Economic meltdown, or what an iceberg can tell us about the economy

J.K. Gibson-Graham

Do you feel part of the economy? That thing that we are told grows or stagnates? That thing that is monitored by financial analysts (our modern day sooth-sayers) who interpret fluctuations in interest rates, share prices, trade balances and investment patterns, and take up more time on the nightly TV news than the weather report?

The economy, as we have come to know it, is presented as a machine that dictates our lives – it enrols us as employees and employers, as consumers, as property owners, as investors, and tells us what is and is not contributing to the economic bottom line. It churns up people and spits them out when their wages rise too high. It 'develops' by accessing cheap resources, ignoring the environmental consequences of depletion and degradation. This machine-economy is seen to operate best when left to its own devices – though of course governments are frequently called in to repair this part, or regulate that, or bail out some large institution or other. In this vision we are not part of the economy, the economy is something that does things to us.

The more we go along with the idea of the economy as an engine that must be fuelled by growth, the more we are locked into imagining ourselves as individual cogs – economic actors only if we work to consume. But there are many other ways that we contribute economically. The machine-economy vision ignores the myriad ways that people and organizations interact to provide material wellbeing, social and psychological sustenance and environmental care in our world.

There is work to do to fully reject the idea that the economy is a machine and recognize that it has no existence apart from us. This is where our iceberg comes in. We are all familiar with the fact that what we see of the iceberg above the waterline is just its tip, perhaps not more than 10% of its mass. Well the economy that supports our lives is like that too.

If we see only the paid wage labour, production for markets, and capitalist business that are the focus of the business press, governments and economists, we miss out on a host of other practices that constitute our economy. In fact we are only seeing the tip of the economic iceberg.

Under the waterline are all those activities, organizations, interactions and places that play a role in supporting livelihoods. Just think of all the ways we work to meet our daily needs apart from having a job and a regular wage. There is the unpaid work that is done in households making food, washing clothes, providing clean and nourishing living spaces. There is the volunteer work that is done in families and neighbourhoods to care for the young, the elderly, animals and the environment. There is the work people do in gardens and kitchens, sheds and workshops to self-provision. And we can't forget the dark side of our diverse economy – the hidden unpaid labour of slaves who work for no return, other than mere existence, in coercive situations all over the world.

On top of this there's the work that's done for payment of a different kind. The self-employed often work for very little, other than the rewards of independence that being your own boss (and worker) affords. Those in cooperatives work for a negotiated share of the value they create. Some people work and are paid in-kind, for example with food, shelter or a share of the harvest. Others perform reciprocal labour in that they offer their labour to others in return for the same at some later date to harvest, or build, or make something.

Most of us do more than one form of work and yet it is only paid employment in formal business institutions that up till now is valued as contributing to the 'real' economy. And when we look around we see that needs are being met by a whole range of different types of labour that is enacted in all kinds of places, not just 'work-places'. Once we are attuned to the diversity of economic practices that surround us the economy is reframed as something that we can start to take back and make to work for people and planet.

Trade is one activity that is being taken back from those markets where the machinery of supply, demand and price setting stands in the way of ethical encounters. Markets connect us with others, especially distant others. They enable us to obtain the things we need that we can't produce for ourselves. But while supermarkets and shopping malls are convenient, this convenience

is a form of 'selective seeing' – it is easy to overlook the cost of our transactions on others and feel disconnected from the people and environments that produced the products we buy.

Increasingly people are becoming more aware of the multiple roles they play as producers, traders and consumers and are looking to build more direct connections with those who make what we need. Transacting does not have to be faceless or exploitative. Fair-trade networks, for example, help us to learn about and respect the distant others who produce the coffee we consume or the clothes we wear. This movement ensures that distant producers can lead decent lives and their environments can be maintained and cared for. Direct people-to-people trade and reciprocal exchanges are other ways of enacting ethical interconnections with others. In Japan a national system of reciprocal exchange, Fureai Kippu or caring relationship tickets, documents unpaid hours of in-home care for elderly and disabled people. You can provide care for a disabled neighbour and give the tickets to your elderly mother who lives in another part of the country. She, in turn, can receive these hours of care from another person who is part of the reciprocal exchange system. You can even store up the hours of care you give for use in your own old age!

In a world where certain kinds of expertise are valued way above others, there is a huge range in the monetary returns to different kinds of labour. Local trading systems can use time-banks to override this by valuing an hour of any kind of labour the same. Hour Exchange, in Portland, Maine is a time bank that includes doctors at the local health-care centre and low income residents. A one hour medical appointment earns the same amount of credit as one hour of window cleaning, fixing cars or teaching painting. The ethical negotiation of value comes into community supported agriculture as well. Here consumers provide a guaranteed market and income for farmers, and farmers reciprocate with fresh food to meet the needs of consumers. This means that producers and consumers share the risk of farming – if it's a good growing season, consumers will receive larger shares of produce, but if it's a poor season, shares will be smaller. In either case the farmer is supported to maintain a decent livelihood and not to place too high a demand on the land that sustains us all.

Despite what the economists say the market is not all there is. Our survival is ensured by many other transactions that are not mediated by markets that calibrate values, using prices or hours. Think of the transactions that involve direct connections such as gifting, gleaning and gathering. All these activities involve some kind of (often unsaid) ethical negotiation with other people and environments. Whether it is gathering berries or mushrooms, dumpster-diving or free-cycling, presenting wedding or birthday gifts, these interconnections contribute to material wellbeing and thus keep our economy afloat.

As we learn to appreciate the economic diversity that co-exists in our world, we see ourselves occupying multiple economic identities, producing many different kinds of value and benefiting from the gifts given by our earth and our community. Now, more than ever before, we are being called upon to build a different economy – one that nourishes life in all its forms. How we do this is up for grabs. One place to start is where we are right now in the public realm of an art space.

Art is a production, a located practice, a trade or transaction with materiality, with viewers, with buyers. An art space is like a shop, when we step across the threshold we become consuming subjects. Our curiosity is aroused. Our taste is challenged. Neither school nor court, the shop/gallery is yet a place of learning, negotiation and judgment. Can it be a site for enlarging our economic sensibilities? Can we use this familiar site of trade to enter into an expanded realm of transactions and interconnections?

The image of the economy as an iceberg is one way of reframing which practices are included and valued as 'economic'. When we see the whole iceberg above and below the waterline, the economy as we have known it melts away. We start to recognize the vast range of practices, places, organizations and relationships that contribute to daily survival. What was once seen as 'alternative' is but part of the already existing diverse economy.

While many practices have been ignored and thus effectively devalued in mainstream economic thinking, this is starting to change. Feminists have finally convinced national statistics agencies to collect information on caring and domestic labour and volunteer labour. There is increasing interest in the contributions of cooperatives and social enterprises towards socially just wealth generation. And mainstream business is starting to notice the impact of collaborative consumption in the sharing economy and name it as a threat to business as usual. All across the globe people are creatively re-engineering economies, innovating with new ways of transacting labour and goods, new mechanisms for distributing surplus and different temporalities of investment and return.

The economy is ultimately what we make it. We can take it back so that it serves the needs of people and the planet more directly.

This text is loosely based on ideas presented in *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities* by J.K. Gibson-Graham, J. Cameron and S. Healy published by the University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, USA in April, 2013.

J.K Gibson-Graham is the pen-name of Katherine Gibson and the late Julie Graham, feminist political economists and economic geographers based at the University of Western Sydney, Australia and the University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA. Their 1996 book *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* was republished in 2006 by Minnesota Press along with its sequel *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Julie and Kath are founding members of the Community Economies Collective www.communityeconomies.org