



What are the alternatives? Organising for a socially and ecologically sustainable world

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Introduction

This special issue brings together three articles and two notes seeking to explore alternative ways of organising that strive to address the social and environmental challenges we currently face. The collection traverses disciplines to include theoretical, philosophical and empirical papers; ranging from action-research methodology to the philosophy of Merleau Ponty to the post-capitalist politics of J.K. Gibson-Graham¹ and covering co-ops, political parties, makerspaces and alternative food provisioning. Notwithstanding the eclecticism of approaches and organisations, each tries to answer a central question: how can we organise differently given that we face the potential collapse of our current social and natural ecologies? The papers ask how we can build capacity for living and organising in ways that align better with natural systems, imagining ecologically sustainable and socially just alternatives. They posit different ways of understanding and experiencing nature and our social relationships, including how we research alternative organisations FOR sustainability (understood in its broadest sense) such that those organisations are further empowered to bring about change.

Never has the search for finding different ways of living in the world (Gibson-Graham, 2011) been so urgent. The capitalist market economy, gripped by the icy hands of neoliberalism, continues to wreak havoc on our social and natural ecologies. Indeed, the idea of the Capitalocene, described by Jason Moore as ‘a multispecies assemblage, a world-ecology of capital, power and nature’ (2016: xi),

¹ J.K. Gibson-Graham is the portmanteau name shared by feminist economic geographers Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson.

has growing currency among scholars who recognise that we are living through a systemic shift in the earth's systems with 'the potential to transform Earth rapidly and irreversibly into a state unknown in human experience' (Barnosky et al., 2012: 52). Planetary boundaries are being crossed (Rockstrom et al., 2009) and climate stability and biodiversity pushed to breaking point (Mace et al., 2014; Steffen et al., 2015). The biosphere with which the fate of humans is inextricably interlinked thus continues to degrade at a frightening pace. Loss of habitat, poaching, use of herbicides and pesticides, pollution including the devastating impact of plastic waste in the oceans, climate change driven by growing greenhouse gas emissions and atmospheric concentrations of CO² are causing a genocide of animal, insect and plant life such that we are living through a sixth extinction event (World Wildlife Fund, 2016). Climate change is also leading to severe weather events such as hurricanes, wildfires, drought and flooding. Meanwhile, the politics of austerity mean that inequality and poverty are growing (OECD, 2018); for example, in the United Kingdom, between April 2017 and March 2018, there was a 13% increase in the three-day emergency food supplies distributed to people in crisis by the Trussell Trust², following a 6% increase over the previous year (Trussell Trust, 2018). Add to this an increase in precarious and poorly paid employment, the dismantling of welfare systems and a rise of the far right. The 'other', in the form of migrants whether legal or illegal, refugees, ethnic minorities, welfare claimants and the disabled, are demonised. A sense of belonging in a shared endeavour with others has been hollowed out and replaced by increasing alienation, atomisation, individualisation and a focus on the enterprising self who is wholly responsible for their self-determination through making choices that will determine success or failure (Dawson, 2012; Giddens, 1991). Political and geographical community and participatory culture is being torn apart (Monbiot, 2017).

At the same time, we edge closer to a collapse of capitalist economy, as its inherent contradictions become ever more apparent. Salleh (2003), taking a feminist-Marxist perspective, points to the tensions between the social relations of production versus the forces of production (for example, the potential displacement of jobs by new technologies may undermine the profit generated by labour), between the social relations of production versus its conditions (for example, factory conditions and local pollution damaging workers' health such that their capacity for productive labour is compromised) and particularly between the forces of production and an externalised nature (ongoing resource extraction undermines the availability of future inputs). The repeated and systemic crises these contradictions have caused have been resolved, thus far, by

2 The Trussell Trust runs a network of over 400 foodbanks, giving emergency food and support to people in crisis across the UK.

new means of extracting value from the natural world (Salleh, 2003; see also Biesecker and Winterfeld, 2016; Moore, 2015) but this has resulted in the ecological checks and balances of the planet being degraded. Capitalism has manipulated nature 'as inert and fragmented matter' which has resulted in the near collapse of 'nature's capacity for creative regeneration and renewal' (Mies and Shiva, 2014: 23) such that further appropriation of the work of nature is becoming increasingly difficult. As nature's resources become scarcer, their extraction is enforced by growing authoritarian action on the part of governments and corporations seeking to protect their economic interests. This is one of the elements of what Klein (2007) has called 'disaster capitalism'; delivering or exploiting crises to further embed controversial policies in their wake.

