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Self, others and objects in an 'alternative economy': Personal narratives from the Heiveld Rooibos Cooperative

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the personal narratives of 12 women members of the Heiveld, a rooibos[1] producer cooperative in the Northern Cape province of South Africa. It contributes to the emerging literature in geography and allied disciplines on so-called 'alternative economies', the aims of which often include the conceptual re-location of agency from the capitalist system to the realm of the human. This work suggests that human development – both individual and collective – is central to the success and indeed the alterity of alternative economies. The Heiveld members' narratives support these ideas, in particular through their accounts of the importance of autonomous work and the significance of learning from and with others. We argue, however, that these narratives also foreground a theme that tends to be neglected in the alternative economies literature – that of consumption and the possession of material things. Our interviewees repeatedly emphasise buying and owning things as being among the most meaningful outcomes of alternative economic activity. They see great value both in having their own money, homes, and furnishings, and in being able to give to others. Through an analysis of the reciprocal, meaningful relationships between these women and everyday objects, we suggest that consumption is not opposed to human development but can be part of it. More attention should therefore be paid to the ways in which tangible, material things help constitute the more commonly researched, intangible benefits of alternative economic participation, such as empowerment, dignity, knowledge-sharing and care for others.

1. Introduction

The Heiveld Rooibos Cooperative (hereafter 'the Heiveld') is in the Northern Cape province of South Africa, in a region called the South Bokkeveld. The Heiveld's offices are in the small town of Nieuwoudtville, while the farms are spread across the South Bokkeveld plateau. With a long history of economic exclusion by apartheid agricultural policies, it is only recently, through social and economic development initiatives, that the region's predominantly 'coloured'[2] population has been able to participate in the economy in any meaningful way beyond subsistence activities. The Heiveld is one such initiative. Formed in 2000, it is supported by a number of development agencies, accredited by the Dutch 'Fair Trade *Organisatie*', and has 64 members.

New studies of cooperatives and other types of so-called 'alternative' economies in geography and allied disciplines have been valuable in recent years in identifying diverse forms of economic production, different motivations for and benefits of labour, and the practices of care and responsibility that shape many people's economic participation. Countering the notion that capitalism is either definitive or inevitable, geographies of alternative economies attempt to locate economic agency in the human, rather than in capital itself and its circulation in abstracted, global space (Massey, 2004). Two aspects of human development are central in this literature: first, the individual self, typically associated with notions of autonomy, dignity and empowerment; and second, the human collective, often linked to ideas of social and related forms of capital, knowledge and resource-sharing, and the strengthening of 'community'.

This paper explores the personal narratives of 12 women from the Heiveld to understand how cooperative members themselves express the benefits of participating in an alternative economy. We demonstrate in Sections 4 and 5 that these narratives support the broad consensus in the literature that the development of both self and collective are major benefits of such participation. The stories indicate, however, that context is crucial to understanding these benefits: individual and collective identities are produced in historically, culturally, and politically inflected ways. Selves here

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[1] Rooibos (*Aspalathus linearis*) is a plant endemic to the Western Cape region of South Africa. It has recently become internationally popular as a healthful, caffeine-free alternative to tea and coffee, and is widely available in many countries.

[2] This term is deeply political, describing as it does a diverse group of people who were subject to specific forms of apartheid classification and restriction. We use the term in quotation marks throughout to indicate its still-contested and problematic nature in post-apartheid South Africa.

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are shaped particularly through autonomous work, while connections with others are valued especially for their enablement of learning and new experiences. Rewarding labour and learning are both significant in that they were precluded or severely limited for these women under apartheid, and the legacies of these restrictions persist for the majority of the South Bokkeveld's population.

In Section 6, we argue that the Heiveld women's stories make an additional contribution to the literature on alternative economies: they foreground the acquisition of material goods as among the most meaningful aspects of being newly able to earn a profit. Consumption, in the sense of acquiring material objects, is seldom given much consideration in the alternative economies literature, especially in studies focused on the global South. Similarly, although research on economic empowerment in development studies often notes that women newly able to earn their own money tend to purchase material goods for the household, little attempt is made in this literature to theorise such consumption as being of interest in itself. There may be many reasons for these silences, but their effect is the separation of the human world from 'the thing world' (Thrift, 2008, p. 10), privileging the former over the latter as the supposedly appropriate site for meaningful outcomes from alternative economic activity. The Heiveld members' narratives trouble this hierarchy, demanding an appreciation of the importance of material acquisition in human development.

2. Alternative economic geographies

The kinds of economic participation conceptualised as alternative in geographical scholarship are varied. They include: cooperatives and other forms of associative production (de Sousa Santos, 2006), as well as non-monetary currencies (North, 2010), fair or ethical trade (Hughes, 2007; Le Mare, 2008), the 'social economy' (Amin et al., 2003), and 'sustainable' production and consumption. Each category is internally heterogeneous too – what counts as ethical trade, for example, may differ with context. Moreover, many economic practices deemed alternative in some sense may in fact operate well within the mainstream, as focused on profit and growth as conventional businesses. As McCarthy (2006, p. 809) points out: 'few [economic projects] are so alternative that they eschew the circulation of capital in commodity form altogether; rather, they attempt to harness intrinsic dynamics of capitalism to progressive political projects'.

