
Area studies after poststructuralism

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Abstract. In this paper we address the question of ‘what next after poststructuralism’ through a reassessment of area studies. In a narrative of our own involvement with place-oriented research and institutions, we examine the traditional position of area studies in geography and anthropology and its reevaluation by poststructuralist scholars in a number of disciplines. We argue that both prestructuralist and poststructuralist treatments of areas are oriented by a narrative of capitalist development; at the same time, we recognize that traditional area studies has a deep interest in noncapitalist economic practices and relations. It is therefore a resource for those of us who want to create a discourse of economic diversity as a contribution to a politics of economic innovation. The latter half of the paper presents an extended example of reading for economic difference drawn from fieldwork in the oil-palm sector in Papua New Guinea. We conclude with a ‘post-poststructuralist’ reflection on geographic field research. From our evolving perspective, the fieldwork practices that are the principal research methods of area studies constitute a relatively untheorized form of academic politics, creating differences in thought (and thus in the world) via new interpenetrations of concepts and ‘matter’.

Introduction

Whither area studies? Until recently this question did not really trouble us much. Now, however, when one—Katherine Gibson (KG)—is working in an area studies research school, and both are engaged in placed-based field research, we find ourselves fully involved in area studies and its problems of uncertain mandate and direction. So, when we received the invitation to contribute a paper on what comes ‘after poststructuralism’, we immediately localized that global query on the terrain of ‘the area’.

Area studies in geography has a long and problematic history. As the other of (sub)disciplinary or thematic studies, it participates in one of the founding dualisms that give geography its difficulties with identity. The claim that one is pursuing, say, South American or East Asian studies rather than economic or urban geography consigns one to the periphery of the discipline, while simultaneously invoking the authority, authenticity, and mystery of ‘the field’.

Encountering this sort of ambivalent and incapacitating judgment, poststructuralism has made it seem less natural, more artificial. It has given us the liberating sense that the internal hierarchies of geography might be rearranged, and provided the tools for their rearrangement. But poststructuralism has done much more than that, extending far beyond geography. It has resituated academic practice in the world by offering new ways of thinking the relation between thought and other forms of materiality, and between academic and political activity (Gibson-Graham, 2000). In this paper we think through a biographical lens about what poststructuralism has brought to area studies and what might follow upon its inevitable supersession.

It is much more difficult to imagine the eventual legacy of poststructuralism (though we will make some attempts later in the paper) than to recognize its distinctive contributions contemporarily. For us, the most valued of these are political. Deconstruction,

for example, which is seldom associated with active political projects, can be seen as a tool for revitalizing and enlarging the sphere of politics:

“The role of deconstruction is ... to reactivate the moment of decision that underlies any sedimented set of social relations. The political and ethical significance of this first moment is that by enlarging the area of structural undecidability it enlarges also the area of responsibility—that is, of the decision” (Laclau, 1995, page 93).

Another poststructuralist tool is the performativity of language or, in Judith Butler’s words, the power of discourse to produce “the effects that it names” (1993, page 2). Recognizing the effectivity of language has freed us to produce novel representations that intervene in the world, rather than search for answers, discover what is ‘out there’, translate and codify obscure messages sent by ‘reality’, that domain of materiality from which language was often excluded.

Since the early 1990s this recognition of language as productive and powerful in its own right has been central to our research projects, which have focused on producing alternative discourses of economy in an interactive research process we call ‘poststructuralist action research’. What we see as poststructuralist about these projects is a refusal to inscribe subjects into existing discourses, but instead a collaborative production of alternative discourses—offering novel economic identities and social possibilities to those who might want to inscribe themselves within the new (Gibson-Graham, 1994; 2000).

One could see these projects as coming ‘after poststructuralism’ in the sense that they are enabled and shaped by poststructuralism, as indeed they are. But there is another sense of ‘after’ lurking here, one that taps into movement, change, the evanescence of everything. No matter how much we may want to stay here, we cannot help but go beyond where we are. Poststructuralism may have swallowed us up and transported us, but it will eventually spit us out on another terrain.

Intimations of that different territory have begun to surface in our work and in our consciousness. For, despite our unwavering conviction that new discursive developments give rise to new political possibilities, we repeatedly reach the point where language is not enough and something else speaks to us. When we hit the wall of re-presentation (so to speak), we confront the ‘nondiscursive’—what is sometimes called matter, the body, unreason, chaos, the ‘real’ (in Lacanian terms), the inchoate, the uncanny, the visceral.

