**Coda**

**Peter North, University of Liverpool, UK**

When asked to provide an afterword for this collection I was a little daunted. I wasn’t even sure what a ‘coda’ was, beyond something pulling things together and forming an ‘end’ of some sort – but how comprehensive was I being asked to be? Provide a review? Pronouncing, passing some things while critiquing others? Or making some comments on how we might go forward based on what I find interesting, as well as what I am reading at the moment, and my experience? Of course, I knew that community or diverse economies scholars try to be kind, reparative, constructive, making more of the good stuff visible, and ‘better’. We cannot, and would not try to provide an ‘end’. We can, though, explore how these initiatives contribute to our understanding of environmental governance and policy by thinking through how they help build just and sustainable economies appropriate for the Anthropocene, and make judgements about what we think is working well, or at least interesting.

Community economy approaches aim to understand the forces that “may work to undermine, constrain, destroy or sideline our attempts to reshape economic futures” (Gibson-Graham 2006:xxxi), but these are not dominant with a “fundamental, structural or universal reality”, but “contingent outcomes of ethical decisions, political projects and sedimented localized practices, continually pushed and pulled by other determinations.” Gibson-Graham inspires us to read and re-read for contingency rather than necessity, and for difference and diversity rather than dominance. She emphasizes capacities to act, and engages with obstacles to this as “challenges, problems, barriers, difficulties – in other words, as things to be struggled with, things that present themselves as more or less tractable obstacles in any political project” (2006: xxv). A generative local post-capitalist politics examines the *conditions* rather than the fundamental *limits* of possibility, underpinned with an ethics and practices of hope rather than uncritical optimism. The papers in this collection focus on the ‘perhaps’ rather than the probable; and on the “not yet” rather than the “never”. They all engage with how we can plant, tend and nurture economic alternatives and harvest the fruit. Thus, material practices matter: visions are not enough. We can accept that which is done to us by economic forces beyond our control, or we can struggle to visualize, develop and cultivate better alternatives.

The papers all show these possibilities are out there if you just open your eyes and see them. To recognise that, as Tom Payne memorably put it, ‘we have it in our power to make the world anew’, but perhaps in smaller, more modest terms than Payne had in mind. I won’t try to review all the papers that precede this coda, or pronounce on one way forward, but adopt a more modest stance of rehearsing what I have been thinking about recently – which all these papers speak to – and point not only to the end, but the next stage.

The papers in this collection all build on inventories of and calculation of actually-existing diverse practices to creating more of those that we want to see, so more people can live well in the Anthropocene while enabling others (human and non-human) to do so as well. They ask: to what extent are we happy with diversity, with niches or experiments and practices? Do we want to scale up or spread a variety of perhaps always small scale localised concrete diverse practices and initiatives into more spaces? In this context, how much does history, culture and socio-material context matter - or is this foundational metanarrative thinking? To what extent do these practices threaten powerful interests, agendas and individuals in different ways, or are ways for abandoned or ignored people to live well?

As the paper by Doina Petrescu and her collaborators (2021) shows so well, diverse and community economies perspectives start by looking more closely at and mapping the full diversity of economic practices, before working harder to grow more of them, and make those we have better. Part of this project is to show that they are everywhere, and that they have value both in conventional terms by ‘using the masters tools’, given that the ‘master’ thinks that if you can’t count or quantify it you have no sense of its value and can’t manage it. Less thought goes into what sort of quantification, and the extent the aim is to have more, bigger, scaled up diverse economic practices or to create spaces for a minority to think and act differently, without worrying if anyone else cares or having a strategy to involve large numbers of people (Melucci 1989). For the latter, the task is less quantification in the ‘master’s’ terms – attempting to compete with ‘his’ tools and be valued by him and his agenda – but to look at how effectively and how far along the arc of developing alternative ethics for the Anthropocene those who want to think and act in this way have got. What sorts of alternative valuation, for example, are undertaken in Chilean wine co-ops? Do they think in terms of global sales, or providing livelihoods and quality products in sustainable ways?

This suggests we might on one hand pay more attention to the voluminous literature on other metrics and the social return on investment. But we also need to recognise that sometimes people don’t want to count. During research in Hungary back in the 1990s, I met Gábor who had set up an alternative currency scheme centred on a group of families associated with a Steiner school in the bohemian town of Gödöllõ. Gábor felt that the school was organised using what he thought was a rather chaotic and inefficient system of unquantified mutual aid. He felt that an alternative currency would enable contributions to be better organised and more equally measured – but his friends at the school did not agree:

“(They) rejected this measurement of their effort and their contribution because ... (they felt) ‘if I work for money, I don’t feel free’. They thought like this, so a convenient house is better than a rigorous contract system which, people rejected. ‘oh, I don’t want to work for money’… They felt that somehow this was a devaluation of their contribution … they insisted on old reciprocity, this chaotic system where no one knows who is responsible for doing this or that or the other, and who made already enough and who is overloaded or is disappointed.” (North 2007:114)

This suggests that some are happy in alternative spaces or niches that they do not want to quantify and measure.

