and later capitalist industrial enterprise, strong capitalocentric theories of economic reorganization have dominated understandings of economic change. Capitalocentrism refers to the positioning of all economic identities with reference to capitalism as “fundamentally the same as (or modelled upon) capitalism, or as being deficient or substandard imitations; as being opposite to capitalism; as being the complement of capitalism; as existing in capitalism’s space or orbit” (Gibson-Graham 1996:6). Capitalocentric dynamics are those that are seen to be strengthening or bringing capitalist relations into being. Such dynamics include the enclosure of common property, proletarianization, marketization, commodification, the accumulation of capital and neoliberal privatization of state resources (Gibson, Cahill and McKay 2010). It is tempting to align small facts with these large issues of economic import.

An example that illustrates the choices involved in ethnographic interpretation is the way that the introduction of cash into many rural communities in the Philippines has been ‘read’ as evidence of the commodification of labour—that is, the separation of workers from access to land as a means of production and family survival, and the resort to selling their labour power as a commodity. ‘Thin description’ according to Geertz (1973:7) jumps too quickly to name an action (closing the eye, for example) in culturally loaded terms (as a wink) and runs the risk of bleaching human behaviour of complexity. Thin descriptions of rural change might read the cash remuneration of workers for their harvesting or planting labour by a land owner as evidence of the advancing proletarianization of the countryside. In contrast, thick description might resist the gravitational pull towards strong theories of economic behaviour and uni-directional change.

Frank Hertz (1998) provides a thick description in his study of a poor rural municipality in Central Luzon. In this community farm labour gangs, the *kabesilya*, are now paid cash to plant

and harvest rice fields. This monetized transaction replaces the practice of non-monetized reciprocal labour exchange which farming families used to engage in to achieve intensive agricultural tasks at planting and harvesting time. Hirtz describes how daily wage rates are closely negotiated and farmers form a coalition to “deal with the use and selection of free labour”, but warns against reading this in terms of proletarianization and a capitalist transformation of the countryside (260). Behind the transactional encounter between land owner and labourer lies complex relationships of kin and commitments of care that position the cash payment not as a coldly rational payment for services rendered to those who have nothing but their labour power to sell, but as a recognition of a “quasi-right to the land” held by unmarried women relatives in the extended family of the formal land owner. The ‘thin’ reading that positions the *kabesilya* as *wage* labour is what informs government attempts at land redistribution in the area—and the ‘thick’ reading explains why claims to land have been few and far between.

This is a case in which the interpretation of economic identity is up for question. Whether we read the worker as a ‘wage labourer’ or a ‘rural worker who is supported by familial ties that take the form of payment for work’ is not just academic hair splitting. It is important when it comes to representing economic dynamics and how change occurs (Gibson et al. 2010). A thin description of rural change makes 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 attends to multiple transactions that are bound up in the cash payment. In an economy that is strongly theorized as *becoming capitalist* the appearance of cash payments is evidence of the increasing hold of capitalist relations of production. In a *diverse economy* in which dynamics of change are weakly theorized, the appearance of cash in extended family strategies of care for unmarried women is evidence of a still intact ethic of a non-capitalist economy. It can be seen as evidence also of the complex ways in which ‘private’ property is

accessed and benefited from by a collective of family members and of how people find ways of investing in each other's futures.

J.K. Gibson-Graham's project of rethinking economy advocates a move away from 'strong theory' with its "embracing reach" and "reduced, clarified field of meaning" (2006b:4) towards 'weak theory' which, though "little more than description" (2006b:6), powerfully attends to nuance, diversity and overdetermined interaction. Weak theory does not elaborate and confirm what we already know, it observes, interprets and yields to emerging knowledge. To rethink the economy using thick description and weak theory is to carefully reconsider the 'large issues' that 'small facts' are made to speak to. It is not to ignore what Geertz refers to as the "hard surfaces of life—...the political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere contained—and the biological and physical necessities on which those surfaces rest" (1973:30). But it is to train our analysis on such "such realities and such necessities" so that it widens the field of economic 'realities' and multiplies the dynamics at play in a complexly overdetermined field. To do so is to begin to rethink the economy as we have known it.

