

Temporal Belongings



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Katherine Gibson is an economic geographer with an international reputation for innovative research on economic transformation and over 30 years' experience of working with communities to build resilient economies. As J.K. Gibson-Graham, the collective authorial presence she shares with the late Julie Graham (Professor of Geography, University of Massachusetts Amherst), her books include *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Blackwell 1996), *A Postcapitalist Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006) and *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities*, co-authored with Jenny Cameron and Stephen Healy (University of Minnesota Press, 2013). She is a member of the *Community Economies Collective* (CEC) which is a collaborative network of researchers who share an interest in theorizing, discussing, representing and ultimately enacting new visions of economy.

This interview was conducted as part of the AHRC-funded Sustaining Time project (www.sustainingtime.org). The project asks, if clock time helped build industrial capitalism & the idea of a speeded-up, networked time supports late capitalism, what kind of time would support alternative, sustainable economies? It took place in November 2013 and has been edited for length and clarity.

Alternative to what?

MB: Since this project is about alternative economies, I just wanted to begin by asking you what you understand by this term. How would you describe your vision of an alternative economy?

KG: Well that's an interesting question because I don't use the term alternative economy, for the reason that I think using the term 'alternative' just keeps reinforcing the dominance of the 'mainstream' economy. But, that said, I can see what you are talking about: How do I think about other kinds of economies than the one we've got? I guess I don't really have a blueprint, and that's partly the argument of our book *Take Back the Economy*,¹ that we don't have a blueprint, but what we have is a set of concerns that we would like to see put more at the core of what the economy might be.

So for me any kind of new economy or different kind of economy would put at its core the questions of how do we survive as humans on this planet and how do we survive with 'earth others' as well? We see these questions as something that we need to negotiate and expand on. How do we encounter others in the process of surviving well through all the different kinds of

¹ Gibson-Graham, J.K., Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy. 2013. *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

transactions that we're involved in, whether it be market or non-market transactions? How do we really think about the surplus or wealth that a society generates? What is the basis for that wealth? Where has it come from? What do we do with the surplus and how do we make and share property so that we actually produce well-being? And lastly, how do we invest in our future? How do we actually make the future? How do we take into account those who are coming next in the ways that we save and invest our wealth?

So if I think about what kind of economy might arise around those concerns, for me, it would be something that was quite diverse and heterogeneous. It might include all sorts of enterprise types and practices that we actually already have. So yes, that would be my answer to your question. I don't really have a wish-list, but more a series of questions.

Time and community economies

MB: So in your work on community economies have you noticed any issues to do with time coming up? In whatever way you want to take the term 'time'?

KG: Well I think it comes up in almost all of those concerns really in different ways. For instance, when it comes to thinking about what do we do to survive, how do we work or how do we labour, then clearly certain kinds of work, and the time put into them, are privileged and valued more versus the time that we put into other kinds of labour, whether it's caring labour or volunteering or just recreating or sleeping or whatever.

In thinking about these concerns we want to put that issue to the fore: what we are spending our time doing, what kinds of labour or work are we valuing. There are many examples of people questioning the dominance of paid work and moving away from only doing that kind of work. Instead they are trying to integrate different kinds of work like volunteering and caring into their lives and valuing those forms of labour that haven't been valued within mainstream economic thinking.

In our book we do actually bring it back to the 24 hour clock and invite people to inventory how they spend their time and to then look at what the balances are. For example, what are we trading off in terms of senses of wellbeing by working in these ways? And we are not just thinking of physical or material or economic wellbeing but also social and communal wellbeing. So when we think about time and where we're putting our time, one of the ways into thinking about different economies is asking ourselves where our wellbeing is actually coming from. Rather than thinking negatively about putting our time into all activities that don't make any money, perhaps instead thinking about this time as making social relationships or things that produce other kinds of well-being. Though of course that would be

very contextual for people because of where they are located and what kind of work they do.

But generally, a key issue is time not being fixed, but something that we negotiate with ourselves and with our society. Clearly, a large part of the working class movement has been around regulating the time spent in paid work versus the time in recreation and sleeping. However, that whole nexus of negotiation seems to have fractured in so many ways. Part of building that alternative that you were just talking about would involve stepping outside of the machine of the economy and asking "Why are we working?" The other aspect is looking at the ecological footprint of the kind of work-life that we have and asking, "What is it that we're doing with our planet if we work this way? How long have we got to live in a climate like this for, instance, if we keep going this way?" So there's something there.

MB: So time as a threshold perhaps? But also thinking about the past, present and futures of work?

