

A feminist response to Stephen Marglin's *Premises for a New Economy*

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Abstract

In response to Stephen Marglin's call for new economies, the article points to the strong and vibrant tradition of feminist scholarship inside and outside academe, which is exploring alternatives to capitalism. The article takes up the concepts of meshworks, politics of place, feminist political ecology and community economies. It argues that feminist approaches are contributing to a new analytic that goes beyond developmentalism and recognises the importance of building a new economics based on the many progressive alternatives that are being imagined and articulated in local economic practices.

JEL Codes: A13, J16, O10, R58

Keywords

Alternatives, decoloniality, ecology, gender, local economies

Continuing conversations

The invitation to join in the flourishing debates about 'new economies' in this symposium of *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* is a challenge. Not because it is untimely or new, but because it competes with a cacophony of writings – from high level documents of the United Nations (UN), to political manifestos of civil society movements, to op eds in newspapers, to online magazines and widely read daily blogs that are demanding us to set out agendas for 'a new economy'. Given so much noise, it is important to situate the significance of this particular call from Stephen Marglin.

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Marglin is one of those rare economists who look critically at the politics of economic theory and practice and seek to make connections with other disciplines and with non-academic audiences. His work, including this article, is situated at the borders between academe, policy and civil society, working on the interface of economic development thinking and practice. It has many decades of collective thought and discussion both in and out of academe behind it.

Marglin has contributed to several academic and policy debates that have looked towards new economies. In a Bellagio Rockefeller Foundation meeting in 1993 on 'Greening the Economy' he and Frederique Apffel-Marglin brought together a progressive set of academics to discuss alternatives to the mainstream economy from cultural and ecological perspectives. The subsequent book raised epistemological and ontological questions about the production and practice of economic knowledge (Apffel-Marglin and Marglin, 1996). I was privileged to be among the group, though my questions about how to 'gender' the 'greening of the economy' were not so well taken. Nevertheless, as a result of asking them I have since that meeting been able to engage with Marglin's work along with others who I met there, including Frederique Apffel-Marglin and Arturo Escobar, who have regularly (with Marglin) contributed to the *Development* journal which I edited from 1995 to 2012. Indeed, it was in *Development* that Marglin first published this current call for a new economy.

Another set of thinkers with whom Marglin engages is the Great Transition Initiative (GTI) – an online network based around the Tellus institute in Boston, USA, founded by Paul Raskin. GTI since 1996 has brought together a global, interdisciplinary group of scholars and activists who seek to elaborate pathways to a 'great transition' envisaged in economic, ecological and social terms (see <http://www.greattransition.org/>). Raskin and others in the GTI organised contributions to *Development* journal issues in the 2000s, particularly in the analysis of the 2008 economic crisis). Marglin pays direct tribute to the vigorous GTI debates in his piece.

As with the 1993 Bellagio meeting on greening the discipline of economics, in the GTI on- and off-line, my contribution to the discussion has been to ask: 'what has gender got to do with it'. In 2006, I contributed with others a paper to GTI on 'feminist praxis and women and transnational and place based struggles for change'. A check of the website suggests that those issues seem to have dropped out of sight as the focus has shifted towards ecology, technologies and ideas. The emphasis now is on redesigning a normative foundation for the transition based on 'governance and economic institutions to balance the imperatives for unity and diversity, to nurture social cohesion and eradicate destitution, and to support human wellbeing and a vibrant natural world' (see <http://www.greattransition.org/about/what-is-the-great-transition>).

It is important to position Marglin's work by mentioning these two narrative encounters (there are of course many other scholarly and policy debates to which he has contributed) because to do so raises a puzzle about why, given his close working with various feminist scholars and writers (including his partner Frederique), those feminist practices and insights (particularly on gender and methodology) are not taken up in his search for new economies. I hope to show in this brief response how close feminist thinking and practice are to Marglin's call for new economies. I welcome this opportunity provided by *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* to address what Marglin rightly sees as the

most pressing debates of our time by setting out briefly what I see as feminist approaches to building ‘a new economy’.

There is a strong and vibrant tradition of feminist scholarship inside and outside of academe, exploring the issue of alternatives to capitalism. This scholarship is mapped out in more detail elsewhere (Harcourt, 2013a, 2013b). The comments in this short article are based on my on-going reflections, some of which I shared at a recent British Academy meeting where both young and old scholars looking at post 2015 debates were examining alternative economic framings as part of the debates in critical development studies (see http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2014/After_2015_Development_and_its_Alternatives.cfm).