### **From epistemology to a performative ontology**

So there are three characteristics of ethnographic description: it is **interpretive**; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to **rescue** the "said" of such discourse from its perishing occasions and **fix** it in perusable terms. The *kula* is gone or altered; but, for better or worse, *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* remains. But there is, in addition, a fourth characteristic of such description, at least as I practice it: it is **microscopic**. (Clifford Geertz 1973:20-21 bold emphasis added)

Geertz' definition of ethnographic description stands out for its ontological stance. While the interpretive and microscopic aspects of ethnography are still crucial to thick description, the 'rescuing' and 'fixing' functions have come under examination. Geertz presents ethnography as a practice of preserving meaning, whereas now we might more readily highlight its world-making contribution, that is, its 'performative' effect (Callon 2007; Law 2004; Law and Urry 2004; Mitchell 2005). Take for example, the no nonsense confidence with which the *kula* becomes, in the quote above, a "said" that is gone or altered. This statement reveals a conception of unidirectional change that performs this very absence and sits uncomfortably with contemporary understandings of temporality. From the perspective of rethinking the economy, this non-market exchange practice is too hastily relegated to a ghostly trace, thankfully preserved for posterity in a 1922 text.

When conducted with some self-consciousness of its performative effects, ethnographic thick description can surely offer a way forward for rethinking the economy outside of a capitalocentric frame. Practicing weak theory in relation to thick description involves conscious engagement in ethico-political moments of transformation when decisions to name and connect are made on an undecidable terrain. (Gibson-Graham 2006b:71-72). Interpretive skill and a microscopic gaze can, for example, be turned to the project of appreciating the diversity of economic practices and 'rescuing' them from discursive annihilation by mainstream economic thought. Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes this work as moving from a "sociology of absences" to documenting "ecologies of difference" (2004:238). These practices might then be 'fixed', not in texts or museum exhibits where they remain frozen in time-space, but in processes of contemporary world-making. This is not to romanticize 'traditional practices' but to investigate and name the interdependence they enact and thus to expand a workable economic vocabulary. In Gibson-Graham's project of rethinking economy the epistemological and the

performative ontological become one. What motivates this thinking practice is commitment to an open future.

When the large issues to which small facts are made to speak are mostly those of the penetration of market forces or capitalist relations into all aspects of daily life, a conception of possibility is constrained. Certainly non-capitalist economic imaginaries are curtailed. Gibson-Graham's critique of capitalocentric theory offers as a way out of this confinement (1996). By theorizing a diverse economy in which the dynamics of change are an open empirical question, not a structural imperative, we propose a framing which allows for a different imaginary in which economic possibility proliferates. By accepting that how we represent the world contributes to *enacting* that world we collapse the distinction between epistemology and ontology (Gibson-Graham, 2008).

As a way of rethinking the economy from the ground up the diverse economy framing marshals heterogeneous economic practices. Rather than selecting certain practices, instating them as the 'real' economy and theorizing interactions between these selected practices as economic 'drivers' of change, this strategy adopts an ecumenical approach that gathers all practices to do with material survival onto one conceptual plane. Five types of economic practice are distinguished—enterprise, labour, property, transaction and finance. In Figure 1 these are arranged into columns, at the top of which is a broadly named practice (wage labour, capitalist enterprise, formal market transactions, private property and mainstream finance) that is recognized and privileged by mainstream economic theory and unquestionably included in representations of the economy.<sup>2</sup> Below are economic practices that are largely ignored by mainstream economic thinking and rarely incorporated in representations (such as the National Accounts and calculations of Gross Domestic Product) of what constitutes a functioning economy.