KG: Yes. A lot of our thinking about the past, present and future is related to our work on property, communing and investing. In *Take Back the Economy* we have the idea of a commons yardstick which encourages using a generational timeframe to think about economies. We ask people to think about what actions have we engaged in, or people in the past have engaged in that have helped to make and share a commons that has produced wellbeing. We also think about what we might need to do now and in the future in order to sustain this. Part of the yardstick is also to identify the moments when there has been an 'uncommoning' such as the closure or privatisation of services, and explore how these acts might have reduced wellbeing for various stakeholders both human and nonhuman.

This framework helps participants to think about our interdependence with both commoning and uncommoning, what actions might need to be taken, but also to see how long it might take these actions to take effect. One example we use to think about the time of commoning is the ozone layer. The realisation that CFCs were damaging the ozone layer came well before action was taken to start to regulate them, and these regulations occurred well before the time when the ozone layer would heal itself, if it ever does. Scientists think it might be another seventy years or so. So putting ourselves in this drawn out timeframe of actions, interventions, restoration and rehabilitation is part of understanding the time of commoning.

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Another example from our book is in the chapter "Take Back the Market: Encountering Others." This is much more about the relationship between ourselves, others living locally to us, those that are at a distance and earth others. There we are thinking about the nature of the transaction and seeing this specifically as an encounter. What is the nature of this encounter and to what extent do we take responsibility for the other end of the encounter? Here time isn't so much of an issue in terms of simply whether the transaction is slow or instantaneous, but more thinking about the ethics of these interactions and what kind of connection we have with those environments, animals and people that provide the things we need to live well.

Revaluing time/labour

MB: Thank you. That's great, because I'll pick up on a few different issues that you've brought up there that resonate with what I wanted to focus on in our discussion. Firstly, I've been talking to people about the relationship between time, money and value. So the argument that one of the key shifts in capitalism is the way these three things became knotted together in particular ways. I thought it was really interesting in your work that there are a lot of methods for supporting people to revalue time that isn't valued or is devalued. So there was the use of the Portrait of Gifts exercise² and the 24 hour clock exercise³ that both encourage people to value the work done outside of the official eight hour work day. I wondered if you might want to say a bit more about that, and whether you see those kinds of exercises as trying to unpick that relationship between time, money and value and allow it to work in different ways?

KG: Yes, well I guess that kind of work is really just carrying on the work that certain feminists have done, such as Marilyn Waring and others who have sought to shine a light on all the social value that comes from different kinds of labour and which don't get recognised in the national accounts or similar accounting systems. So those techniques are ones that can be used particularly in communities where people have lost paid work or have been denied access to it.

It is partly about revaluing time, but there's also the valuing of the subject as well, of finding ways for people to see themselves as part of a functioning economy even if they're not in a paid job. Often people see paid work as the only way of being connected to the economy and

² A type of asset mapping that focuses on bringing attention to "unpaid and nonmarket economic practices, like gifting and voluntary work, that supposedly economically inactive people are engaged in" (Gibson-Graham *A Postcapitalist Politics* p146).

³ Time spent on different types paid and unpaid work over a day are charted and then evaluated in terms of how each element contributes positively or negatively to wellbeing. (See *Take Back the Economy*, Chapter 2).

so that's why the Portrait of Gifts has been so useful. It's a way of helping inventory all the different skills and capacities of a group. Actually, the whole notion of inventory is really key to our practice in all sorts of areas and one way you can look at an inventory is as a way of reframing what you've got.

MB: One of the issues that can come up with unemployment is feeling as though you are outside of time, that the world is going along and you are stuck in a kind of stasis. When you are working with people in this way have you noticed any shift in how people feel about time? About what kind of time they might be in and how that is related to dominant rhythms of time?

KG: Well one thing I remember is the way that just doing the Portrait of Gifts exercise, would give people a real sense of validation in relation to what they're doing. They develop a better understand of why they are busy all the time by being more aware of what they are actually doing with their time. It helps them to document it, which in turn helps them to value it to some extent. So if I think about the various retrenched workers we've worked with, the electricity and mining workers in the Latrobe valley, for example, some of them would say, "Yeah, I'm spending a lot of time down the pub now" and might have the sense that they were not worth anything anymore and that's all they could do. On the other hand people could also see that spending time in the pub was a way of reconnecting with their workmates and having those connections that they would have had at the workplace but weren't allowed to, or couldn't, have anymore. So that time spent at the pub was, in a sense, a replacement for the kind of sociality that they had as part of the workforce.