Such nonlinguistic ‘matter’ has made itself matter to us in several ways. The first is in the production of subjects. We have developed a language of the diverse (and in large part noncapitalist) economy that offers novel possibilities of identification. But, in dealing with ourselves and others as already-existing subjects of capitalism, we find that the augmentation of economic language has limited capacity—by itself—to engender alternative forms of subjectivity. What is required in addition is what Michel Foucault (1985) has called ethics—technologies of the self, of self-transformation—or what William Connolly (1999) has called micropolitics—working in the visceral register of being to open oneself and others to new possibilities of becoming.

The second and related surfacing of unprocessed ‘matter’ has occurred in the field. Poststructuralism has had a tendency to distrust fieldwork, seeing it as a form of discursive or even actual colonization. In spite of these dangers, we have always been drawn to fieldwork as a practice, and poststructuralism has enhanced rather than attenuated the attraction. We named ‘poststructuralist action research’ in honor of the performativity of discourse and theorized this different kind of poststructural action research as generating new discourses in collaboration with others; these discourses offer novel subject positions from which a new politics may be desired and pursued (Gibson-Graham, 1994). But what we have come more recently to acknowledge is the actively *generative* role of ‘matter’ in this process (Gibson-Graham, 2003).

The field is a space where we interact with others to displace existing discourses by creating new ones, yielding new possibilities of subjectivity and action. But this process does not occur on the plane of discourse alone; indeed, we obscure its creativity and generativity if we understand it that way. As Scott Sharpe (2001) has taught us in a masterful PhD, the field is also, and powerfully, a place where matter and concept fold together anew, yielding the differences in thought that augur possibility. It is this recognition that has helped us revalue field-based research and the purviews and practices of area studies.

Area studies before poststructuralism

Our first engagement with area studies came in the early 1980s when KG was a postdoctoral fellow in the Research School of Pacific Studies (or, as she secretly called it, the Research School of Specific Studies) at the Australian National University. At the time, the two of us were exploring and extending classical Marxian theory and pursuing comparative quantitative research by using national-level economic data. Not surprisingly, KG was frustrated by seminars in the research school where the discussion deteriorated (from her point of view) into empirical tales of uniqueness—with one protagonist claiming that on ‘his island’ things were different from what the paper presenter had outlined, while another protested that in ‘her village’ things were similar ... though also slightly different. Dissatisfaction arose from what was seen as a failure to engage in a more universalizing theoretical and political discussion that would transcend uniqueness and promote conversation across difference. To this young Marxist, uniqueness and difference were theoretically uninteresting within a vision of theory as lawful generality (see also Appadurai, 2000, page 4). From the perspective of today, we are conscious of how KG’s feelings and judgments were themselves situated within a Eurocentric development discourse and modernist epistemology.

Twenty years later, KG returned to the Australian National University to take up a position in what had now become the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies in recognition, sometime in the 1980s, that Australia should (finally) turn its academic and strategic gaze away from the Pacific alone (where its colonial ties and responsibilities were situated) and cast it in a northerly direction towards Asia, where the rapidly developing nations of Japan, China, and Southeast Asia were offering economic threats and opportunities, as well as political challenges, to the island continent. By now, both of us were deeply engaged in place-based research in the Latrobe Valley of southeastern Australia and the Connecticut River Valley of Massachusetts, USA, and our thinking about the theoretical relevance of uniqueness and difference had reversed itself. Yet, area studies seemed to have continued its decline into academic disrepute and theoretical disrepair. The attacks coming from poststructuralist, postcolonial, and postdevelopment perspectives emphasized Eurocentrism rather than theoretical vacuity, as in our day, but the scorn and skepticism were still there. Oddly enough, what had been ‘outed’ by contemporary critics was the presence rather than absence of theory—Western development theory—which has structured all area studies, consciously or unconsciously, since the middle of the last century.⁽¹⁾

The devalued state of area studies is a far cry from its status in the early 1950s, when neocolonial and Cold War imperatives mandated its expansion in universities of the West and North (Mintz, 1998; van Schendel, 2002). In 1951, Professor Oskar Spate founded the Department of Human Geography in which KG works, as part of

⁽¹⁾ The preoccupation with development is still a major feature of area studies. Carolyn Cartier argues, for example, that contemporary area studies in geography is mainly interested in theorizing growth regions (2002, page 2).

Australia's effort to keep a finger on the pulse of its neighbors and colonies in the region. Trained in the British empirical economic geographic tradition (Barnes, 2000), Spate was a distinguished scholar of regional geography and author of many books including the impressive 827-page tome *India and Pakistan: A General and Regional Geography*, first published in 1954.⁽²⁾ This book contains both the best and perhaps the worst of what geography as a discipline has traditionally had to offer: a wealth of fascinating information organized into 'commonsense', systematic categories—the land, the people, the economy—combined with a strong belief in the promise of 'development' and a relatively partisan documentation of its progress.