If the focus is living as you wish to, then the question is less quantitative measurement but more qualitative – how much resubjectification is possible, or do isomorphic processes in time make organisations hoping to do things differently look and act more like the mainstream? Are they are thereby subject to processes of neoliberalisation? Does it even get that far? Are they closed down if they represent a threat to that mainstream? The latter suggests that more attention might be paid to what social movement scholars call the Political Opportunity Structure (Tilly 1978), or the concrete historical, cultural and socio-material context in which specific diverse economies practices operate. Alternatively, while not a systemic threat, could these alternative uses of space be replaced with more conventionally profitable practices, or are they something to be ignored? Are these alternatives additional to or complementary to existing mainstream economic practices, or are these profitable mainstream practices absent in abandoned or isolated spaces? In both cases, they are not threats. To coin a phrase, when does it it matter if Goldman Sachs does or does not care if you raise chickens?

For example, while it is deeply depressing that an unimaginative, conservative local authority might want to waste 1.2 million Euro and remove an imaginative project in favour of a car park, it might be expected if that land could reasonably expected to be developed into a shopping centre or an office block. Give that could be predicted, it might not be the best place to put up your oppositional tent. What if the local community wanted a car park, or saw those eco-pioneers in the garden as green gentrifiers? On the other hand, there can be a long gap between land being identified for development and work starting. Financial crises can intervene. It might be a good use of that space for pop-up innovation, and it does not matter that is does not last. It mattered to those involved at the time, and people move on. Context matters.

A wine co-op in a more remote Chilean village, in a Catalan village where people have fled the city, or in a more remote UK west country town like Frome might form a more supportive a niche that can draw on the alternative values of independence and autonomy and ties of comradeship that form the spatial and historical background that you find there. Might there be something in certain regions that provide a stronger base from which to build, such as the Celtic west of the UK (Longhurst 2013), that means they offer more productive political opportunities in which alternative economic milieu can thrive? Catalonia does seem to have created a milieu for grassroots experimentation and new imaginaries, perhaps drawing on its historical experiences and self-identification going back the Catalonia of the Civil War. Or are we romanticising things?

At the other end of the spectrum, evidence from Luxembourg suggests that conservative Leitbilder – ‘guiding visions’, individually and collectively held beliefs, goals, and purposes that act as guiding lights or lodestars – can catalyse practical, pragmatic hybrid networks enabling alternatives to thrive amongst conservative-minded people in some remote, disinvested places. While I was frankly surprised to find out that anywhere in the Grand Duchy thought of itself as ‘remote’, there might be something in ‘left behind’ spaces that mean there are progressive alternatives to the prescriptions of the populist right. Here the questions would be to look at the depth of these practices without being either boosterist or prematurely critical and dismissive. Perhaps the example from Stuttgart – of a hybrid pragmatic infrastructure with more radical aims – provides a middle way. These infrastructures can attract resources, but again the question arises as to the extent that they are neoliberalised, tamed or translated away from their radical origins over time. This cannot be assumed. Literature on social enterprise suggests that intelligent compromises are made by people who know that they are doing and are adept at playing the game.

The Frome example also suggests we might pay more attention to the extent that the local state can advance or retard these agendas in specific places. Matt Thompson (2020) has provided an excellent review of the new Municipalist agendas in different places that diverse economies scholars can draw on. As well as flatpack democracy and transition towns, there have been interesting experiments in Community Wealth Building and from participatory and civic approaches to local state governance from the self-identified ‘rebel cities’ like Barcelona. The local socialisms of the UK in the 1980s that inspired Gibson-Graham are worthy of further consideration, although the election result of 2019 has rather taken the wind out of this project. That said, can activists wishing to promote these agendas effectively campaign and get elected to local office and then form a ‘regime’ not in the terms suggested by the transition literature but in ways we can analyse using the regime theory approaches in political science growing out of Clarence Stone’s (1989) work on Atlanta. This needs more thought.

Here again the Political Opportunity Structure, or the specific socio-material context matters. What is the electoral system? Can small or alternative parties break through – something generally very difficult in majoritarian systems. If activists win the election, how much resource, institutional capacity and ambition do local authorities have? What is the local state expected to do, or not do? How centralised or decentralised is the nation state? Is the wider political environment characterised by neoliberalism, social democracy, or is the nation state far away and not expected to do much and there is more space for diverse economies experimentation, which is not seen as a threat at all – but normal? An engagement with the local state might provide more data on how to strengthen diverse economies practices, projects, and milieu.

A final strand of uses of or alternatives to the master’s tools focus on technology a tool for co-operation, or problem? Can we hack their system? Use their tools in a different way? Or is an association with the big technology companies a fundamentally problematic association with capitalist processes and infrastructure problematic, not resilient? They can pull the plug whenever they want. These papers suggest that technologies can open possibilities, be these open source, electronic currencies, internet servers or wine making technologies and practices.

Of course, these papers answer some questions, and raise others. We continue to dance, challenge, experiment, ask questions, grapple with old questions, and encounter new ones. Perhaps in these postfoundational times we need to also remind ourselves how some of older questions around class, contentious politics and policy change, the place of these initiative in wider theories of change, and ways that local conditions constrain and attempt to channel (but do not determine) what is possible have not been resolved, and still matter.

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