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This impressive collection of stimulating theorization and descriptions of a multitude of other-than-capitalist economic practices could not have been published at a more pertinent time. Engulfing the world, the Covid19 pandemic has energized communities into many remarkable actions of solidarity while governments in the ‘minority world’ - to use the language promoted by this book - have offered substantial support to tame the economic shocks. Will the world continue as we know it or has time come for change? ‘Diverse economies’ scholars have earnestly engaged with this question before the pandemic struck and prior to the global financial crisis that has (again) demonstrated the perils of financialised capitalism.

As housing scholars have largely missed this body of work, I will briefly present the ‘diverse economies’ core framework before reflecting on this inspirational Handbook. This is a new but growing body of work (Figure 1, left panel), stirred by J.K. Gibson-Graham’s continued work of theorizing and documenting the diversity of economic practices that intertwine capitalist economies. The literature uses the imagery of the cake or the iceberg (Figure 1, right panel) as a metaphoric representation of the ‘whole’ economy.

Figure 1 The ‘diverse economies’ programme

The top layer represents the capitalist economy of the private firm characterized by paid work, monetized transactions, exclusive distribution of profit to capital-owners. The discursive dominance of this economy is conceptualized as ‘capitalocentrism’, which is seen not only as hiding other economic practices but closing the future towards alternative economies. Below the top layer, there are the less visible alternative capitalist economies of the public sector, third sector, socially and environmentally oriented private firms and the ‘grey’ economy, each with their very different characteristics, sharing the
fact that profit is distributed more widely. The least visible *non-capitalist* economies are embedded in non-market spaces, relying on unpaid labour.

Diverse economy scholars celebrate the ethics of economies of solidarity that stem from altruism, sharing, love, parenting, volunteering, mutual aid, sustainability concerns for and reliance on nature, and their ethos of commons rather than privatism, collaboration rather than competition, sustainability rather than exploitation. They are nonetheless accused of myopia (Samers, 2005) or illusion (Ossewaarde & Reijers, 2017) for they seem to dismiss the exploitation and welfare insecurity of unpaid work (including within the economies of theft or modern slavery), the challenge of scaling up and potential for cooption by the market.

The Handbook of Diverse Economies has clearly achieved theoretical fine-tuning. Some of the above lines of criticism are ably refuted (e.g. the challenge of scaling up), others admitted (e.g. the potential for cooption and exploitation), while making clear that these scholars remain exclusively concerned with the ‘ethical’ practices of the ‘whole’ economy - where ethics is neither given nor binary but processual and negotiated between agents, human and more-than-human, present and future.

Across 68 contributors, the Handbook attains the impressive achievement of theoretical harmony and substantive richness. Substantial work of theorizing is advanced in the introductory Chapter 1 by the editors (a must read for readers who want to familiarize with this scholarship) and in the seven framing essays that introduce the seven parts that structure the book: Enterprise (Jenny Cameron), Labour (Katharine McKinnon), Transactions (Gradon Diprose), Property (Kevin St Martin), Finance (Maliha Safri and Yahya M Madra), Subjectivity (Stephen Healy, Ceren Ozselcuk and Yahya M Madra), and Methodology (Gerda Roelvink). There is no space to mention other contributors, suffice observing that nine were PhD candidates, indicating authorship inclusiveness and high odds for further field expansion; and almost two thirds happen to be females. The chapters within each of the seven parts make refreshing and easy reading while bringing substantive richness. They demonstrate the usefulness of this theoretical framework to the analysis of, e.g., workers cooperatives and anti-mafia enterprise (Part 1); paid, unpaid, caring or non-human labour (Part 2) alternative currencies (Part 3); community land trust and free universities (Part 4); Islamic and ‘hacking’ finance (Part 5); more-than-human agency and affect (Part 6); artistic methodologies, GIS and assemblage analysis (Part 7).

The Handbook is truly international in terms of authors’ affiliations and case studies’ geographies, covering the ‘minority world’ (developed countries) and the ‘majority world’ (those less developed) - although I confess, while I understand the symbolism of these expressions, I have trouble in relating to them as I do not know where I should place myself as a post-communist migrant, nor the precariat of the ‘minority world’ or the cosmopolitans of the ‘majority world’.

As discourse is performative, the authors advance a careful set of concepts aimed at bringing to the fore ‘the hidden’ and deconstructing ‘the dominant’. Of all, I would like to highlight the already mentioned concept of ‘capitalocentrism’, which I wish to pair with the dominance of ‘financialisation’ in housing studies that dismisses the diverse economies of housing whether in the most or the least financialised nations (Soaita, 2019). To give two brief examples: in Romania, one of the least financialised countries,
just 1.1% of households are mortgagors, homes being gifted as (shared) space or self-built with pooled-family resources. In the UK, one of the most financialised countries, 27.6% of owner-occupier households own outright, mortgagors are often supported with family gifts and the DIY home-improvement industry is substantial.

The Handbook offers key conceptual tools for housing scholars to unlock the diverse economies of housing. It also makes an inspiring read for students and scholars of any discipline who want to imagine alternative, more ethical futures which are already seeded in the practices of today.

References

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