Alternative analytics

Marglin’s call for new economies is premised on the need for a new analytic that moves beyond the ‘violence’ of development struggles against domination and inequalities and recognises the many progressive alternatives that (as with the GTI) are being imagined and articulated with creative insight. Such visions help us to connect our understanding of social reality and the theoretical framework we use to interpret it. They inform our sense of politics and the hope that emerges as we find ways to imagine ‘another way’ of looking at social and political reality of economies.

It is essential that this other way of thinking is not seen as part of the future but is around us. We are living where other economies and ‘other worlds are not only possible’ but happening (Escobar, 2004). We are part of such practices – we do not need to wait for others to perform change while we wait passively – we can build it ourselves. Such visions move us out of the capitalocentric logic that informs dominant hegemonic economy of today’s neoliberal global capitalism. They invoke self-organisation, non-linearity, pluralism, non-hierarchy and non-binary ways of organising as an alternative to standardised mainstream economic practice based on hierarchical thinking and centralisation. Such economies are evolving alongside and within the dominant hegemonic frame.

These alternative economic framings are being explored in new types of intellectual communities – such as the GTI – of academics, policy makers and activists particularly those of degrowth movements in Europe and the decolonial thinking and practice of Latin America (Harcourt, 2013a). These intellectual communities of networks, community groups and individuals offer textured attempts to propose new models of life and world making. They construct shared political strategies that together are providing new ecologies of knowledge based on diverse forms of co-operation, pluralist thinking and (creative, artistic) collective learning. They are not identifying as traditional progressive groups – trade unions, cooperatives, political parties and so on. Rather, they are loosely connected in networks, full of progressive discussions, campaigns, actions and writings around different justice goals. Escobar has called these types of networks of learning ‘meshworks’. His analysis is closely related to biological ways of organising, learning from nature with reference to complexity theory (Escobar, 2004, 2008). Meshworks bring groups of people together (in cyberspace or in place based events) for the purpose of action and discussion on key issues – there is no membership, or dogmatic line of thinking, and the goal is to inform, open up possibilities and act politically where people

are placed. People do not 'belong' to meshworks; they move in and out of them, with great fluidity, with passion and engagement making links across different justice issues (climate, gender based violence, peace, austerity, debt reparation, fair trade). Such decentralised flexibility offers possibilities to understand alternative philosophies of life along with the chance to mobilise via self-organising that enables direct engagement with mainstream politics and economics.

As I write this, one major example of such mobilising through meshworks is the People's Climate March in New York 21 September 2014 that is bringing together millions online around the urgency of climate issues and is, just now, seeking to move people out on to the streets in New York and simultaneously around the world for the UN based Climate Meeting (see <http://peoplesclimate.org/march>). In this meshwork, there are no leaders as such, though there are spokespeople such as writers Naomi Klein and Bill McKibben and many facilitators and organisers with a historical pedigree that goes back to Martin Luther King Days. The 'swarming' effect – such as bringing 100,000s on the streets to protest at the economic model that is leading to the climate crisis – is evolving via encounters with different human and natural environments digitally or in person. The connectivity grows in unplanned directions, in contrast with the dominant model of neoliberal global capitalism and its practices of restrictive standardisation, surveillance and control in the name of the imperative of economic growth and security.

While these intellectual communities use the Internet to debate and mobilise for economic alternatives, digital connectivity has its dark side as the very public exposures of Wikileaks, US government spying, and Facebook selling of private information have revealed. Invisible surveillance and control is going on by companies and governments every time we visit a website, google, tweet or post a photo on Facebook. Even so, what I would maintain is that meshworks are forming in ways that allow economic alternatives to emerge produced by progressive ideas and actions that are shifting and changing our understanding of economies via these new types of digital/place based politics (Biekart and Fowler, 2013; Escobar and Harcourt, 2005; Shah, 2013).

Politics of place and alternative visions

Our modern interconnectivity is enabling challenges to dominant economic hegemonies as we practise resistance within and outside dominant economic frameworks. People forge links among different places in meshworks interlocking real and virtual movements. We have reason to be intrigued by and hopeful about the growing collective intelligence that is resisting and in the process restructuring the world that is led by transnational capitalism (Harcourt and Escobar, 2005).

