

## Review

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J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Oxford: Blackwell 1996.



*The End of Capitalism (As We Knew it)* is in part the response of two economic geographers, whose joint authorial personality is J. K. Gibson-Graham, to the 1980s binge of globalisation, corporate consolidation, raiding and plant closures. At its most general and most controversial level, the book asks us to change our political imaginary in order to be able to carry out an anti-essentialist sublation of marxism. As their contribution to this larger, collective project, they offer here a challenging manifesto for rethinking

economic analysis, with an emphasis on demystifying the effects of a powerful "discursive artefact" that they call "capitalist hegemony". Clearly, the intended audience is feminists, marxists and others engaged in social and economic analysis, but they also hope to promote new ways of thinking about strategic possibilities for community and labour activists directly engaged in struggles for control in the political economy of the 1990s.

They see the economic and social analysis of capitalism as dominated by categories that portray capitalism as the dominant, or even the only, form of economy present or successful, now or in the future. Theoretically, this model is essentialist in at least three ways. First, without theoretical justification, it often identifies a whole range of social practices and institutions, from commodification to industrialization or whole nations, as "capitalist". Second, the concept of capitalism deployed is itself constituted by, and expresses, a homogeneous essence (whether the motive force of capital accumulation or the penetration of commodities). Third, its view of capital subordinates, dominates or in some other way writes out other distinctive forms of economic production, especially the growing category of self-employed workers and domestic labor. According to Gibson-Graham, this portrait is mythic and abstracted from any particular society. Instead, social formations are always multiple and overdetermined, as is capitalism itself as a "system". They are at pains to stress that inside any particular "capitalist" economy there are a multiplicity of economic and class processes, both capitalist and non-capitalist. Clearly, substantiating this claim is crucial to their argument.

In addition to their cognitive distortions, "capitalocentric" discourses have a pernicious ideological and political effect. Because they constantly ignore or subordinate "capitalism's other" in the way we think about our world, conventional economic discourses, whether left or right, serve both to disable our imaginations of different possibilities and to undermine our motivation for struggle. In other words, the language of economic analysis has a performative effect, helping to create the kind of economy it portrays. And undoing it might prove difficult. Ways of talking economics are, they aptly suggest, underpinned by "multiple and contradictory desires"--like a "fantasy of wholeness that operates to obscure diversity and disunity" or the paradoxical sense of "mastery and power" that men get from subordinating themselves to economic necessity--a cathexis that the normal logic of theoretical critique does not address.

Against this they deploy strategies variously inspired by post-modern feminisms, psychoanalysis and post-Althusserian efforts at rethinking marxism. Althusser's concept of overdetermination is promoted as a corrective to essentialism. "One can say that representations of the capitalist economy as an independent entity informed by logics and exclusive of its exteriors have allowed capitalism to hegemonize both the economic and the social field. One can also say, however, that overdetermination is a discursive strategy that can potentially empty, fragment, decenter and open the economy, liberating discourses of economy and society from capitalism's embrace. But that process, far from being over or even well on its way, has hardly begun".

But Gibson-Graham breaks with the objectivism of Althusser's search for Truth in favour of a partial "truth"-telling that requires writers fully state their interests, intentions and positions to enable readers to assess the politics, adequacy and scope of their work. Thus, they present a clear statement of a strategically chosen "entry point", i.e. an "analytical starting place that reflects the concerns and preoccupations of a particular knower". For example, they start with class because they want to get to a reinvigorated politics of distribution or to make a gesture toward creating and interpellating class subject positions that are not usually theorized.

Since the book concentrates on the concrete economic processes of class, it is useful to pay a little more attention to the way this term is developed. First, in an anti-essentialist move, they dispose of classical marxist and regulationist versions of "mode of production" by stripping property relations, industrial processes or modes of distribution from their definition of capitalism. "Class is overdetermined, rather than defined, by property ownership and other sorts of social relations". Similarly, a concept of class, adapted from Resnick's and Woolf's reworking of Marx, stands in for "relations of production". At its center are neither social groups nor relations, but narrowly delimited processes of the appropriation of surplus labour and apparently wider processes of distribution. Any class process has two distinctive moments, "the exploitative class process where surplus labor is produced and appropriated and the distributive class process where surplus labor is distributed to a variety of social destinations". Conventionally enough, capitalist class processes are those where surplus labour is extracted in value form. Their definition of "necessary labor", however, is unclear, and it seems unnecessarily narrow. They seem to ignore both Marx's insistence that it is not a

bare minimum necessary for short-term survival, but has a cultural component that, in his example, allows the pint of beer or the flagon of wine and also the real complications of the intergenerational production of labour. In particular, in their example, laid off, newly "self-employed" workers are said to be making and appropriating a surplus when their income seems to require using up their own accumulated resources and is insufficient to pay the costs of child care.

