

**Symposium in Memory of Julie Graham:**  
**Postcapitalist Encounters with Class and Community**

edited by Esra Erdem

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**Symposium in Memory of Julie Graham:  
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**Introduction**

Esra Erdem

esra.erdem@ash-berlin.eu

**Abstract:**

The text introduces the contributions to Part I of the symposium, which we publish in memory of Julie Graham, eminent Marxist-feminist geographer and long-time member of our *Rethinking Marxism* collective.

Focusing particularly on the seminal contributions to poststructuralist Marxism made by Graham and her colleague Katherine Gibson (writing together under the pen-name Gibson-Graham), it shows how their work continues to inspire current scholarship in distinct ways. Gibson-Graham's critique of 'capitalocentrism' in leftist theory and politics; their process-oriented, interdisciplinary conception of economic diversity; and their ethical approach to connecting community and economy are identified as theoretical nodal points that inform all four symposium articles included in this issue.

**Keywords:** J.K. Gibson-Graham, community economy, diverse economy, poststructuralist Marxism

With this symposium we wish to commemorate Marxist-feminist geographer Julie Graham, whose untimely death in April 2010 remains a huge loss for *Rethinking Marxism*. Julie was intimately involved in the collective production of this journal, serving on the editorial and advisory boards, working in the capacity of managing editor, participating in the organization of conferences, and contributing numerous articles to the pages of *Rethinking Marxism*, several of which have acquired the status of seminal texts in poststructuralist Marxist theory today.

Julie's intellectual legacy cannot be considered independently of the ground-breaking work that she and Katherine Gibson produced together under the pen-name J. K. Gibson-Graham. In an academic world where competitive pressures too often isolate knowledge producers, Gibson-Graham's long-time research partnership serves as commendable testimony to the theoretical and affective productivity of collective academic labor. At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where Julie was based academically, this collaboration extended to conversations with Marxist economists Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, whose Althusserian inspired re-reading of Marx (Resnick and Wolff 1987) was to prove a significant influence on Gibson-Graham's work. Thus from the late 1980s onwards, UMass emerged as a theoretical hub for leftist academics and several cohorts of graduate students who shared an interest in taking Marxism in radically new theoretical directions. The common endeavor of thinking through the diversity of class constellations and developing a language of economic difference predicated upon the multiplicity and contingency of class specific sites and subject positions was a crucial precursor to the critique of 'capitalocentrism' which Gibson-Graham were to articulate so eloquently in their book *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)* (Gibson-Graham 1996). Just a few years later, the memorable volumes *Class and Its Others* (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2000) and *Re/Presenting Class: Essays in Postmodern*

*Marxism* (2001) brought together the writings of many scholars inspired by this new Marxian class theory. As the much-acclaimed symposium on "Subjects of Economy" (vol. 18 (2) of this journal), co-edited by Julie Graham and Jack Amariglio, exemplifies, Julie's contributions to bringing to life this collectivity have also produced highly tangible effects for *Rethinking Marxism*. Through her writings as well as in her mentoring and editorial capacities, Julie played a pivotal role in opening the journal to new theoretical explorations and to audiences interested in exploring class in conjunction with gender, sexuality, psychoanalysis, ecology, and community activism. Ongoing research collaborations between *Rethinking Marxism* and the Community Economies Research Network (CERN), initiated by Gibson-Graham, exemplify the kind of synergy that Julie brought to the journal group.<sup>1</sup>

With this symposium we wish to both pay tribute to this rich scholarly legacy and to illustrate how it continues to inform current research practices. Aware of the fact that any single collection of texts such as this symposium can hardly be adequate to convey the theoretical depth and enduring significance of Julie's intellectual persona, the goal of the symposium lies in the more humble task of presenting novel theoretical impulses inspired by Gibson-Graham's efforts to think through and beyond capitalism. The two issues of *Rethinking Marxism* dedicated to this endeavor will provide readers with an opportunity to discover a variety of distinct research agendas engaging with Gibson-Graham's oeuvre. In the space provided by this introduction, I would like to highlight some recurrent themes and concepts discernible in the articles featured in Part I of the symposium. I wish to both sketch out the contours of a shared theoretical space and to point out the unique ways in which each text renders Gibson-Graham's concepts productive in its own theoretical and political terms.

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<sup>1</sup> See the memorial website <http://forjuliegraham.wordpress.com/> for a sense of the lasting impact Julie has had on students, colleagues, and community activists.

Gibson-Graham's critique of 'capitalocentrism', i.e. the discursive marginalisation of noncapitalist economic processes, can be said to constitute one of the nodal points of this common theoretical space. By drawing attention to the performativity of theory, and arguing that "Marxism has contributed to the socialist absence through the very way in which it has theorized the capitalist presence" Gibson-Graham mounted a significant challenge to the Left's analytical priorities and political certainties (1996, 252). The articles published in this issue demonstrate how Gibson-Graham's lucid and provocative diagnosis continues to reverberate through current controversies. As Jonathan Diskin points out in the article "How Subjectivity Brings us Through Class To The Community Economy", the 'capitalocentrism' critique has generated a growing awareness of the disempowering effects deriving from a depiction of capitalism as an all-encompassing social totality and an all-powerful adversary. This, in turn, provided the impetus to embark on a new research agenda of mapping the heterogeneity of the economic field and developing a language of economic difference adequate to this notion of diversity. The theory of diverse economies, then, constitutes a second theoretical reference point that is broadly shared among all contributors to this symposium. Diskin's article specifically focuses on the ramifications of Gibson-Graham's theory of economic diversity for class as a category of theoretical analysis. He emphasizes that class diversity, understood in terms of different ways of organizing surplus production, has always been one among several elements constitutive of Gibson-Graham's diversity framework. Diskin specifically responds to anxieties that Gibson-Graham's anti-essentialism might relegate Marxist theory to a somewhat minor role and convincingly argues that class occupies a place of enduring significance in Gibson-Graham's analysis. The vision of community economies, as elaborated in *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Gibson-Graham 2006) in terms of collective processes of ethical deliberation over economic decisions and interdependencies, and constituting the third theoretical nodal point of our

