



New spaces, ordinary practices: Circulating and sharing within diverse economies of provisioning

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Diverse economies
Ordinary provision
Circular economy
Shared economy
Materialities

ABSTRACT

This article draws upon two distinct UK case studies to explore how alternative modes of provisioning employ ordinary practices of sharing and circularity. Speaking to debates about alterity, diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008) and emerging literature on the circular and shared economy, these two small and informal based models, one food based, the other clothing, are put forward as examples of the vast array of contemporary ‘alternative’ forms of consumption and provisioning taking place across the UK. The article illuminates how diverse economies are ‘made material’ through their materials and practices. In doing so I make three key arguments: firstly, and overall, that studying materiality is one way to illuminate these new and emerging spaces of provisioning, highlighting their practices, intimacies and ambiguities. Secondly, this material focus illustrates how the practices of provisioning – in particular, sharing and circulating - are not new, but are instead organised in original and novel ways; and this has wider implications for contemporary debates on circular and shared economy. Thirdly, that the materials of provisioning can be both beneficial and troublesome to provisioning organisations’ practices of circulating and sharing and the extent to which they tackle issues of social exclusion, financial hardship and sustainable resource use.

1. Introduction

This paper considers the emergence of contemporary provisioning models and their materialities and practices. It argues that focusing on the materialities of diverse provisioning economies is one way to make sense of them, and that doing so reveals the ordinary practices of circularity and sharing which take place in these new and novel spaces. Through this focus it joins debates around the geographies of alterity and austerity with those of circular (CE) and shared economy (SE). Inspiration is drawn from Gibson-Graham’s (2008) notion of ‘diverse economies’, alongside more recent work which illuminates the potential of alternative economic spaces and their intersections with CE/SE (Hobson, 2016; Ince and Hall, 2017). However, a key element of this paper is its consideration of ordinary, everyday economic practices; and for this it returns to the work of Pahl (1984) and Clarke (2001), both of whom have highlighted the informal, often taken-for-granted elements of informal economies and their focus upon sharing, circulating and reciprocating.

Gibson-Graham’s ‘diverse economies’ is a useful mechanism with which to think through contemporary alternative responses to global economic and political uncertainty. Models such as food banks, community food gardens, pay-what-you-can cafes and tool libraries, to name but a few, have been positioned as potential resolutions to the

widening inequality gap created by global recession. Although such models are as diverse as they are similar, as a collective they promote progressive values around wellbeing, social justice and sustainability (Morgan, 2015). In the UK the impact of neoliberal austerity has been acute. In 2014 3.9 million people were in persistent poverty and 32.5% of the UK population reported experiencing relative income poverty at least once between 2011 and 2014 (ONS, 2016). With a persistent housing crisis (Shelter, 2016), continued uncertainty regarding the fallout from Brexit, and the yet to be felt long-term effects of benefits changes, alternative provisioning strategies have been developed across UK cities and towns with the aim of helping communities in financial hardship. Yet alongside more well-known and structured networks, such as The Trussell Trust, Incredible Edible, and The Real Junk Food Café, operates a plethora of other smaller often informal endeavours. The alterity of such strategies is up for debate and, as I illustrate, the concept of alternative provisioning is in itself an umbrella for an assortment of often paradoxical activities. Yet, these diverse endeavours demonstrate the heterogeneity of contemporary economic activity and the emergence of new economic spaces through which various forms of ‘economy’ are practiced and made material.

The popularisation and subsequent confusion regarding the supposedly recent economic formations of the sharing economy (SE) and the circular economy (CE) similarly serves to highlight the heightened

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heterogeneity of economic activity (Belk, 2014a, 2014b; Richardson, 2015; Schor in Schor et al., 2015). Although neoliberalism has provoked a resurgence of academic interest in the moral economy, as scholars critique the structured inequalities of capitalist political economies (Wilson and Jackson 2016; Morgan, 2015; Morris, 2016; Sayer, 2015), there is a dearth of scholarly literature dealing with these new and often contradictory economic formations and their place within the ‘new crisis of capitalism’ (Sonnino and Griggs-Trevarthen, 2013: 272); not to mention how they intersect with contemporary spaces of provisioning.

Studies by Hobson (2016) and Hall and Ince (2017) have made a crucial step along this path. The latter illuminate the everyday embeddedness of sharing as economic practice ‘existing beyond or at the edge of the commodified sphere’ (p. 4). Their edited collection draws upon a variety of compelling case studies to convey not only the complexity and ambiguity of sharing, but also how mutuality, solidarity and resourcefulness are a crucial component of sharing practices in times of crisis. The former similarly notes the embeddedness of economic practice. Bridging the lacunae between CE and SE, Hobson (2016) advocates the potential for ‘rich engagement’ (p. 99) with the ‘generative spaces’ (p. 98) and social enterprises of everyday activism. Such a focus enables an unrestricted approach to the possible realms of CE and SE, not bound by scale or space.