What speaks to us across the span of almost fifty years since its publication is the way Spate's geography of India performs 'development' in its very language and narrative style. Here he writes of an Indian village:

"Though the substratum of life—the gruelling round of the seasons—remains and will ever remain the same, though a miserable livelihood exacts an exorbitant price in endless toil, there have been great changes, material and psychological, since Edwin Montagu, Secretary of State for India, spoke in 1918 of the 'pathetic contentment' of the Indian village. Pathetic it still too often is; contented, less and less; which is as it should be Now new motifs are changing the tempo of life in the large villages: perhaps a radio, perhaps a mobile film unit, more and more frequently a school Perhaps the most powerful agent of change is the battered, ramshackle motor-bus, packed to the running board and coughing its way through clouds of dust along the unmetalled roads to the nearest town. There may be loss as well as gain in all this; but it is idle to bewail the break-up of integrated codes of life—too often integrated by religious, social, and economic sanctions which were a complete denial of human dignity. In any case the disintegration set in long ago, with the impact of the world market; and it is high time that new horizons should be opened, that the villager should see whence the forces that have subverted his old life have their origins, and what of good they may bring" (1954, page 181).

What we hear in this account is a directive, normative tone intermixed with progressive (if paternalistic) hopes. What we see performed are the hierarchical valuations and unilinear trajectory of development discourse.

Arturo Escobar (1995) has argued that in the postwar period area studies was the preeminent intellectual arena promoting modernization. Under the guise of a primary interest in descriptive detail and local specificity, area studies became a site where a universalizing development discourse was, and still is, performed, embodied, and naturalized. The quest to describe 'world areas' effectively convened places into a common spatial framework that could be subjected to a universal social science capable of understanding and addressing (implicitly lesser) 'stages of development'.

The empirical elaboration of 'the area' was framed by a blatant exoticism and an only slightly less blatant Eurocentrism. Description performed 'backwardness' and produced the necessity for development interventions. The miserable livelihood and pathetic contentment of Spate's Indian villager were represented as needing, indeed *requiring*, change. And the ramshackle bus to the next market town was seen as the only vehicle heading toward the future.

⁽²⁾ Lest it be mistakenly imagined that Spate was an atheoretical Cold War scholar, it should be noted that the book is full of references to Marx and Marxian terminology, perhaps an intellectual residue of his involvement as a young man with left-wing politics in Britain.

Area studies after poststructuralism

The relationship of area studies to the (sub)disciplines can be neatly summarized in a series of familiar binaries:

thematic studies/area studies
 general/specific
 universal/particular
 abstract/concrete
 nomothetic/ideographic
 theoretical/empirical
 deductive/inductive
 social scientific/humanistic
 quantitative/qualitative
 hypothesis testing/case study
 economic/cultural
 contemporary/historical
 the West/the rest
 developed/underdeveloped
 modern/premodern

These differential valuations and scholarly treatments have become familiar targets of deconstruction, as poststructuralist, postcolonial, and postdevelopment theorists debate ‘what is to be done about area studies’. Below are just three of the many deconstructive pathways that have recently been offered:

1. *Eschew progress—embrace specificity of place.* Japanese historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki argues that we should abandon area studies, putting an end to scholarship that plots the “communal trajectory of a civilizational area within the march of global progress”. What she calls ‘anti-area studies’ would observe “practical, everyday ways in which people experience and deal with the unsettling effects of global economic change in a number of very different sites throughout the world” (2000, page 21).

2. *Eschew centralizing structures—embrace in-betweenness.* South Asian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that area studies can be reconfigured as ‘subaltern (area) studies’, in which scholarship remains committed to speaking for and to a particular region (for example, a nation) but does so by challenging and destabilizing nationalist, exoticist, and Eurocentrist representations of centers. He suggests that subaltern area studies can enter into productive dialogue with its alter ego, diasporic studies, which “leads us away from the imagination of centralizing structures” towards what is “in-between, interstitial, neither here nor there” (1998, page 474).