symposium, is a case in point . Both in its theoretical chapters and through the empirical case studies presented, the book clearly shows a concern with exploitation. For Diskin, however, Gibson-Graham's contributions to contemporary Marxian theory clearly go beyond this. He draws readers' attention to the ethico-political resignification of Marx's notion of social labor in the context of the community economies framework. As such, Diskin squarely places Gibson-Graham's understanding of social labor in the broader debate within poststructuralist Marxism concerning the boundaries of social being (or becoming) vis-à-vis the collective production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor.

In his contribution to the symposium, Leo Hwang gives concrete meaning to the community economies concept through an empirical case study from Western Massachusetts. His article, which carries the title "Rethinking the Creative Economy: Utilizing Participatory Action Research to Develop the Community Economy of Artists and Artisans", forms part of a tradition of participatory action research projects carried out by scholars affiliated with the Community Economies Research Network. CERN aims at putting noncapitalist economic practices, protagonists, and enterprises on the agenda of economic policy development. For Western Massachusetts, for example, Hwang reports a mainstream vision of regional economic development that connects the promotion of 'creative industries' to the fostering of a capitalist art market. He juxtaposes this vision to artists' starkly different stories about their place in the regional economy. Excerpts from interview data he collected in the context of the *Rethinking the Creative Economy Project* illustrate the vital contributions made by nonmarket, noncapitalist economic activities such as barter, gifting, or commoning towards securing artists' livelihoods and creating a sense of community. As Diskin remarks, such local activities matter because their very existence goes against the grain of 'capitalocentric' narratives of the economy. The efficacy of local agency thus exceeds its

geographical boundaries and must be considered in the context of its ability to successfully unmask claims that capitalism constitutes a social totality rather than only being a small part of a broader, more heterogeneous economic field.

According to George DeMartino, this activist spirit of "starting where you are" and directly involving local community members in economic policy debates are among the factors that render Gibson-Graham's participatory action research so pertinent to the debate on ethics and economics. In his article titled "Ethical Economic Engagement in a World Beyond Control", DeMartino contrasts this experimental ethic to the fantasy of the economist as the knowing subject of the capitalist social totality. He considers Gibson-Graham's willingness to concede the fragmentariness of their knowledge and to engage with the heterogeneity of the economic field to be particular strengths that bring to the fore the ethical dimension of economic decision-making. As such, Gibson-Graham demonstrate an acute awareness that social change is predicated on an "ethics of risk", that is, on the theoretical choices academics make in the process of knowledge production, on the ways they position themselves in the research process, and the terms on which they engage with the communities they conduct their research in. For DeMartino, then, an "ethics of risk" in research implicates a code of conduct that includes training community-based researchers as knowledge producers (rather than reducing them to functional roles such as facilitators of access to interview partners or as translators), learning to listen rather than "knowing too much" (in the sense of imposing a particular research agenda or policy recommendation), cultivating respect for distinct epistemic traditions, and an openness to mutual learning and transformation.

Ethan Miller's contribution to the symposium, "Community Economy: Ontology, Ethics and Politics for Radically-Democratic Economic Organizing", addresses this interrelation between community and economy from the social movement perspective. His reflections on the main tenets

of Gibson-Graham's community economies constitute a remarkable tour de force, encompassing the ontological, ethical, and political dimensions. In underlining the performativity of the social, Miller pays particular attention to the dilemmas facing activist groups as they grapple with defining, communicating, and putting into practice their common values. He draws on the solidarity economy movement as a comparable (and comparative) example to explore how Gibson-Graham navigate the attractions and entrapments associated with such acts of (temporarily) fixing economic space.

According to Miller, Gibson-Graham's work exhibits a particular sensitivity to this problematic, as evidenced in the embeddedness of ongoing ethical deliberation as a crucial component of economic everyday life, while at the same time they exhibit a principled reluctance to judge (i.e. to rule out or celebrate) any particular constellation of community economy on a priori grounds.

To sum up, the three nodal points identified in this introduction, namely the critique of capitalocentrism, the diverse economies framework and the ethics of a community economy, serve a twofold function: First, to sketch out - albeit in a very rudimentary fashion - the contours of the conceptual space shared by the contributors to the symposium. Secondly, to provide an entry point for readers to engage with the distinct theoretical insights and subtle argumentation of each article on its own terms. In keeping with the spirit of Julie's commitment to reinvigorating leftist theory and praxis, we hope that the symposium will arouse the interest of a broad readership, instigating constructive critique and new insights into poststructuralist Marxist theory, as well as sparking conversations with scholars-activists and community-based researchers worldwide about their experiences in enacting postcapitalist collectivities.

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