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RETHINKING MARXISM IN AUSTRALIA: REFLECTIONS ON THE "HILLS HOIST ROAD TO SOCIALISM"

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My most recent encounter with an audience of Australian political economists and fellow travellers was at the "Rethinking Marxism in Australia Conference" at the University of Wollongong in November 1999 when I was invited to offer a keynote presentation alongside my colleague Steve Cullenberg from the University of California, Riverside, then co-editor of the US-based journal *Rethinking Marxism*. I was very pleased to have been invited to Wollongong, where in the early 1980s I had been peripherally involved with Graham Larcombe and Romaine Rutnam, some of the pioneers of the Australian political economy movement, on economic research for the Wollongong Workers' Research Centre. The invitation presaged to me a coming of age of the movement and I welcomed the opportunity it seemed to offer for an honest and self-reflective investigation of the legacies and potentialities of Marxism in the Australian intellectual and political context.

My half hour paper outlined some of the theoretical and action research Julie Graham and I have done since writing *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (1996), a book which draws on post-structuralist feminist and social theory to engage with Marxian class theory and left-inspired local economic 'development' interventions. The central argument of the book is that the way capitalism is talked about as a singular and unified system limits our ability to acknowledge and strengthen economic diversity and stunts development of a vibrant post-capitalist politics.

Before Steve had his say, I was treated to an engagement with my work by Brian Cox, Demetriou Demetrakis, Mike Donaldson, Rene Leal and Richard Southall, authors of a read paper entitled "Katherine Gibson and the antinomies of post-modern socialism". For half an hour I sat stunned as my work was excoriated by a line-up of five men who took it upon themselves to instruct me on how to put my head and my heart "back together again" (1999:8). If I wanted to build and live the revolution along with these boys I had to abandon my idealism, stop trying to change minds instead of society, and above all give up trying to create socialism in my own backyard:

...while this hills-hoist rode (*sic*) to socialism is attractive and comforting, it leaves us with a Marxism that has been stripped of its revolutionary energy, its materialist analysis and its hope in the imagination of the proletariat. (Cox, *et al*, 1999:6)

Not only was this misguided, but hanging the political left out to dry on the hills-hoist was positively dangerous:

[Gibson] wants socialism without socialists, a working class without workers. Not only the development of wide-spread and inclusive counter-hegemonic processes has been weakened by her post-modernism, but the very possibility of constructing partial hegemonies is jeopardized for, in the end, she dissolves reality and agency into the soup of discourse. (1999:7)

Writing this I find myself wondering if perhaps I was also responsible for the smashing defeat (the first time in some 50 years) of the Labor party in the recent Wollongong by-election, and the election of a Green member for Cunningham in the Federal Lower House. Surely the effect of rampaging post-modernism, JKGG-style, on the Illawarra?

Having been subjected to that 'welcoming' experience, my hopes for some rapprochement with the new/old left of the Australian political economy movement were shelved for a while. And yet, here I am entering the fray again, on the invitation of Frank Stilwell to write a short position piece on "the central issues of today and the best way forward for political economic analysis" from my perspective.

What I have related above is a rather minor and personal story, yet no less instructive about politics and communication to me for its smallness in the face of things. Similarly, what I have to say in response to Frank's invitation is also minor and highly personal, not aiming to be an agenda for "What is to be done?", but some reflections as I see them on the promises and possibilities for rethinking, reimagining and remaking the economy today.

Surplus

As we have tried to show in recent publications (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff, 2000, 2001) Marxism's interest in fostering an economic analysis of *surplus labour* has an explicitly political motive. In my 1980s empirical engagement with Marxian value theory I was interested in operationalizing a theory of surplus labour as a way of understanding the dynamics of capitalist industrial restructuring (Gibson, Graham and Shakow, 1989) but became increasingly dissatisfied with the political potential of this work (see Gibson-Graham, 1996 Chapter 5). While my heart is still in the 'right' (ie. left) place, according to the Wollongong push, and I still have a commitment to eradicating the social injustices associated with exploitation, I am drawn more to the insight that societies are (not wholly but in large part) built from social surplus and can be reshaped by new arrangements of producing, appropriating and distributing surplus labour.