3. *Eschew economic essentialism—embrace the importance of cultural representations.* New gurus of world development agencies such as Hernando de Soto (2001) dismiss the misguided essentialism of development interventions that ask the rest of the world to imitate Western capitalism without first establishing the cultural basis of formally recognized private property upon which capitalism flourishes. Drawing on Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, de Soto argues that ‘representational systems’ matter and have real effects—the social contract that allows assets to generate capital in the West is a discursive construct that has yet to be naturalized in developing countries where property is tethered to social, often face-to-face, relations that cannot easily be conceptualized and generalized to allow for fungibility and thus capital mobility.

All these proposed pathways attempt to undermine the unself-consciously Eurocentric developmentalism of area studies, but what is remarkable about them (and others like them), from the admittedly idiosyncratic perspective of J K Gibson-Graham, is the unchallenged centrality of a certain representation of capitalism and capitalist

globalization (Gibson-Graham and Ruccio, 2001). For someone like Peruvian de Soto, who does not want to be seen as a blind advocate of capitalism, ‘capitalism is the only game in town’ and the fungibility of assets is the key to generalizing its benefits. For postcolonial cultural analyst and historian Chakrabarty, capitalism is the economic container of life-worlds “produced by travel, (im)migration, battles for cultural recognition, and survival in capitalist-consumerist democracies and in postnationalist structures” (1998, page 474). For historian Morris-Suzuki capitalist globalization is forcing all places and people to relate to it through accommodation or resistance.

In our terms, then, all these interesting and worthwhile rethinkings resemble their precursors in one key respect—they are capitalocentric. Capitalism is still the economic standard, and noncapitalist economic activities and processes (traditionally, if not currently, an object of area studies) are understood *with respect to capitalism*—as complements to, situated within, subordinate to, or becoming capitalism. Whereas development discourse previously performed the task of harnessing economic difference and specificity into capitalist hegemony, now globalization discourse has joined or replaced it in this role.

Deconstructing capitalism, constructing the diverse economy

Poststructural area studies has left capitalocentrism intact, and perhaps even strengthened it—ironically buttressing Eurocentrism with the one hand while undercutting it with the other. This feature is glaringly visible to us as theorists who have been principally focused on moving beyond capitalocentric representation. The poststructuralist emphasis on discourse and deconstruction has provided us a means to destabilize the fixed identity of capitalism (as necessarily and naturally hegemonic) and to open the economic field to difference outside the binary frame.

It is important to acknowledge that our criticism of poststructural area studies is motivated by a political interest in enabling and enacting different forms of economy. When capitalism is represented as the economic container or the dominant element of the economic totality, everything that is not capitalism loses its economic autonomy and potentiating power. For this reason, rather than accepting the ‘reality’ of a dominant capitalism, we are interested in challenging prevalent discourses of capitalism in order to undermine their performative effects.

To recognize the performativity of discourse is to recognize its power. It is also to recognize the important role that researchers play in producing and performing discourse. Through our research, we are interested in generating or fostering discourses of economic difference that can represent (and perform) the proliferative diversity of noncapitalist economic activities, subjects, and projects in place.

As a preliminary step in this anticapitalocentric research agenda, we have convened the many strands of economic analysis that do not take capitalism as their sole object of inquiry. These include the work of feminist economists who have problematized the household and voluntary sectors, informal sector theorists of both the ‘Third’ and ‘First’ Worlds, economic anthropologists who have focused upon indigenous kin-based and ‘gift’ economies, economic sociologists and geographers who have problematized the cultural and social embeddedness of economies, and Marxist political economists who have pursued a surplus-oriented economic analysis, among others.

With this immense body of work in mind, we have begun to theorize what we call a ‘diverse economy’, provisionally represented in figure 1. In this figure, what is often seen as ‘the economy’—that is, market transactions, wage labor, and capitalist enterprise—occupies one set of cells in a complex, open-ended field of diverse economic relations that sustain livelihoods. The figure is always under revision as we encounter different intellectual and activist communities and engage the concerns and specificities of each.

Transactions	Labor	Organizational form
<i>Market</i>	<i>Wage</i>	<i>Capitalist</i>
<i>Alternative market</i> local trading systems alternative currencies underground market barter cooperative exchange	<i>Alternative paid</i> cooperative self-employed indentured in kind	<i>Alternative capitalist</i> environmental ethic social ethic nonprofit state enterprise
<i>Nonmarket</i> indigenous exchange household flows gifts theft	<i>Unpaid</i> volunteer household labor family care	<i>Noncapitalist</i> communal independent feudal/peasant slave

Figure 1. A diverse economy. The figure should be read down the columns rather than across the rows, as items cross rows to come together in any number of configurations. Thus, a noncapitalist enterprise, such as a worker-owned collective, is a communal form of business organization that employs alternative paid (cooperative) labor and engages in production for a market. Shaded areas indicate those economic activities associated with the community economy in which the sociality of economic relations is foregrounded.