This interconnectivity has been principally based on feminist organising, contributing to and learning from a broad intellectual activist community that has been proposing and practising alternative economics. Meshworks of feminists have formed an activist community that has been proposing and practising alternative economics that look at how 'development equity and ecology are intertwined' (to paraphrase Marglin). They are part of a widespread tradition that is building economies based on the concept of flourishing and wellbeing rather on growth and development with a focus on care of peoples of all ages, genders, ethnicities, race, diverse environments and shared respect for the world's

commons. There is a vibrant tradition of feminist political ecologists, feminist economists, feminist development alternative advocates working in transnational feminist movements that have contributed to mainstream progressive debates in critical development studies and practice. Transnational feminism has helped to unravel old political orders, during conflicts and crises, and to new forms of organising in the continuing search for just, equitable, inclusive, democratic and peaceful societies.

I would like to highlight here two particular streams of feminist engagement in the framing of new economies that I feel resonate with Marglin's analysis and I hope in the future will become part of his (and the GTI) call for a new economy.

J.K. Gibson-Graham and the new community research network

The Community Economies Research Network (CERN) is inspired by the work of JK Gibson-Graham (the pen name of the late Julie Graham, US feminist economist and Kathie Gibson Australian feminist geographer) whose books (1996, 2006) set out a profound analysis of alternatives to the economic analysis that assumes capitalocentric dominance. Writing together, Julie Graham and Kath Gibson have inspired many in their proposals for imagining and enacting new visions of the economy. As pointed out in an earlier article published in the *Economic and Labour Relations Review* (Harcourt, 2014) the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) has shown how we need to move beyond capitalism as omnipresent: an inescapable, unified system, bounded, hierarchically ordered, determined by a growth imperative, understood only by macroeconomic theory and policy. Their work opens up possibilities for recognising how anticapitalist politics and imaginaries can flourish in the different community economies that are creating an ethical and political rather than structural conception of economic dynamics. Their work gives a key role to feminist discourses as it connects through theory and practice 'the private and public, the domestic and national, local and the global, changing the rigid boundaries of established political and economic discourse' (Harcourt, 2014).

CERN is interested in continuing this theorising of diverse economies and building more ethical economic and ecological relationships from a feminist post-structural theoretical basis. Through various research projects around the world (what the network describes as situated in both majority and minority worlds) the network sets out to 'produce a more inclusive understanding of economy; highlight the extent and contribution of hidden and alternative economies; theorise economy and community as sites of becoming; build sustainable non-capitalist economic alternatives and foster ethical economic experimentation' (see <http://www.communityeconomies.org>). Currently, CERN is setting up an 11-site, 7-country project, including Tuscany, Italy, where there is a project to study diverse community economies in order to build a transformative framework for economic, ecological and social sustainability in the wake of climate change.

In such types of research, CERN aims to produce feminist and progressive alternative proposals for economies that enable healthy lives both materially and psychologically to survive and flourish, consume sustainably and distribute surplus. The research approach recognises that ethical encounters with others (humanity and nature) are critical if we are to survive well and ensure that we (humanity and nature) flourish in the future. Such new

ways of understanding economies that aim to foster wellbeing and flourishing (rather than economic growth) require a reframing of the economy building up from community experiences that engage ethically with diversity and otherness, replenishing and growing with attention to natural and cultural contexts.

The most recent publication of CERN 'Take Back the Economy' (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) provides an ethical guide on how to take back the market by building from what is happening around the world. The book shows how the economy is part of our everyday lived lives, an outcome of our own decisions and efforts. It aims to set out how small-scale changes can create ethical economies, recognising feminist values of diversity, care, sustainability and resilience as we move to a post-capitalist world profoundly reinventing ourselves, our communities and our world.

What is key to the community economies approach is its positive and empowering imaginary of the economy as part of our own lives and understanding. By reframing the economy as a space of ethical action that all people can shape, CERN sets up possibilities for change in small ways we can all engage in – rather than leaving it to business men, politicians to take life and planetary decisions for us. The oft stated 'we know what to do, but we lack political will' crumbles if we value how we can live ethically in our own communities and work for very different forms of (gendered and ecologically aware) political engagement in the economy.