The existential nature of these interlinked ecological, social and economic crises means that it is imperative to look at alternatives to the ways we currently organise. Pinning down what is meant by alternative, and the significance of alternative organisation is a work in progress. An increasing number of social scientists have begun to research and theorise alternative economic and political practices (see Gritzias and Kavoulakos, 2016, for an interesting review). Cultural geography has been at the forefront of this, and in particular the work on diverse economies developed by J.K. Gibson-Graham. Two of our contributions, those offered by Willatt and Elzenbaumer and Franz, are also influenced by Gibson-Graham's work. Gibson-Graham critique the theorisation of capitalism, globalisation, financialisation and so forth as an inevitable condition, because it renders invisible a multitude of hidden and alternative economic activities. Gibson-Graham (2008) focus instead on the diversity of ways of, for example, remunerating labour, distributing surplus and establishing commensurability in exchange that might not be acknowledged by the capitalist system. They use an iceberg metaphor (2006) to illustrate how capitalism is a visible, but small, proportion of all economic relations, while a substantial number of invisible economies lie below the waterline, including barter, care work for children and elders, community service, donations, gifts or self-provisioning to name but a few. These are the unregarded 'glue' that holds society together but which allow the visible economy to function and which exist as glimpses of a potential and different future.

Indeed, Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) argue that the very label 'alternative' marginalises non-dominant ways of organising such that their credibility can be questioned. They point to the difficulty of describing the 'alternative' without reference to the already known, a point also addressed by Husted's contribution, and that aiming for radical discontinuity with current norms is bound to disappoint. Positioning 'alternative' against 'mainstream', or 'good' against 'bad' reveals a reductive binary thinking that blinds us to the current developments

and future possibilities of already existing divergent forms of organisation (Beacham 2018). Jonas (2010) also argues that binarism serves only to legitimise currently dominant economic and social relations whereas we should try to know, represent and narrate diversity and difference to challenge such categories. For Gibson-Graham, this means reading for difference, being open to the fluid and contingent nature of diverse economies and recognising them as spaces that enable experimentation in the politics of the possible, in order to seek a fundamentally changed society. While it is imperative that knowledge of the real and present dangers we face is disseminated, seeing only barriers, overshoots, decline and collapse in our current predicament is to preach a mantra of disempowering despair.

However, although interest in these concerns is growing in Management and Organisation Studies (for example, see the *ephemera* special issue on ‘Organizing for the post-growth economy’), it has, as a field of academic research, been muted in addressing social and ecological challenges. Valerie Fournier has pointed out: ‘if one looks at the field of organisation studies specifically, one may be forgiven for thinking that there aren’t many alternatives to capitalist corporations’ (2002: 189). This view is echoed recently by Martin Parker when considering most management and business education. His call to ‘shut down’ the Business School underlines the focus on large, profit-maximising corporations which does not consider alternative forms of organising as options; instead globalising, speculative capitalism is seen as almost inevitable (Parker, 2018). The myth that there is no alternative to capitalism and current dominant forms of organisation is thus promulgated by not only the ways in which the production of goods and services is ordered, by the creation of ‘obedient’ producers and consumers who are almost trapped within cultural and material webs but also by the foci and methods of much MOS research and the ways we educate many of those who will enter the world of work (Parker et al., 2014; Parker, 2018; Shiva, 2014; Shove, 2003).

It is a truism often attributed to Einstein that the thinking that has created a problem is unlikely to help us solve it, so we need to break free of those webs and think differently. Scott-Cato and Hillier (2010) argue that we need to look in the holes and interstices left by current institutions and in our current ways of doing things to find transformational practices that challenge and subvert the status quo (see also Gibson-Graham, 2006; 2008). What we are likely to uncover are not grand revolutions and ruptures, but micropolitical processes that stress the importance of local context, local provisioning, community and a renewed civic life. This is what many of our contributors have done; Willatt’s research site is a community kitchen that collects and uses surplus food that would otherwise be wasted to prepare food for those suffering from social or economic exclusion.

The kitchen also runs pop-up cafes and education events to alert wider publics to the amount of food wasted by current provisioning systems. Schoneboom examines a 'makerspace' that re-draws relationships to the material, such that we question the provenance of the things we use and, just as importantly, the things we throw away. Elzenbaumer and Franz interrogate a printing co-operative that strives to work, as far as they are able, outside a system which prioritises commercial gain. Husted's focus is perhaps on the most radical of the organisations examined; Alternativet, a Danish political party who are striving for a new and participatory politics that will move away from systems that have become increasingly subject to corporate capture and increasingly undemocratic. These are, in the main, local initiatives that can be understood as resisting and attempting to reform, circumnavigate or transform market-orientated systems. For Gibson-Graham, these initiatives could be built on to develop ways of being and ways of organising that are focused less on growth and profitability but more on social and environmental flourishing (Gibson-Graham, 2003; 2008). They provide a way to see openings for a politics of possibility (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013).