It is useful, therefore, to ask (paraphrasing Whatmore et al., 2003): 'What's alternative about alternative economies?' A first step in answering is to outline the shared sense in the literature of what constitutes the mainstream. As Jonas (2010, p. 4) remarks: 'the notion of an "alternative" implies that the object to which it refers must necessarily be situated in relation to an "other" – the thing... that the "alternative" seeks to oppose, replace or challenge'.

Although it is often implicitly or uncritically invoked, the point of origin for many studies of alternative economies is globalised neoliberal capitalism. Gibson-Graham's deliberate caricature of this 'beast' is a more effective synthesis of its characteristics than any straight literature review. In eight points, just 'a few examples from a list that is potentially infinite' (1996, p. 7), she constructs a straw man, 'or more accurately a bizarre and monstrous being that will never be found in pure form in any other text' (1996, pp. 9–10). Without aiming for an accurate representation of the many 'capitalisms' in existence, Gibson-Graham employs exaggeration to approach the collective power of the narratives that enable capitalism to exist and pervade all life so thoroughly that the system itself appears to have 'no outside' (1996, p. xxiv).

The characteristics of this monster include: the 'heroism' of capitalism in the teleological narrative of modernity; its nature as a unified body, 'vitalized by a growth imperative and though prone to crises (diseases)', also 'capable of recovery' (1996, p. 8); its status as the master term by which all other economic spaces are defined; and its 'absolute presence' (1996, p. 9) that saturates all spaces, appropriates all individuals and is unbounded by identity.

Gibson-Graham is far more explicit than most studies of economic alternatives in conceptualising the mainstream economy, and this formulation has come to be regarded as seminal by many in the field. It is however, a strategic one in its deliberate hyperbole, and it is worth remembering that the relationship between this mainstream and its alternatives are neither easily separated nor indeed are experienced as separate in people's everyday lives, as Lee (2006, p. 418) notes: 'Assumptions of... the hegemony of capitalist value and temporalities are constantly disrupted by diverse historical, political, social and environmental geographies which... cannot simply be reduced to "non-capitalist"'. The language of 'diverse economies', often employed instead of or in conjunction with that of alterity, provides one way of acknowledging the multiplicity of both dominant and less powerful, less recognised modes of economic participation. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2008), again, has been influential in developing this vocabulary, following the emphasis of Escobar (1995) and other postdevelopment theorists on the 'heterogeneity within [economic] narratives and diversity of local practices' (Sidaway, 2007, p. 349).

The central problem here, whether the language is that of alterity or diversity, is agency. The major flaw in economic understandings, according to Gibson-Graham, is that agency is attributed to the capitalist system and capital itself, rather than to the human beings who generate and sustain them. Capitalism is in most discourses alive, actively growing and regenerating, penetrating every space and controlling every interaction. Humans are subject to the power and imperatives of capital, rather than vice versa. Redress, for Gibson-Graham as for like-minded scholars must therefore be brought about through projects that relocate agency in the realms of the human, both individual and collective.

2.1. Individual agency

Positioning the individual as central to understanding the economy is not novel; individual autonomy has a long history in mainstream economic thought, arising from dominant narratives of modernity which in turn are rooted in Enlightenment philosophy. Indeed many theorists take the autonomous self to be the defining feature of being modern. As Delanty (2000, p. 13) suggests, 'the foundation of modern culture is the doctrine of the autonomy of the self and its project of self-determination'. However, whereas mainstream economic theory develops from this its notion of rational, individualistic *homo economicus*, theorists of alternative economies aim to produce an understanding of the self resting on moral concerns rather than self-interest. *Homo economicus* is ostensibly agential, constantly taking economic decisions that further his (as indeed the subject position is typically, implicitly male) own wellbeing. But the human thus imagined is a mechanistic, atomised actor, whose choices maximise benefit, narrowly defined, for himself only. The real actor and beneficiary in the dominant economic imaginary, therefore, is capital itself, since human interests and the growth of production and profit are seen as coterminous.

Against this dehumanised vision, the alternative economies literature presents an image of individual wellbeing as centred firmly in personal empowerment, rather than in the domain of the purely economic. This is particularly explicit in the discourses of Fair Trade, 'driven as it is by a desire to empower producers' (Lawrence and Burch, 2007, see also McEwan and Bek, 2009; Le Mare, 2008; Kleine, 2010). But others employ similar language – unsurprisingly, since as Gold (2004) notes, empowerment formed one of the pillars of the paradigm shift in development theory in the 1990s.