Exploring the extent of noncapitalist economy in the 21st century

Louis Thiemann

1International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague – Pays-Bas

Résumé

Postcapitalists such as Gibson-Graham (1996, 2008) argue that the first step in making capitalism contingent (i.e. an option amongst many instead of an inevitable force) is to make visible and palpable the many alternative modes practiced beside it. Such theoretical attempts at "producing a discourse of economic difference", however, have tended to lead to a loose grouping of non-capitalist practices within a pluralist experiential ‘universe’ (Gibson-Graham have termed this ‘diverse economies’). What remains unclear is how a fragmented assembly of sectorial and place-based movements representing a ‘universe’ of identities, concerns and theories can converge to evict entrenched, globalized capitalist structures.

The search for commonalities between diverse noncapitalist practices hinges on a re-conceptualization of class itself, incorporating, among others, Bourdieu’s broader notion of capital(s) (1986) and recent research into unorganized and ‘everyday forms of resistance’ (Scott, 2008; Ye et al 2016). I argue that all forms of noncapitalist labor and consumption rest on, or tend towards, a common class position and principle: autonomy. Wherever the capital relation is absent or limited (be it in peasant agriculture, household self-sufficiency, small-business districts, cooperative endeavors, or university-based research), we find individuals self-directing their energies, safeguarded by collectively-maintained rights, institutions and commons. Rather than flag-bearers of an elusive economic pluralism, they constitute a third class-in-itself alongside capital and proletariat – the artisanat.

The paper integrates theories and concepts used to understand noncapitalist/artisan labor in a variety of sectors. Different forms of accumulation established in PE (primitive, extra-economic, simple, expanded) are juxtaposed with their corresponding forms of equilibration. Examples of cross-sectorial organization and struggle along artisan class lines are discussed (e.g. Via Campesina’s or StreetNet). The paper ends with an exploration of the factors that prevent alliance formation on a broader scale, taking as point of reference the cross-sectorial convergence of diverse proletarian movements between 1870 and 1930.

Mots-Clés: autonomy, peasantry, artisanat, self, direction, alternative economies, nested markets