At the same time, we need to be wary of over-idealising or romanticising the possibilities offered by 'the community' or 'the local' as sites of transformation (for example, see Böhm, 2014 for a critical review of Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). While 'community' has emerged as a key concept to respond to global challenges (e.g. Monbiot, 2017), it is notoriously difficult to define so that, for example, the transience and dynamism of communities are overlooked as are the ways that communities of place can be overlapping and conflicting (Burchell et al., 2014). Communities and community action are often represented uncritically as an effective way of reaching vulnerable groups or of building trust and, according to Day, positive ideas of place-based 'collaborative action for the common good' (2006:1) complement ideas of belonging and identity. However, an unreflexive focus on the local can result in issues of power, inequalities, division, exclusion and hegemonic domination being ignored (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Harvey, 1996). Meanwhile, the potential power of the discourse or concept of community has been appropriated and exploited by government in the promotion of a broader neoliberal agenda. This would include abdicating the responsibilities of the state (at either local or national level) by an unrealistic call for community action to fill in the gaps and a masking of broader and systemic social issues (Aiken, 2015; McCarthy, 2005).

There are also issues around the capacity of radical and innovative projects to instigate change. Hargreaves et al. (2013) found that they faced two forms of challenge. First, intrinsic issues around their organisation and management, the skills and resources required, the loss of key people and vulnerability to shocks

such as funding cuts. Secondly, barriers to diffusion that limit their wider, external influence. These include context specificity, geographical rootedness, competition from less radical groups who develop watered-down versions of their ideas and, interestingly, ideological commitments to being other and outside the mainstream that result in an aversion to broader engagement. This last point resonates with a tension also experienced by NGOs campaigning on environmental issues: whether to engage with profit-focused organisations in the hope of influencing them to bring about change (for example, the World Wildlife Fund) which risks corporate capture and being used as a figleaf for business as usual, or the more adversarial approach taken by, for example, Greenpeace (Phillips, 2017). Middlemiss and Parrish (2010) explore the frontiers between structure and community/individual agency and are more hopeful that grassroots action can create change. They too point to the importance of community capacities: cultural capacity (the legitimacy of sustainability objectives arising from a community's history and values); organisational capacity (values of the active organisations within a community and the support they can offer for action); infrastructural capacity (support from government, business and community groups); and personal capacity (individuals' resources such as skills or enthusiasm). They demonstrate that grassroots initiatives for change, even with limited resources, can influence those around them and the social structures they inhabit through interactions between such capacities. This resonates with the focus placed by our contributors on how an ecology of support can be nurtured that will enable initiatives to build capacity. Elzenbaumer and Franz address the ecology of support head on, by setting out how the co-operative operates as a movement, drawing on practical, material, as well as emotional and value-based support to sustain their actions. Husted's study demonstrates how collective action and support can rely upon openness and understanding – an acceptance of difference within a community where there is nonetheless a shared commitment for change.

Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) describe community economies as 'spaces of ethical decision making' which resonates with another of the pre-occupations of our contributors. Striving to organise in ways that foster more regenerative, equitable and ethical practices underpins the ethos of the alternatives that they studied. For Parker et al., this is a fundamental element of being 'alternative', which cannot reproduce 'a social system which relies on coercion, of an economic, ideological or physical form' (2014: 36). At the same time, principles which uphold autonomy and the protection of individual rights must be co-produced with principles that foreground solidarity and 'begin with the collective and our duties to others' (2014: 36). Co-operation, community and equality 'become both descriptions of the way that human beings are, and prescriptions for the way they should be' (2014: 36). Finally, taking responsibility for the future is key; 'the