In constructing and reconstructing this diagram, we were initially inspired by feminist scholars who have produced a powerful critique of conventional economic representation. Their work demonstrates that as much as 50% of all economic activity in both rich and poor countries is undertaken by unpaid labor in households and neighborhoods (Ironmonger, 1996). As this *noncapitalist, nonmarket* activity is excluded from conventional economic accounts, it is largely invisible and unvalued. In addition (and perhaps surprisingly), Marxian theory allowed us to conceptualize a certain proportion of market-oriented activity as also noncapitalist. Worker collectives, self-employed individuals, slaves, and indentured workers all produce goods and services for markets, but not under capitalist relations of production (Gibson-Graham et al, 2000; 2001). Taken together, the insights of Marxism, feminism, and other traditions enabled us to revision the so-called ‘capitalist’ economy as a diverse social space that is home to a wide range of economic activities and relations in which the capitalist sector accounts for less than 50% of total economic activity (whether in terms of hours or value, in rich and in poor countries) while *nonmarket* and market-oriented *noncapitalist* activity account for the bulk.

Using the diversified conceptualization embodied in figure 1, our current research involves:

1. unhinging notions of development from those of growth and especially of capitalist expansion;
2. decentering conceptions of economy and de-essentializing economic logics;
3. loosening the discursive grip of unilinear trajectories on all narratives of change.

It also involves:

1. generating anticapitalocentric economic representations;
2. exploring the diversity of economic ethics;
3. interacting with subjects of a diverse economy to construct community economies in place.

As we develop these directions in our research, we have found area studies to be a rich resource for the theorization, observation, and enactment of economic difference.

Area studies and economic difference

Area studies was established to provide a liberal education about ‘other countries’ that would destroy ‘provincial attitudes’ among the populace (Chakrabarty, 1998, page 458) and provide cultural knowledge of strategic value to the defense departments of the world powers (Morris-Suzuki, 2000, page 14). With its explicitly empirical focus and synthetic approach, area studies became a scholarly site where a voluminous documentation of economic, social, and cultural difference took place (van Schendel, 2002).

Recognizing the distinctive contribution of such research, poststructuralist anthropologist Rainer Lederman takes the somewhat surprising tack of arguing for the ongoing value of cultural area studies within her discipline. She agrees that a ‘significant rethinking’ of anthropological practice is needed ‘in the face of’ globalization, but she resists the imperative to abandon or radically change the study of the “persistence of the primitive” or “out-of-the-way places like Melanesia” (1998, page 436). In a decidedly antirealist move, she argues for area studies “not as geographical mappings of placed topics [topics that are real prediscursive artefacts] but as situated disciplinary discourses” (page 442) and for the “critical value of areal commitments when they are engaged, systematically and in diverse ways, with global discourses” (page 443).

Lederman’s argument suggests that area studies can be outmoded or useful depending on one’s problematic and research goals. Her notion of ‘situated disciplinary discourses’ is interesting to us, from the perspective of our project of developing languages and practices of economic difference. In pursuing this project we have found the situated discourses of economic anthropology and place-based geography to be a reservoir of economic difference, on both the conceptual and empirical levels. Whether in terms of articulations of modes of production and social reproduction (Godelier, 1977; 1986; Katz, 1991; Meillassoux, 1981), or entangled exchanges of gift, tribute, money, and commodities (Curry, 1999; Gregory, 1982; Thomas, 1991), or interactions of households, family, clan, community, and market (Gudeman, 1986; 2001; Pred and Watts, 1992), area studies has excavated and exposed economic diversity rather than suppressing or ignoring it (even if it has been generally subordinated to a capitalocentric norm).

In recent years the situated area studies discourse of economic difference has been to some extent extinguished by globalization discourse where concerns with transnationalism and trans-locality have come to the fore (Mintz, 1998; Smith, 2002). We would hope to rekindle it, as a contribution to a postdevelopment discourse that can represent and positively value economic diversity. This involves making visible diverse economic (and especially noncapitalist) processes, and highlighting the multiple desires and not-totally-colonized imaginations that subjects draw upon as they interact in daily life. One place we have worked to do this is in Papua New Guinea (PNG), where KG has an ongoing project of action research in the smallholder sector of the oil-palm industry.