Nevertheless, a useful flexibility in their understanding of class processes is illustrated by the analysis of an imaginary Australian couple, Bill and Sue, who live in an isolated mining company town. Bill, a well-paid full-time unionized truck driver, who has invested savings in rental property and runs a small business shooting wild pigs and freezing them for urban gourmet consumption, can be seen to be involved in a capitalist class process as a worker and to receive non-capitalist income from rent and from the self-appropriation of his own surplus labour as a hunter. (Given the rarity of pig-shooting, one might think less exotically of Canadian fishers' households or the innumerable workers whose company and personal pensions are tied up in stocks and bonds.) Sue's household labor is "feudal". This term might seem formally accurate in Sue's extreme case, since her access to productive resources and even shelter in the house that comes with her husband's job depends on her legal status as a wife. But they simply sweep aside the whole domestic labour debate to claim that domestic labour in general is feudal, a claim that is neither supported nor persuasive. This point is not trivial given the centrality of domestic labour to their argument that widespread non-capitalist class processes permeate all capitalist formations. Without domestic labour, the case seems to rest on various forms of self-employment, producer co-ops, and small businesses.

*The End of Capitalism* homes in sharply on plaguing questions of strategy. The strategic certainty that marxism seemed to promise has been inadvertently undermined by a nondialectical totalizing vision of capitalism. "Like the holistic vision of capitalism as a society-wide system, images of stability have long undermined leftists' abilities to engage in revolutionary politics, encouraging instead a politics of preparation or postponement. Whereas systemic holism makes it impossible to identify small or local transformations as revolutionary events, stability reinforces the idea that the energies of the left must be devoted to 'reform' until the whole begins to crack, at which time the moment of crisis represents an opening for a true politics of economic and social transformation".

In Gibson-Graham's view, a dramatic overthrow of capitalism is ruled out both historically and methodologically. They promote a new form of mixed economy, not with state enterprises, but with an eye to an expansion of non-capitalist forms of work, reduced levels of exploitation and greater social justice in distribution. Reform is, then, on the agenda, but not as second-best. In support of this project, they usefully compile a range of successful tactics they see as deploying new legal strategies "from the margins": environmentalism, Aboriginal land claims and US community legal resistance to plant closures. If "nature" and "native land claims" might seem to be located in some geographic hinterland, in Canada, at least, successful struggles required carefully-built coalitions of native peoples, greens, political parties and trade unions, these last two traditionally seen as politically and economically "central". As for plant closures, they

recommend legal strategies of stakeholders' rights without recognizing that there can also be problems with rights discourses (as another postmodern feminist, Carol Smart, points out) or that the legalization of struggle can itself have long-term depoliticizing repercussions.

Imaginatively posing important issues, the book provokes a highly partisan reading--for or against. The writing is generally witty and often succinct. However, an incomplete transformation from articles and conference presentations means that the argument is fragmented over different chapters, sometimes repeating, sometimes losing its thread. The iconoclasm of the project is blunted by this unnecessary difficulty. Stylistic questions aside, there are two more troubling points to raise here. The first is a refusal of even a provisional theoretical retotalization. In this regard, one version of a marxist critique would dismiss the work as simply "idealist". Another critique, in something closer to their own terms, might take them to task for failing to pursue overdetermination rigorously or far enough; to say that a particular labour practice, like Sue's or a whole range of self-employment, is not capitalist because of the form in which value is extracted, does not rule out its implication in the way concrete local capitalisms remain hegemonic in practice. Second, the version of or tendency in marxism from which they construct an admittedly "straw man" as analyzed for critique is particularly static and nondialectical. Do they do so knowingly or not? If knowingly, do they violate their own criterion of transparency for "truth"? If unknowingly, is their straw man biased in ways that they do not comprehend? Indeed, the view of society, they recommend, where "antagonism and contestation" constantly produce social and political instability and where (at least struggles for) "class transformation might be envisioned as a regular occurrence and the focus of everyday politics" is surely very close to--even an appropriation of--Gramsci's version of hegemony and struggle in a war of position (in contrast to a simplified notion of domination that gets attached to the term in general and here). Is Gramsci's contribution ignored because he links micro struggles to global hegemonic and counter-hegemonic mobilizations? Does a decentered economic analysis, necessarily leave social movements fragmented and marginal?

Still, despite problems with particular concepts or specific strategic suggestions, the book's contribution, like its intention, may prove to be wider. Certainly, the process of social representation in which Gibson-Graham engages in this book is meant to help create new political subjects whose imaginary is populated by new "friendly monsters of the noncapitalist" sort and whose political activism is motivated by the desire to bring them into existence. Is this transformation necessary? Is most economic analysis and left organizing disabled by the capitalist monster? Certainly, the British Labour Party's "third way", left currents in post-Soviet politics and social-democratic provincial governments in Canada have not been able to think up or to put in place policies that are not mesmerized by "the market". Making us think about thinking about capitalism is, then, a real service. After all, in a psychoanalytically informed analysis of a contingent world, there can be suggestions but no guarantees.