At the bottom of each column are clustered those practices that feminist scholars, economic anthropologists, economic sociologists and those who study the informal sector, 'third' world and the social economy recognize as producing goods, services, values and care that are crucial contributors to material well-being. Between the 'mainstream' and its 'other' are practices that might incorporate aspects of 'mainstream' practices but that operate according to distinctively alternative, non-market-oriented ethics. By arranging practices in this framing so as to highlight their radical heterogeneity, we attempt to undo the privileging of certain activities as more important to and directive of the economy while others are undervalued and relegated to dependency. This is both a deconstruction and a queering of the identity of the economy (Gibson-Graham 1996).

But what of the dynamic interrelationships between these practices, that is, what of the question of economic determination? Mainstream economic discourse theorizes strong connections between certain practices—for example, wage levels and capitalist profits, currency values and international trade, or bank interest rates and home ownership—while ignoring others. What's more it draws on a select set of motivations said to animate economic change—such protean forces as individual self-interest, competition, efficiency, freedom, innovative entrepreneurship, exploitation and the pursuit of private gain. In contrast, a weak theory of diverse economies opens to these and a myriad of other motivating forces that are not only confined to so-called non-mainstream practices. A much wider range of social relations bear on economic practices including, to name just some, 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, environmental and social justice. It is in the apprehension of these multiple determinations that ethnographic thick description comes into its own and leads the way towards rethinking the economy.

Ethnography can give us insight into how people enact economies by piecing together diverse labour practices—salaried labour, for example, with household caring work, with services provided under the table, with reciprocated work in a child care network, with selling products on the side, with self-provisioning work in the garden and so on. The difference between barely surviving and living well can be traced back to the rates and kind of remuneration obtained for labour and the range of diverse labour practices that make up an individual's livelihood “portfolio” (Rigg, 2005:179). Ethnography can delve into how individuals or enterprises distinguish between what is needed for survival now and what is surplus to be saved and invested for use in the future, or distributed to those who have claims on this surplus, or sequestered to keep it out of circulation or away from claims on it—whether in hidden bank accounts or durable household furniture—or expended in luxuries or expansive festivity.

Ethnography can describe the different regimes of value that people juggle and move into an out of throughout their daily life and over the life course. How, for example, they share and reciprocate household flows of goods and services with family and community members, while transacting other goods and services in the market via cash exchanges with strangers, while negotiating access, use and care of collectively owned property or open access natural resources, while borrowing money from family or loan sharks to make ends meet. Ethnography can trace how people view temporality and make provision for their own or others' futures—deploying various kinds of savings practices, investing in social relations or material goods, borrowing and lending to secure intergenerational security. Or, in the case of actors in the financial industry or the high value black market, it can describe the process of hedging bets, risking other people's lives, illegally obtaining advantage, or bluffing to create investment environments.

A weak theory of diverse economies does not assume there is any one direction for economic change, but is alert to the ways in which crisis and stability is experienced differentially across the

heterogeneous economic practices that constitute an ‘economy’. Importantly, the ethnographer has some choice as to what threads of interpretation to pull on in the making of a story about ‘large issues’. This involves a political choice to enact a revolution of sorts, one that makes faint glimmers of hope into prefigurative elements of a becoming economy.

### **Making revolution by pulling threads of hope through ongoing crises**

the essential task of theory building ... is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them. ... theory is used—to ferret out the unapparent import of things. (Clifford Geertz 1973:26)

Crisis today is an everyday event, the daily bread for our news media and a focus of much academic analysis. Whether it is the financial/refugee/climate/obesity/ecological/waste/housing/or species extinction crisis, to name just some, it seems that crisis is the new norm. We are wired up to expect our next serving. But curiously, we also expect to survive crisis. From wherever it springs, hope fosters a belief that there is a future and that there are pathways toward it. While economists and governments continue to mouth the growth is good pathway, on the ground people are experimenting with other ways forward. The revolutionary contribution of thick description and weak theory is to help make these otherwise hidden pathways apparent.