Economic difference in PNG

Like other area studies research, recent PNG scholarship—whether poststructuralist or not, and whether mainstream or revisionist with respect to development—is decidedly capitalocentric (see, for example, Connell, 1997; Foster, 1999; Gewertz and Errington, 1999). From our perspective, this sense of an always already territorialized terrain stands in the way of realizing the liberating potential of research in the aftermath of poststructuralism. In telling the story of research in PNG, we want to emphasize the choices we have as producers of knowledge, and the practical and political consequences those choices entail. The narrative that follows involves reading for difference rather than dominance, in order to produce a knowledge of economic possibility in both the capitalist and smallholder sectors of the PNG oil-palm industry.

Background

Oil palm was planted in the late 1960s and 1970s in PNG by three transnational agribusiness corporations in partnership with the national government. A significant smallholder sector was developed alongside capitalist plantations in West New Britain and Oro (Northern) Provinces. The industry, which was financed largely by international aid, is now seen as one of the more successful 'development' interventions in PNG. It has demonstrated the potential for relatively harmonious coexistence by ethnic groups transplanted from different regions of the country to the oil-palm settlement schemes and the possibility of sustaining improved standards of living for farm-based households. A big problem today, however, is that smallholder oil palm accounts for 43% of the planted area, but for only 33% of the total production for the industry (Koczberski, 2002, page 88). As capitalist plantation development has now been curtailed, there is increased interest in raising productivity levels in the smallholder sector.

In preliminary research conducted with Gina Koczberski in February 2000, KG found considerable divergence in the corporate strategies being adopted to enhance smallholder production.⁽³⁾ At one end of the spectrum, one company drew upon the discourse of the 'lazy native' (Stoler, 1995) to explain low productivity in the smallholder sector at Bialla. Justifying their position with neoliberal and antipaternalistic rhetoric, management advocated a rigidly hands-off approach to smallholders, in an attempt to promote grower entrepreneurialism. The smallholder was imagined as a unified rational economic subject who desired a 'middle-class' lifestyle and was motivated by a singular interest in making money. Any perceived deviation from this subject position on the part of the smallholder was denigrated, infantilized, or disregarded. Perhaps it is not surprising that this project area has had a high incidence of anticompany conflict, and violence and unrest among smallholders as they struggle to grow, transport, and sell their crops.

At the other end of the spectrum, a second company had supported the smallholder sector by providing credit, production inputs, transportation with company-owned trucks, and support for agricultural extension work. Company personnel appeared to understand the PNG smallholder as a subject who was not necessarily recruited into any one dominant economic value system. Instead he was seen as an intelligent and complex subject who modified his oil-palm production in response to the price of the product and also in response to the many other demands upon his time, especially involvement in other forms of work. He could be engaging in traditional subsistence gardening, or in small business as a public motor vehicle driver, or in communal village betel-nut production and marketing, or in social networks that sustain the household in either the community or clan—working to help a relative raise a bride price, for example, or participating in a church activity.

This company was aware that the grower might treat his block as a bank account, working it only when he needed the funds for school fees, or as a source of cash income that he limited to avoid claims by his extended family of relations. With this image of diverse practices and different desires in mind the company, in collaboration with the industry's agricultural extension service, initiated a number of innovative initiatives aimed at improving performance of the smallholder sector. One of these was the Mama Lus Frut Scheme.

⁽³⁾ This research visit was sponsored by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) and led to the funding of a two-year project with Gina Koczberski and George Curry by ACIAR on "Improving productivity of the smallholder oil palm sector in Papua New Guinea: a study of bio-physical and socio-economic interactions". During the period of the project there were major changes to management in one of the oil-palm companies and the differences in attitudes to smallholders reported here were lessened.

Mama Lus Frut

During the harvest some 14% of the total weight of the oil-palm bunch ends up as loose fruit (Lewis, 2000). These are the ripest fruitlets, valuable to the oil-palm mills because of their higher oil content. Women and children, with no direct incentive to work on loose fruit collection and with many other claims upon their time in gardens, marketing, community, and clan, have not consistently undertaken this job.

The Mama Lus Frut Scheme introduced a 'mama card' to remunerate women directly for loose-fruit collection instead of relying upon the grower to distribute a portion of the block income to his wife. Initially 10 women along one road were included in a pilot project and now there are over 3200 women participating. Production in the Hoskins project area has increased and women are now claiming up to 26% of the income generated by oil-palm production, individually earning up to K1000 (\$A500) per year (Koczberski, 2002, page 89).

This increased income is being used in a number of interesting ways: it is spent on consumption items, increased mobility, gambling, school fees, production inputs, to help out relatives, to enhance status by engaging in gift exchange, and to ease conflict between different households sharing the same smallholding. Not only has there been a notable reduction in domestic violence, but interfamilial conflicts, especially between brothers, have also decreased. Complex systems of sharing the Mama Lus Frut payment have been devised and in some cases the labor of collecting the loose fruit has been collectivized.