There were also examples of people getting involved in all sorts of incredible things like setting up their own little telephone systems for the elderly people in their street so they could ring each other without having to use the regular company. Once everyone started to see what they were doing and saw these activities reflected back to them as valuable activities, then it had a huge impact on people's sense of worth and therefore of wanting to be involved in something like the project we were doing.

There was a similar response during our research in the Philippines. The sense of not being 'in time' is a construction that is imposed on particular people. For example, we heard people saying things like, "I'm not in the economy because I'm a peasant farmer." But once again this changed when the community looked at everything they were doing and the value that it was creating for their families, for example in terms of direct food production, or building houses and churches in the community etc. So the Portrait of Gifts is a way of stepping outside of one value system and trying to construct a different kind of system – a community

economy value system. So yes, I think it does have an effect on people's sense of time, since it shifts that sense of victimhood or lack that can come from feeling like you are not part of 'real time.' It can help you realise that there are other times.

Critical approaches to time

MB: So would you say that you are interested in developing 'critical temporalities'? That is, attempting to shift senses of time in order to allow worlds to work differently and support different forms of relationality?

KG: Well I don't feel like it's been at the front of my thinking, or our thinking, partly because again it seems to have a certain normative aspect to it. 'Critical temporalities' seem to suggest that one would propose a different model of time and know what that is in advance, rather than embarking on a pathway of negotiation out of which different temporalities would emerge. Our strategy has always been around diversity and difference. So maybe what I would like to see is a future world where many different temporalities are valued, because I don't think it would be just one. There wouldn't be just one enframing temporality. There already isn't. So it seems to me that it is more a matter of seeing the value of different temporalities. For example, in thinking about your question I would say that I see Buddhism as a different temporality of the self – the way it encourages you to slow down and to be in the moment. There is a long tradition there that has always had a different temporality and its own temporal practice which a lot of people are interested in today as a way of countering some of the temporalities of modern life but again it's not an issue that I've worked on specifically.

MB: Yes, quite a few people I've talked to in this project have talked about wanting to be more in the moment. But even if perhaps you haven't articulated this explicitly, I wondered whether your interest in thinking about the economy in terms of becoming rather than a predetermined or predictable temporality might work in this kind of way? For example, there are quite a few different passages in *A Postcapitalist Politics*,⁴ which argue for an understanding of economy as being in the domain of historicity and contingency, rather than economy as a machine. So I wondered if this move was partly about allowing economies to *have* a time and to be in process, rather than following laws that will determine in advance how it will operate.

KG: Well, yes definitely, but as you were talking I was thinking that there are also ways that some timeframes which are part of mainstream business, such as the product cycle – the timing of production etc. – *are* going to always be part of any kind of future economy

⁴ Gibson-Graham, J. K. 2006. *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

as well. There has to be timed relations between inputs and outputs, just-in-time systems and all those mechanics of timing and planning that would have to be part of any future economy as well. This might mean that we'll always have technologies of management and timing, time and motion studies and such. Perhaps there could be community versions of them or more ethical versions, but

even in a worker-owned cooperative where there would be a strong focus on ethical values, there would still need to be a consideration of time management. So I don't think we have to transcend some of the uses of time that have been subject to criticism, although we do have to make them work better for people and not just be focused on production for production's sake.

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MB: Would you say then, that rather it is the philosophy of time assumed by the idea of economy in general that shifts? Perhaps from the steady and predictable time of a deterministic self-regulating machine to an overarching temporal model that emphasises an open unpredictable future, a future that is made in the moment via opportunities that need to be seized?

KG: Yes, I think at the broad scale then we open time up in that kind of way but in the specific moment of a particular enterprise or a household there are various kinds of timings, or enframements that are going to be useful. It is the practice of projecting only some of these frames onto what, in the old language, was 'the system' that I think is somewhat problematic. I suppose people working on issues to do with complexity or systems theory would have things to contribute here. That's not really my area, but from the point of view of a political project then accepting uncertainty and notions of becoming seems to be a useful thing to do because it makes you more experimental to some extent?

Whose futures, whose pasts?

MB: Great, thank you. So I have two more sets of questions and the first builds on our discussion of pasts and futures. I've been interested in the ways that within thinking on sustainable economies there seems to be ways that people are challenging linear, progressive models of time where the future promises newness and innovation, while the past holds all that is old and obsolete. There have been quite a few examples where people have identified new possibilities as coming from the past, picking up on the work of Walter Benjamin and his emphasis on the continuing potential of the past to

offer possibilities to the present. So I was just wondering how you were thinking about past and future in your work?