It is here where this article interjects. As Hobson concludes, further conceptual and empirical exploration of such spaces is required. Drawing upon the notion of diverse economies and an appreciation of the everyday embeddedness of sharing and circularity as economic practice, this paper uses two case studies, one a domestic clothes swap, the other a membership based food provisioning group, to empirically flesh out what such ‘generative spaces’ look like, illuminating their varied scales and spaces. However, it also pushes further at these arguments. Firstly, it examines how these diverse economies are materially stabilised, or ‘made material’, through the practices of circulating and sharing, and inversely how materiality also ‘troubles’ them. In doing so, I illuminate how provisioning organisations challenge and also inadvertently reproduce inequalities and exclusion. This material focus draws upon the vast body of work on consumption, everyday practice and material culture (key examples texts include: Gronow and Warde, 2001; Miller, 1987, 2010; Gregson, 2007; Shove, 2003). Secondly, it returns to the work of Pahl (1984) and Clarke (2001) to illustrate how these practices are not new, but are rather age-old methods of self-provisioning and getting-by, badged in original and organised forms. From swapping and sharing, making and mending, to exchange and barter, these ordinary practices and the materialities they encompass illuminate new economic spaces operating in between the gaps of ‘alternative’ and also ‘emergency’ provisioning.

The article begins with an overview of the complexity of the current economic landscape, and the contemporary positioning of provisioning. A review of the research this paper stems from and its methodological underpinnings follows. In the second part, attention turns to the two empirical case studies. I begin by detailing the structure and format of these new and novel diverse provisioning economies. I then illustrate how circularity and sharing practices are materially stabilised within these spaces of provision and their ordinariness revealed. Following this, I examine how the materialities of provisioning cannot only stabilise the ordinary practices of circularity and sharing, but can also trouble them.

2. Situating provisioning

2.1. Diverse economies, morality and gifting

Nearly 10 years ago Gibson-Graham (2008: 614) argued that ‘projects of economic autonomy and experimentation’ were ‘proliferating worldwide’. These ‘diverse economies’ offered an opportunity for geographers to bring ‘marginalised, hidden and alternative economies to

light’ (p. 613). Building upon their prior concept of ‘community economies’ (2006), Gibson’s-Graham’s ‘diverse economies’ involves an expansive variety of global-local forms of alternative and non-market transactions, paid and unpaid forms of labour, and alternative capitalist and non-capitalist types of enterprises. Drawing on feminist economics, but also notions of the social economy, this broad brush approach captured the heterogeneity and experimental aura of the then economic climate. It also circumvented the ongoing fierce debates about what is ‘alternative’ within the economy. Through a focus on relationality and embeddedness, their work conceives alternatives as ‘continuously made (and unmade) through economic performance’, as opposed to thinking about them as somehow ‘out-there’, pre-given constructs of an ‘other’ (Jonas, 2010: 7).

More recent academic work has taken up Gibson-Graham’s gauntlet of revealing diverse economies. Studies on community co-operatives (Coren and Clamp, 2014; Daya and Authar, 2012; Paddock, 2015), farmer’s markets (Tchoukaleyska, 2013; Vecchio, 2011) urban growing projects (McLain et al., 2013; Potter and Westall, 2013), cultural festivals (Gibson et al., 2009), community alliances (Wills, 2012) and credit unions (Jones, 2008) are just a few of the multitude of scholarly responses. And this response itself has not gone unnoticed within the academic community (Fickley, 2011; Lee et al., 2008). Indeed, a research focus on the hidden, alternative and experimental within the economy endures, as scholars ‘continue to refine what constitutes a diverse economy and alternative economic space’ (Fickey, 2011: 237). Caught up in this space are other economic formations all aiding the creation of the heterogeneity of this plural economy (Amin, 2009). Alongside the popular social economy (Amin, 2009), the foundational economy (Leaver and Williams, 2014; Morgan, 2015), care economy (Zelizer, 2013) and compassion economy (James, 2010) all form part of this discourse; similarly drawing upon ideas of social justice, co-operation and working for the common good. This paper is firmly positioned within this persistent questioning of the contemporary economic landscape; aiming to illuminate, however trivial, partial or informal they may be, other economic spaces, formations and practices.

Inherent within alternative and diverse economies is the notion of morality. As Sayer (2015: 292) notes ‘all economies are moral economies in some respects’, as they must all justify themselves and their actions. This reading complements the notion that these new economic spaces are not simply alterities to capitalism, as the two cannot be easily detached (Daya and Authar, 2012), but rather they are ‘counter to the mono-culture of capitalism’ (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 623). There is not the space in this paper to adequately engage with the extensive and often complex debates regarding the moral economy (see: Polanyi, 1957; Sayer 2000, 2003; Thompson, 1991). Rather it is only suffice to say, that the concept of the moral economy, as both an object of study and as a method of enquiry, is deployed typically (although by no means exclusively) by the alternative economies literature as a means of appreciating: the ethics of care; importance of human agency; reciprocal relations; and collective and community action inherent in some economic activities. Closely entwined with the moral economy, and equally as contested, is that of the gift economy, and likewise this is not something this paper will focus on. Volunteering, donations of time, money, materials are all forms of gifts which are regularly given to provisioning organisations – emergency or otherwise. As Caplan (2016) notes, the donation of food to a food bank or the volunteers’ time are both gifts. Yet, despite the prominence of morality and gifting as inherent features of provisioning, and undoubtedly features which are also ‘made material’, it is the practices of sharing and circularity which are at the core of this article.

2.2. Circular economy and sharing economy

The sharing and circular economies are both new and increasingly popular concepts, which have gained significant traction within the overall economic landscape. However, they are only now really starting

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