conditions of our individual and collective flourishing' (2014: 38) of the more-than-human over the long term and to achieve this, there must be a commitment to action. Elzenbaumer and Franz set out similar values that underpin their worker co-operative, and also how their enactment ensures its sustainability. In turn these values are sustained by other (particularly radical) organisations in the wider co-operative movement. Husted's paper focuses on the values of openness and inclusivity that make a new politics possible. At the heart of the paper is the challenge of navigating the values of 'openness' and those of identifying and committing to particular courses of action which become inherently exclusionary. Schoneboom also points to how more sustainable ways of organising and inhabiting urban space can arise from 'tinkering', being open to possibility and fluidity rather than a grand, explicit political vision. Furthermore, the contributions suggest a set of ethics and values that are not capitalocentric (Moore, 2016) and thus driven by the pursuit of growth and profit, but instead are grounded in a different moral logic that includes a reevaluation and reorientation of the ways we live with other humans and within the biosphere (Phillips, 2017). Drawing on the work of Merleau Ponty, Korchagina places at the centre of her paper the need for a different way of understanding and experiencing nature that would lead to a moral transformation in relations with the more-than-human world. This is necessary because not only corporations but also alternative organisations and movements can reproduce problematic assumptions about nature. Thus a shift is required to stimulate transformative commitments to alternative forms of living and organising for sustainability. It is also part of the moral logic underpinning the approaches and practices outlined in our contributions that top-down, shallow sustainability frameworks that inevitably lead to business as usual (Phillips, 2017) are rejected but instead the skills, creativity and vision of members build sustainability from the bottom up. In relation to this imperative, Willatt turns the focus back onto the academic community to argue that research into alternatives must be guided by a practical and moral commitment to challenge unjust economic, social and political systems. She sets out the emancipatory premises and practices of Participatory Action Research (PAR) as one way to achieve this through respect for and being inclusive of local forms of knowledge and working with communities to use this knowledge to make the changes they have identified as important. As part of this, she outlines how she strives to include the ethical principles that are foundational to PAR in her own practice through structured ethical reflection; a collaborative approach that draws on communitarian and feminist ethics. In this way, she seeks to ensure the centrality of voices and participation of those who are co-creators of the research and of the transformations they wish to achieve.

Having drawn out the threads that bind our collection together, we now turn to outline in more depth the contribution made by each paper. Our collection opens

with Schoneboom, who explores a 'makerspace' in the North of England. This community-run space enables people to meet and utilise a diverse range of tools and materials available to make a wide range of things. Drawing on an ethnography, and including her own participation in the space, Schoneboom sets the scene for us as we imagine the uniqueness of the place, the vitality invested in and given to the materials such that both things and place are created, as well as social relationships. The makerspace is about potential and possibility, learning, sharing and relating, and being open to others. Whilst not necessarily ecological in nature, many of the 'makers' engage in recycling or upcycling materials, but whatever they craft there is the satisfaction of creation, of learning and of engaging with the material world. In an increasingly virtual world, the makerspace enables high levels of (face-to-face) interaction, peer support and shared learning. This extends beyond the members, with weekly sessions that are open to anyone, and a 'shopfront' that displays what is created that acts as an invitation to others.

Underpinning the activities of the maker space the paper considers how it is organised, to ensure a balance between the need to support the creative autonomy of its members and the rules necessary to create some order and enable the space to work for all. At its heart, the mode of organising retains a sense of possibility, a call for people to consider others, and infuses this with playfulness and humour.

Husted's paper introduces us to 'the alternative' in the context of a new political party in Denmark, *Alternativet* (The Alternative). A newly formed political party and movement, The Alternative exists to oppose hegemonic political practices, both in terms of their political ambitions and the ways in which they organise. Husted tackles a tension that lies at the heart of their desire to remain open, inclusive and 'universal' – open to anyone from across the political spectrum who seeks to join an alternative to current politics – and the need to 'particularise', that is to have policies and make decisions that imply exclusivity. The paper addresses how 'the problem of particularisation' is navigated through the management of subjectivity both of the collective subject (#EtNytVi, or #ANewWe) and the individual subject, the 'Alternativist'. While the former articulates the open and inclusive collective, the latter sets out the subject as someone who is open to others, attentive and curious. Drawing on Foucaultian notions of the subject, and Laclau's understanding of political identity, the paper argues that 'loose couplings' enable the organisation to manage the tension between remaining 'universal' and 'particular' at the same time.

The paper considers how radical politics – a politics that bases itself on opposition – can operate when it operates in the mainstream, in this case when

the party wins seats in parliament. This tackles the important question of how alternative ways of organising can practise in positive ways rather than remain on the fringes critiquing the status quo, whilst at the same time ‘resisting’ particularisation. Practically this is achieved through the collective and individual subjectivity, that emphasises openness, but also through inclusive ‘bottom-up’ processes that lead to the generation of a political programme. Drawing on discourse analysis of documentary material and interviews, Husted explores how the collective and individual subject comes into being, and how members identify with the collective and individual ‘ideal’ subject.