KG: Yes, well even that linear construction of the past, present and future still involves the pulling through of some aspects of the past, those which are privileged and seen as part of the narrative of linear progressive time, in contrast to others that are left out of the narrative. For example, small businesses and self-employment has been part of the history of economics forever, and yet they are never seen as part of the narrative of economic development, except as something that should eventually scale up into a large capitalist business in the future. You can see this in the way micro-enterprises are talked about in relation to developing countries, where they represent the future in as much as they are an intervention that produces a huge expansion.

But if you look at what has actually sustained people over thousands of years it has been various forms of small-scale, family-based, individual-based enterprises. So that is an example of something that is still here and was always there. It doesn't really fit into linear progressive narratives of past and present and future because it is something that is just always there. But looking for these things like this, which stand outside of dominant narratives, allows opportunities for being different to emerge. And then it is about appreciating a whole lot of other things that are ignored by historical narratives, and, in a sense, giving value to some of those things.

MB: There was an example of this in *A Post-Capitalist Politics* where you are discussing your work in the Philippines and the need to create inventories of local assets that challenge these sorts of progressivist development models. You argue that these inventories should help "to restore visibility and credibility to what has been coded as backward, insufficient or non-existent" (p169). This was really interesting because some of the people I interviewed struggled with wanting to draw on practices that were coded as backwards, but being very tentative about doing so because they were also aware that being 'backwards looking' is a very common way of dismissing environmental movements. This points towards the way concepts of time are used as powerful tools of granting legitimacy. Labelling something as backwards is very easy to do, but can be very hard to argue against. So it seemed as though in your work in the Philippines in particular that this was something that might have been really important for you to challenge?

KG: Yes, because once you start doing things like valuing village life people will say things like, "Oh, but there all those hideous things that happened there" and so on. So there is a type of essentialising that

goes on, rather than say, trying to unpick the ethical practices from those that were coercive, or looking at the problems associated with a certain patron-client relationship and how it acts out village structures, while also looking at all the ways that various forms of reciprocity actually maintain livelihoods for people.

For me, I think it is important to look at the good and the bad together. We need to try and have a language that could unpack these kinds of complexities, rather than just say “the

past is right, it was good and we need it back again,” or, “village life is better than urban life.”

It’s almost as if the thinking practices people have for differentiating things

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are so under-developed that we’re stuck with either a for or against, or this is romantic, that is nostalgic, this is progressive. We have to counter the under-development of these kinds of analytical skills and start thinking about what is it that was working and what we might want to continue, or what were the conditions under which inequality, empowerment, or disempowerment were being produced.

MB: Yes, I think you are right. This is partly why I’m interested in the problem of time, because of the ways concepts like ‘backwards’ can be used so quickly and easily to dismiss something, with people rarely questioning it. In *A Postcapitalist Politics* you also talk about how you yourselves were coming up against criticisms that suggested that your focus on villages or small communities could not really address the big issues of our time, and that you were being nostalgic about these kinds of ways of life.⁵

KG: Yes, well there is always going to be a critical perspective on what you’re doing and partly it’s due to the fact that you are working with different stances towards thinking and different analytical framings than your critics. But the reasons why I do this kind of work is not to just value something in the past but to ask what we can learn from it now, and what is it that is still here? One of the issues for so many communities given the sort of rapid development that Asia, for example, is obviously seeing, is the sense that practices that sustained people for millennia have disappeared within 50 years, but of course they haven’t. They are still around, even if to some extent they are in different forms.

But to even make an argument for highlighting and valuing some of these practices seems to be antimodernist and unprogressive. There is an incredible

kind of, not optimism, but just this sense that everything that is modern is better and that the rapid pace of change has wiped everything away. That seems crazy to me.

Time of social change

MB: Yes, well that is really interesting because the last set of questions I wanted to ask you was about change. So you can think about time in a whole range of different ways, such as rhythms, schedules, past and future, but time is also linked with how we understand processes of change. For example, under a linear model change is ideally seen as happening in a linear way, with clear steps from initiating a change to its coming into effect. However it seems that what is happening in a lot of the businesses I visited, and in what I’ve read, including in your work, that there’s a different sense of what the time of change is. And particularly in the way you talk about the possibility of change as something imminent in the present. So change isn’t something that happens in the future but is a process available in and to the present.