My value empirics was in many ways consistent with the depoliticisation of the 'economy' that has taken place in recent years, with the rise of neo-liberalism and broad acceptance that the economy is the ultimate *real* and thus outside politics (Gibson-Graham, 2003). This epistemologically realist understanding has further marginalised economic analyses that might focus on 1) the performative effects of theorising surplus and economy in different ways, and 2) the myriad projects that are beginning to imagine and build new economic relations (Gibson-Graham, 2002).

Following the lead of historians such as Nicholas Brown (1995) and Tim Rowse (2003), there is fascinating work to be done on the current

legacies of how 'economy' came to be envisaged and enacted in concrete events and places in Australia (see Gibson, 2001, for my own attempt on the Latrobe Valley). For instance, the imposition in 'regional Australia' of a singular vision of economy pegged to a unified labour market and expectations of capitalist growth both ignored the operations and productivity of an indigenous economy and had the effects of undermining its continued viability in many places. Like this one, there are many detailed chapters of Australia's *economic* history yet to be told.

Rising to the challenges posed by Race Matthews (1999), there is much work to be done on economic experimentation, both in the past and on the contemporary scene. For example, the troubled relationship between the Australian trade union movement and producer and consumer co-operatives is a project that comes to mind, one that might explore the variety of political economic *ethics* that have historically influenced and continue to shape surplus production, appropriation and distribution in Australian society.

Subjects

As a political project Marxism has always been interested in acting subjects. Today, it seems there is scope for much imaginative theorising and action research around economic subjectivity. How might we create subjects of a post-capitalist economy? Who is the subject of a diverse economy? If not (only) the working class, then who? Moreover, how is economic desire enacted?

Indeed, how might desire for non-capitalism be kindled in the face of the more familiar '*economic*' desires:

- *to consume*: Apparently we are all commodity consumers, duped by the vagaries of the capitalist market (frills are in this year, girls, get used to them, desire them even).
- *to profit*: Many of us (including those of us in superannuation funds) are shareholders, members of the most democratised share constituency in the world.

- *to be exploited*: Others are on the scrap heap, reminded on a weekly basis of their economic dependence and invalidity as worthwhile citizens of this nation, and desperately desiring a job.
- *even to connect*: As the economy invades further and further into social life, we are also, it seems, smug owners and purveyors of 'social capital' (as the motley audience at my daughter's recent dance performance in Canberra was informed!):

Linked to questions of desire and subjectivity is the question of economic affect and its role in subjects becoming (other). What might be the dangers of allowing the old style labour left to colonise political (economic) emotions, legitimising anger, resentment and division—eschewing pleasure, forgiveness and connection?

My recent action research in the Latrobe Valley, in collaboration with Jenny Cameron, confronted these questions as retrenched middle-aged male electricity workers voiced their frustrations and disappointments about economic abandonment and loss of traditional class agency (Cameron and Gibson, 2000). Contemplating engagement in local projects designed to strengthen the community economy, desire was hard to kindle. The allure of an Electrical Trades Union (ETU)-led revolution seemed much more compelling than the 'hills-hoist road' to wherever it was going. And no-one was suggesting a Full Monty style fantasy retraining as strippers (Gibson-Graham, 2002).

Building new economic identities in the community economy and kindling the desires of people to occupy them is a painful process that involves grieving for lost identity and economic power and opening to new experiences, affects and emotions. It is, as we found out, also wonderfully rewarding as unprecedented connections were fostered with other men, housewives, young unemployed and health beneficiaries in the process of building a community garden, founding a community workshop for the elderly and retrenched, forming a circus skills training group for young unemployed kids and setting up Santa's workshop to produce Christmas decorations for homes and businesses (Cameron and Gibson, 2001). These projects may be 'growing social capital' (in the dominant 'policy speak' of our times) but they are also developing new forms of collective ownership, drawing on a variety of modes of labour

remuneration, and making explicit how the surplus generated in these activities is to be distributed. In the deluded terms of JK Gibson-Graham, they are contributing to the proliferative diversity of non-capitalist economies. In Australia today there are so many opportunities to engage in conversations that help people take back the economy and make it their own.

Conversation involves listening, and it's not always easy. It's taken me three years to finally read the paper "Katherine Gibson and the antinomies of post-modern socialism" and listen to the voices of Cox, Demetrakis, Donaldson, Leal and Southall. What I hear is certainty and accusation. I'm still looking forward to participating in pleasurable and productive public conversations about Australian political economy.

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