Drawing on a reading of care ethics as a radical social practice Willatt explores in more detail the ‘how’ of alternative organising through the means of PAR. Willatt aligns the ethical, political, emancipatory intent of PAR with the ambitions of many alternative forms of organising, namely that of a social and ecological commitment. Despite this, she argues that CMS – traditionally largely concerned with non-performativity – has tended to be more theoretical than practical. As a consequence PAR has been an underutilised approach in researching and informing the practice of organisations that have intentions allied to the ‘critical’ concerns of CMS. In the context of a community, volunteer-run kitchen in the South of England that uses waste food from large corporations to feed and support those in need, Willatt demonstrates how PAR can productively influence the process of organising. Specifically, it shows how the volunteers in the community kitchen were able to challenge the values and practices of its parent charity, leading to a more democratic way of organising.

As well as exploring the specific PAR practices undertaken (e.g. the learning history method, the structural ethical reflection method and collaborative approaches to research ethics), this paper also highlights the tensions faced by individual members when faced with competing values, and also organisations – in this case wishing to adopt a political stance on the causes of food waste and poverty whilst recognising that the organisation relied upon food waste from the very same organisations that it may criticise. This highlights that alternative organisations exist in complex relationships with their ‘mainstream’ counterparts.

In their note, Elzenbaumer and Franz explore the practices of a radical workers’ co-operative that seeks to organise in co-operative ways and that is driven by an ambition for radical eco-social change. Based on a worker-owned printing co-operative that was set up by environmental and social activists in order that they could contribute to direct action (achieved through printing campaign literature) whilst maintaining an income, the note sets out the core values and principles that inform and sustain the co-operative. They describe how the values inform

practice and, echoing Husted's paper, the subjectivity of co-operative members. As well as being 'against' capitalistic practices, they also explore how these values and practices can be sustained, which they express as a manifestation of Gibson-Graham and Miller's (2015) 'economy as ecology'. With values such as 'anti-work' (working part-time and balancing work time with 'life' and activism), placing flexibility and multi-skilling over efficient working practices, ensuring practices are environmentally sound and space is given for environmental action, the co-operative seeks to play its own small role in challenging and transforming (capitalist) practice. But crucially it does not do this in isolation, and it recognises the interdependencies: an ecology of support. The co-operative can only survive through its relationship with other organisations (e.g. the rent-free space it occupies, advice, support) and its members rely on friends, family, partners and the welfare state to make ends meet. The sharing of space, values, labour and so on set out how this is an ecology, although it is also one that draws on institutional frameworks (e.g. the welfare state) that sit outside the immediate community, demonstrating the complex interplay between agencies.

In our last note Korchagina challenges us to think differently about our relationship with nature. Turning to Merleau-Ponty, she seeks to shift our understanding of what nature is and our relationship to it. Currently we're enmeshed in discourse that treats nature as something to be managed and controlled, largely for our own benefit. This, in turn, assumes the solutions to our current environmental crises can be found through our ever-advancing 'mastery' over nature (the gendering here is intentional) enabling us to continue to live our lives through ever-more sophisticated solutions. In contrast, there is a counter-discourse that stresses the rights of nature and its right to exist and thrive. But as Korchagina notes, this treats nature as a legal entity (a right it cannot exercise) and retains a sense of 'mastery' as we appear to know nature – and in doing so losing nature's inherent mystery and otherness. Woven through both perspectives is the separation between us and nature. Whilst we are distinct, such an approach fails to capture our inherent connections. Through the work of Merleau-Ponty she seeks to move the current relationship we have with nature – one that is framed and thus mediated by these discourse – towards an immediate relationship with the world which is both affective and elusive.

To sum up, our contributors focus on what *can* be done and on what *is* being done to develop alternatives that challenge the current orthodoxies which are leading to social and ecological breakdown. They break away from looking only at issues of power or domination, important as those are, but which can leave us overwhelmed by feelings of despair or futility. As Peter North has commented: 'I want to focus more on developing "our" power to create the world we want to see, theorising barriers as issues to be grappled with, not fundamental blocks to

progress' (2014: 1058). The contributions demonstrate that there is a messy middle ground between the status quo and revolution that can act as a platform from which to develop wider awareness and action. The power of capitalism and our current ways of thinking and doing to co-opt and dilute alternative practices and spaces should not be dismissed. However, we need also to avoid a self-fulfilling critique where such spaces and practices are presented as inextricably entangled in existing systems and should therefore be rejected such that any recognition of hopeful change becomes impossible. Overall these papers give us examples, ideas, reflections and conceptualisations of what 'being' and 'acting' alternatives might entail. Notwithstanding the position of these organisations and practices as being 'against' the system – the radical other – they are also nonetheless operating with and within them. They demonstrate how micropolitics and everyday actions can make a difference and point to another way.

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the editors

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