Feminist political ecology an alternative economies

Another intellectual community, feminist political ecology (FPE) is a meshwork that criss-crosses experiences of academic and activist feminists from the majority and minority worlds, linking variously positioned critiques of patriarchy and capitalism, strategic identity- and rights-based activism and post-structuralist, decolonial and gender-centred approaches (see, for example, Federici, 2010; Kurian and Munshi, 2005; Nightingale, 2011; Plumwood, 1996; Rocheleau et al., 1996). FPE has built an understanding of ecology that recognises gender power relations and has applied that analysis to critiques of green economy, green growth and the economisation of non-human and human nature. In these analyses, 'gender is a central social category that informs and shapes societal nature-relations as well as agency, knowledge and politics related to the environment' (Wichterich, in press).

In the '20 years after Rio' debates referred to by Marglin, FPE has brought together FPE and feminist political economics in discourses on care, commons and resilience and sufficiency. FPE is contributing to the growing global intellectual community that seeks to shape 'care, commons and a culture of enough' as 'strategic sites for transformation and cornerstones of another development paradigm, which countervails the concepts of green economy, green new deal and the hegemonic logic of unfettered growth in economic structures, human-nature-relations and simultaneously in people's mindsets' (Wichterich, in press).

In this vision, which, like Marglin, challenges gross domestic product (GDP) growth and its violations and injustices to human and non-human nature, FPE posits re-embedding the economy in social relations and caring for nature. Importantly, such a caring economy is about well-being and social cohesion of society and nature. It is not about domination

of the other – whether the labour of exploited peoples of the majority world, the non-recognition of women’s social reproduction or the extraction of natural resources of our planet. FPE focuses on research that can point to ways to ensure fair distribution, protection of nature and social reproduction and public goods and calls for economies of solidarity (Harcourt and Nelson, in press; Wichterich, 2012).

Intercultural dialogues

These efforts to build flourishing economies based on care and protection and the dignity of all forms of life are emerging in struggles alongside, in-between and against hegemonic mainstream economies. Given the huge numbers and widely diverse struggles for resources, rights and recognition, a major challenge is how to build solidarity among them in ways that recognise common interests while acknowledging differences, and at the same time resilient enough to resist neoliberal ‘green economy strategies’ to co-opt care, decentralised and community-organised initiatives.

While the concept of meshworks helps to describe how such intellectual communities are forming and reforming, how to build alliances that can provide strategic resilience continues to be a challenge. A methodology that helps to build alliances that respect different forms of knowledge and experience in fluid and non-direct, non-hierarchical and non-standardised ways – is the process of intercultural dialogues. Intercultural dialogues have been and are happening in different feminist spaces (on- and off-line) that aim to re-appropriate, reconstruct and reinvent economies, societies and life worlds.

Intercultural dialogue, as part of the decolonial project, aims to encourage the ‘un-learning’ of previous knowledge and in the process build a co-generation of new understandings and knowledges inspired by the intercultural philosophy of Raimon Panikka (Harcourt and Icaza, 2014: 136). Intercultural dialogues are a practice of communication based on co-working/co-creation stressing the role of subjects/participants as co-producers of knowledge. Intercultural dialogues are based on possibilities and ethical ways of knowing that are not afraid of the contradictions, difficulties and histories of our differences. Such dialogues look to promote the values of gender justice within struggles to resist exploitative and hegemonic capitalocentric knowledge and practices. In acknowledging personal connections and journeys by listening to others’ stories and honestly sharing our own narratives, as well as abstract theoretical understanding, we are practising an ethics of care. By respecting and celebrating diversity, we can challenge and help transform the dominant economic discourse through different imaginaries that ‘change the order of things’.

Conclusion

As I write this article, my inbox pings with email postings offering invitations to reflect on or join in a multiplicity of citizen initiatives organising, resisting and imagining alternatives in hundreds of places in the world. I am only in touch with English and Italian speaking meshworks, some translating from other languages, whether Spanish, Arabic, French – all languages of colonial discourse – as there is very little I can read in the vernacular. While appearing to be working alone, I am very connected with these ‘other’

worlds. It is this sense of excitement, possibility and hopeful knowledge that we need to draw on as we shape practical macroeconomic and ecologically non-racist and gender-aware solutions. Intersectional awareness of diversity is vital – not only of gender but of diversity in all forms, including generational difference. At the British Academy conference referred to above, older people (men and women) tended to speak of their political weariness and fears of further economic austerity, militarisation and ecological disasters, leading to tipping points that threaten our planet's future. It was notable that the younger men and women in their 20s (including those who organised the meeting) spoke of hope and engagement and possibilities of change. Hope for the future lies in collaborating with those vitally needed voices and imaginaries in an intergenerational search for just, caring, resilient and sustainable economies.

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