KG: Yes, well there’s the adage ‘start where you are’ and some people argue that this was what Marx was doing too. Rather than bringing the past into the present, you pull the future into the present by identifying the ingredients of it in the current situation. It is what is at the heart of the notion of a prefigurative argument. When you think that at the time that Marx was writing *Capital* (and I’ve made this argument in a number of places), he was identifying a new form of production, but the actual numbers of people involved in capitalist enterprises were quite small and in countries like Germany the predominant form of enterprise or economic practice was still peasantry. So in a sense Marx was pulling the future into the present by saying, “This is what’s going to happen.”

At the same time he was doing that, however, there were other people in major worker-owner cooperatives, who he went and visited and saw how incredibly different they were. He didn’t pull those into the future though. He could have written a whole book about cooperativism if he wanted to, but he didn’t because he was convinced that things were going to cohere in a particular kind of way. And while one way of seeing things is that he was right and they did turn out the way he predicted, another way is to see that actually they didn’t and that there were multiple independently operating forces which were discursively constructed into this thing called “capitalism.” If that’s the case then what role do we, as researchers, play as performative agents here?

So when we talk about change, to me if you want social change then you look at all the things that *have* been changing, that are still changing. That’s why feminism

⁵ See p2-3.

has been a big impetus for us. But also it's things like recycling practices and smoking practices, where change is happening right now. It has taken generations to do it, but examples like these give me inspiration for what change is and what can change. So it's not something that's in the future. Change is here, now and, to some extent, it is also in the past. That is what we have to work with, it seems to me, and to think through how we go on from here. But what you do learn is how slow change is. Well it depends; it is both fast and slow. It changes pace. Think of the rapid changes that have happened for women during the Second World War, they were just incredibly rapid in terms of changes in the perception of women's roles and then it swung back again and then it swung forward. So there's a whole way in which the temporality of change is quite uneven.

MB: Yes, and in your work it seems like when you are thinking about change you are not talking about just changing in the moment. For example in your discussions of the action research projects in the Latrobe Valley in *A Postcapitalist Politics* you wrote that "in the absence of a collective presence that recognizes the potential future for enterprises...and that continues to renarrativize the past and the present, it is very hard to foster new becomings" (p162). So a key aspect of social change is being able to hold different past and futures in the moment and tell different stories about how the past, present and future might be understood.

KG: Definitely.

MB: And I guess that links up with what you were talking about in relation to the prefigurative. That the domain of time within which you're changing is not just the moment but that it's spread out across the past and future. It sort of spreads out in both directions and you need to maintain all of those aspects of the narrative.

KG: Yes, well that was an insight from Lacanian psychoanalysis, the idea that you reframe the past in order to work on the present and the future. So telling different narratives of the past was important, for instance in the Philippines case, to show the incredible resilience of reciprocal labour practices, they are what has got people through. But this is a very different narrative of the past than the notion of the backward peasant who needs to be liberated by export agriculture. And again we have a choice about which stories we will tell, which stories will we work with people to understand and to share/ So I think you are right that the idea of transformation isn't just from here onwards. It is going back as well as forward.

Transactional times

MB: Great. Thanks so much. Just to finish off, I remember we had previously talked a little about the 'time of transactions,' and in your latest book *Take*

Back the Economy you mention the temporality of gift transactions, for example, as being more open-ended and less immediate than is normally expected.⁶ These unexpected temporalities of the transaction was definitely something that came up in the case studies, for example in discussions with users of the online sharing platform Open Shed where there was sometimes concerns that there were inappropriate expectations of a fast 'commercial' experience when using the service.⁷

KG: Yes, and to add to that, there are also all those discussions around the idea of 'patient capital' too, where investors are not looking for a return within the normal timeframe, but a much longer one.⁸ Some of the crowd-funding movement is like this too. So within the area of investment and finance there is also a sense of different temporalities at work. Instead of all those arguments about making your capital work for you in quick successive investments, which leads to speculative gambling versus more considered approaches, in the social economy sphere there is much more of a sense that investors are willing to wait because they have some sense of value coming from what is actually being developed or produced. That is, these kinds of investors are seeking multiple returns, not just purely wanting their return financially. So again that multiple valuing system really comes in here and as a result there is a willingness to work with a different form of temporality to mainstream investing.

MB: Yes, well thank you so much for a fascinating discussion.

KG: Thank you.

⁶ See p105.

⁷ More information on Open Shed can be found at <http://www.openshed.com.au/>

⁸ See for example <http://www.economist.com/node/13692513>

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The Temporal Belongings research network supports the development of a more coordinated understanding of the interconnections between time and community. We provide opportunities to share research and practical experience and to develop new collaborations. We also produce resources that will support the development of this research area. To find out more about our activities go to: www.temporalbelongings.org

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