Reading for economic difference

One of the effects of the discursive hegemony of globalization has been to yoke more tightly representations of economic difference into a capitalocentric development discourse, thereby deskilling our conceptual ability to represent diverse economic desires and practices. This tethering move has drained available languages of economic difference of their potency, if not contributed to their disappearance. Thus, when a self-employed commodity producer or a peasant collective buys imported production inputs from a trade store, they are seen as engaging in the 'capitalist market', and their enterprises become represented as somehow 'subordinated to', the 'same as', or 'becoming' capitalist. The specificity of their forms of production, processes of appropriation and distribution of surplus, forms of community creation, autonomy, and dependence are rendered invisible. Juxtaposed with this blurring of different economic practices is the pervasive representation of subjects as sharing universal desires for consumption of commodities (metonymically conflated with desires for capitalism). Again, a subtle language of economic diversity and desire evades us. When a PNG villager wants a 'capitalist' commodity such as a metal cooking stove or a television, she becomes interpellated as an emerging subject of a global 'capitalist' village who covets a middle-class consumer lifestyle (Gewertz and Errington, 1999). Diverse imaginations and desires are colonized by a single pervasive imaginary.

In interpreting the situation in the PNG oil-palm smallholder sector, one option is to allow globalization (as the latest form of development discourse) to remain center stage and to look for (and find) evidence of increasing social and economic polarization, market orientation, and consumer consciousness. After all, women involved in the Mama Lus Frut scheme are satisfying consumption desires with their newfound income, and in some project areas certain entrepreneurial smallholders have bought trucks and are convincing or coercing their neighbors to pay them to transport their fruit to the mills. Moreover, because they are engaged in for-market production and sell their produce to capitalist firms, the Mamas could be seen as becoming proletarianized, obscuring their new identities as independent or communal

(and thus noncapitalist) producers. We could say about the smallholder sector that capitalist development is on its way, inevitably pushing aside, or subordinating, other economic practices and identities.

For us, however, this would not be an attractive way forward, interested as we are in rekindling the situated area studies discourse of economic difference, deconstructing its remnant capitalocentrism, and harnessing it to a postdevelopment action research agenda. In the PNG project, the research team performed an anticapitalocentric reading, tracing the various economic processes that smallholders are involved in, recognizing a complex set of desires and practices among people who not only want to increase their consumption but also want to pursue traditional practices such as gardening for subsistence or customary tribute. These practices are embedded in a wide variety of noncapitalist relations, ranging from family or feudal to independent to cooperative or communal (see figure 1).⁽⁴⁾ With the money they earn from selling loose fruit to a capitalist corporation, for example, the Mamas not only buy cooking pots and mattresses to support their noncapitalist household economic activities, they also participate actively in traditional (noncapitalist) gift exchanges that sustain clan identity, maintain rights to land, redistribute income, and cultivate community. And, rather than taking on a proto-proletarian identity, they are empowered in their traditional gendered identities in both household and community (Gibson, 2002; Koczberski, 2002). All these things would be devalued or obscured if we read the Mama Lus Frut scheme for dominance rather than difference, emphasizing the Mama's closer (exchange-based) relation to capital over their new role in strengthening the indigenous economy.

The attention to economic diversity has been extended as well to our analysis of the capitalist corporation and its differences—in terms of management culture, understandings of corporate citizenship, distributional strategies, and productivity drives. Both oil-palm companies' actions in PNG are part of the capitalist development agenda—one wore the ugly face and the other the benign face of capitalism. It is important to expose these different faces as these divergent corporate cultural practices have material effects—increasing or decreasing economic diversity, inflaming or ameliorating ethnic conflicts, more equitably redistributing income or concentrating it.

Management ideologies of economic monism and rationalism contribute to what are from our perspective retrograde impacts upon local economic diversity, the distribution of income, and economic and political power. Capitalist hegemony is promoted and performed by company practices of:

1. privileging the market sector—including trade stores and banks that demand cash payments;
2. encouraging entrepreneurial smallholders to become middlemen (local big men);
3. undermining the viability of the average settler smallholder and village oil-palm growers by pushing them into greater market involvement;
4. creating the potential for greater polarization of income distribution and social differentiation.