The ethnographies collected in this special edition all illustrate the multi-directional and interrelated dynamics of change in diverse economies. While they do not ignore recurrent experiences of constraint, oppression and violence, they help us to glimpse possibilities and hopeful strategies for reshaping economies in revolutionary ways. It is worth looking at just a few examples. Karen Brodtkin (2012) shows how a crisis of survival for blue collar working families in Los Angeles engendered an alliance with Latino neighbourhood activists and forged a

pathway towards improved standards of living both in terms of wage remuneration and benefits for workers and a cleaned up environment for port-side residents. In the face of deregulation of the trucking industry and wins for capitalist corporations, volunteer community activists and sole contractors joined together to put care for people and the planet on the economic radar.

Shenjing He (2012) relates a story in which the crisis of enclosure threatened to engulf a poor rural community in a part of China where urbanization is a rampant force. The resistance mounted by poor farmers in Wukan to privatization of land by the Chinese state was supported by young, urban, computer savvy, entrepreneurs. Farmers were able to claim rights to their communally held land and stop its enclosure. This unlikely alliance of farmers and young business people reinvigorated and revalued modes of clan governing that have exercised responsibility for the land on which they have lived for generations. Both these stories show people coming out of disparate contexts, with different values at stake, and unique horizons of expectation, combining to forge an economy of ethical interdependence, or what Gibson-Graham call a 'community economy' (2006b).<sup>3</sup>

Stef Jansen's (2012) ethnography of families in Bosnia and Herzegovnia discusses yearnings for a 'normal' future shaped by the lives people once knew under state socialism. The memory of economic security gained from regular work in self-managed enterprises is hard to forget, yet the prosperity once enjoyed courtesy of state allocations of surplus into housing, schooling, healthcare and transport infrastructure lies in an unattainable past. The now 'diversified' economy offers only a few precarious positions as waged workers in capitalist firms, hand to mouth self-employment, or alternatively paid and unpaid work in the neighbourhood where a variety of non-market transactions are pursued to make ends meet. As people face the certainty that the road into Europe is one in which collective service provision and worker managed enterprises play no part, their sense of moving forward is stalled. War has wrought destruction not only of lives and buildings but of an imaginary of a different, more equitable, economy, and

yet the yearnings remain. Might they be a fuel for economic experimentation if supported by a different discourse of a rethought economy?

Rethinking the economy is a revolutionary task. It's not just a scientific revolution in thinking in the Kuhnian sense, but the enactment of revolution in a performative sense. To rethink the economy as a site of ethical interdependence is to abandon the structural imperatives and market machinations of capitalocentric discourses of economy. All over the world people are taking back the economy as a site of politics and negotiation every day. Some ways in which they are taking back work, business, markets, property and finance for people and the planet are collectively organized (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy 2013). It is ethnographic thick description and weak theory that have helped us to imagine the becoming of community economies motivated by concerns for

- surviving together well and equitably
- distributing surplus to enrich social and environmental health
- encountering others in ways that supports their wellbeing as well as ours
- maintaining, replenishing and growing our natural and cultural commons
- investing our wealth so that future generations can live well, and
- consuming sustainably.

For ethnographers today, no task is more important than to make small facts speak to these large concerns, to make the ethical acts ethnography describes into a performative ontology of economy and the threads of hope that emerge into stories of everyday revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> This was evident, for example, at the 2011 American Anthropology Association Meetings Session organized by Josh Fisher on “Capitalism, Feminism and the Politics of the Possible: Engaged Research in Honour of J.K. Gibson-Graham”.

<sup>2</sup> When discussing the economy with community members we have often used the image of an ice-berg economy that shows these ‘real economy’ practices on the tip of ice above the water line, and the vast range of other practices in which people are engaged in to make a living on that part of the ice-berg below the water line.

<sup>3</sup> See also [www.communityeconomies.org](http://www.communityeconomies.org)

## **Figure Captions**

### **Figure 1 A Diverse Economy**