4-15-1997


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DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.06.10

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**Recommended Citation**


DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.06.10

Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol6/iss1/10

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book review: J.K. Gibson-Graham's
The End of Capitalism
(As We Knew It): A Feminist
Critique of Political Economy
Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996
by Carolyn Gallaher

Any thorough engagement with social justice must necessarily tackle issues of the economy. For Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, however, the notion that there is a single 'economy'—a totalizing entity of oppression—is itself detrimental to social justice. Graham and Gibson, who together make up the writing unit known as J.K. Gibson-Graham, claim as the central argument of their book that left-leaning academics influenced by Marxism have created the very "beast" against which we presumably fight. Such a claim comes out of the theoretical recognition of the performativity of representation:

In those exciting early days I had yet to take seriously the "performativity" of social representations—in other words, the ways in which they are implicated in the worlds they ostensibly represent. I was still trying to capture "what was happening out there," . . . . I wasn't thinking about the social representation I was creating as constitutive of the world in which I have to live (p. ix).

The theoretical value of such an argument, moreover, is that by deconstructing the monolith and showing it for what it is, there will be room for both seeing and creating anti-capitalist forms of economy.

To deconstruct 'the economy' and 'capitalism', however, is no easy project—a fact Gibson-Graham know well. Much of their book is devoted to laying out the theoretical framework which sets the stage for anti-essentialist readings of society, economy, and polity, and which allows them to make the argument that 'capitalism' and 'capitalist hegemony' are artifacts of
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discourse. Each chapter is, in some way, based on unpacking essential­
ism in the social sciences through a variety of literatures. They de­
velop Althusser’s concept of overdetermination, and move from there
to a variety of topical literatures, including identity theory, queer
studies, globalization, post-Fordism, industrial policy discourse, and
class politics. Their work is clearly influenced by poststructuralism,
which pervades each chapter’s topical literature, and which is then
translated by Gibson-Graham to their subject matter, capitalism.

The impetus behind Gibson-Graham’s engagement with
poststructuralism, and its translation to critical-, neo-, post-, and
feminist- Marxisms is, in fact, the book’s overwhelming strong point.
Gibson-Graham illustrate how capitalism’s discursive scripting as a to­
talizing unity has undermined attempts by Marxists to effectively
confront capitalist exploitation. Such a scripting, they argue, has also
rendered Marxism blind to non-capitalist economic relations, both
existing and potential. And although their book is neither empiri­
cally-based, nor aimed at prediction, they do provide current ex­
amples to illustrate the fiction that they argue is capitalism’s totality.
They point to women in Australia, for example, who work exclusively
in the household and whose relationships with their families consti­
tute a feudal rather than capitalist social relationship. They also
point to successful battles by workers against multinational corpo­
rations. Such battles are important, they argue, because multinational
 corporations have long been viewed as the ultimate indicator of
capitalism’s global reach in political economy literatures.

Gibson-Graham’s book is clearly intended to shake up social
science’s engagement with, and study of, the economy. The reactions
will, however, no doubt be influenced by one theoretical position.
Those familiar with poststructuralism and cultural studies will find
their argument well-versed in relation to pertinent literature, and they
will more than likely ask themselves why someone has not developed
this line of argument earlier. Those unfamiliar or unsympathetic with
anti-essentialist analysis will be forced to confront the authors’ thor­
ough deconstruction of key, contemporary political economic litera­
tures, including globalization (chapter 6), regulation theory/post­
Fordism (chapter 7), and industrial policy discourse (chapter 5 and
9).

While the book is an excellent and important contribution to
poststructuralist thought, as well as political economy, it is not with­
out its problems. The most important problem concerns the book’s
underlying premise. Gibson-Graham are clear in their intentions. The
deconstruction of the discursive artifact known as capitalism is im­