As we have seen, however, company practices can have *different* local impacts by:

1. promoting more equitable household distributions of income between men and women and the younger and older generation;
2. encouraging a more collectivized labor process on some smallholder blocks;
3. enhancing women's role in agriculture, including involving them in agricultural extension and education;
4. increasing women's access to business development (selling garden produce or other goods) through availability of cash income.

⁽⁴⁾ See Koczberski et al (2001) for a detailed overview of economic difference in the smallholder sector.

Highlighting the diversity of both capitalist and noncapitalist practices can have a variety of effects. In this case it illustrates that responsible corporate citizenship on the part of transnational corporations is not only possible but can promote more equitable distributions of income and power, and that involvement by smallholders in export commodity production can serve to sustain many traditional, communal, feudal, independent—all noncapitalist—economic practices. This is not simply a scholarly observation. The research team's understanding of the success of Mama Lus Frut, couched in terms of its integration with diverse economic desires and practices, has led them to recommend another type of payment card. This 'mobile' card would enable independent harvesters, especially young unemployed men, to work more than one block. At the same time, it would allow smallholders to engage in noncash transactions that compensate mobile harvesters in fruit bunches (as the company would pay both harvester and smallholder for their respective shares of the product), thus avoiding the considerable social pressures on growers to redistribute cash. Currently the mobile card is being piloted by the agricultural extension office and one company in one of the project areas. Like Mama Lus Frut, it could be read as tying the young men more closely into capital and strengthening the capitalist corporations' hold over project areas and populations; but it can also be read as anchoring an emerging noncapitalist economic identity of independent producer within a diverse indigenous economy, one that has the potential to foster new forms of sociality and to help resolve long-standing economic and other conflicts between social groups (Curry, 2002).

After poststructuralism, area studies

One of the things that most attracts us about fieldwork is its powers of 'enchantment'. In the words of Jane Bennett, who has written an entire book about this exotic state, enchantment is:

"... a mood of lively and intense engagement with the world [that] ... consists in a mixed bodily state of joy and disturbance, a transitory sensuous condition dense and intense enough to stop you in your tracks and toss you onto new terrain, to move you from the actual world to its virtual possibilities" (2001, page 111).

This enticing image will, we hope, convey something stronger than the usual views of fieldwork—as enlarging the known by domesticating the unknown, or correcting misperceptions, or multiplying points of view or perspectives (Sharpe, 2001). Fieldwork in this stronger light is a transformative experience rather than an additive one.

We are attempting, as we have said, to produce a discourse of economic difference through practices of field-based action research. What we are perhaps quixotically seeking is the difference of the new, rather than the exotic or primitive other of (capitalist) identity. Ultimately, then, the research process is one of creation rather than recognition, and the field is a generative ground rather than a site of testing or correction or elaboration or discovery (Sharpe, 2001). The field is a place where concept and matter are newly folded together, producing something different from either—a new thinking.

The new thinking produced through the PNG fieldwork reported above came out of folding together the concept of a diverse economy with the relatively unprocessed (in economic terms) experience of both smallholders and oil-palm companies. The diverse economy framework changed the understanding of the success of Mama Lus Frut; no longer seen as simply a scheme to increase productivity in the capitalist sector, it was recognized as actively reconstituting and reshaping the indigenous economy in ways that offered new (yet still noncapitalist) economic identities for women. The enchantment of the new was palpable in the excitement of the women, and it transferred to the extension officers and even company managers. It led to the experiment with the mobile card,

which would not have come into being without a recognition and respect for the intricacies and resiliences of the indigenous economy and a vision of the possibility of mutually beneficial interaction between capitalist and noncapitalist economic forms.

When we are performing the diverse economy in PNG, or in other projects that are more explicitly political, the new thinking that results entails not only new understandings but new ways of talking, of being in the world, and thus new subjects, cocreated along with a different 'objectivity'. In Sharpe's (2001) characterization, "fieldwork is that activity through which one enters into differential relations and thus *makes a difference*" (page 240, emphasis in original). It is this generation of difference that for Sharpe constitutes the specificity of academic politics.

What the field has become for us is a place of the encounter, not with the other but with the unconceptualized. What is *unthought* enacts its creativity, it passes our senses, it awakens our slumbering perceptivity, it participates actively in generating new thinkings. In the process the field becomes exoticized in a different sense: exoticized not because it is other to ourselves, not because it is the 'real' or the 'third world' to our 'abstract' or 'first world' sensibilities, but because it cannot be subsumed to (capitalist) identity.

The exotic field is everywhere, then; it is simply 'place', that second home of geography. And area studies is the disciplinary domain that has developed and preserved fieldwork as a productive technology. It deserves therefore to be appreciated for its potential generativity.

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