Where is the economy? Towards an everyday epistemology of economic geography

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Abstract

While economic geography has traditionally focused on large scales, in this article, I argue for an everyday epistemology of economic geography to add nuance to our current understandings of the economy. This entails, alongside state and city-scaled analyses, a focus on the lived aspects of the economy at a more personal scale. By the everyday economy, I refer to the ordinary and intimate relational experiences of everyday life that are unevenly and dynamically spatiotemporally shaped by the economy. This epistemology involves a shift in where we see and understand the economy: from large scale macro-analyses to the micro-geographies of everyday life. Such a shift is important for economic geographers, as it allows us to conceptualise the personal, everyday impacts of the economy, as well as how people and communities can work to resist the economic logics of austerity and neoliberalism.

1. Introduction

Despite a movement towards everyday analyses in economic geography (e.g. Gibson-Graham, 1996; Leyshon et al., 2003; Katz, 2004; Gray, 2014), there has been a tendency to privilege larger scales of analysis (Werner et al., 2017). Thus, I argue for an everyday epistemology of economic geography through questioning where we see the economy. I suggest that rather than privileging large scale economies — which have marginalised peoples' experiences — we examine economic 'micro-geographies' to better understand peoples' diverse experiences of the economy (van Lanen, 2020: 220). Indeed, as Hall (2019a: 490) suggests, the economic is 'lived, intimate, and so very personal': the economy should not be detached from the lives it impacts. In making this argument, I respond to appeals for more diverse voices in economic geography (Gray & Pollard, 2018), and calls to post-colonise economic geography (Pollard et al., 2009).

First, I will outline what an everyday epistemology of the economy entails, before discussing how this contributes to post-colonising geography. Then, I will use austerity to ground this everyday epistemology in an empirical example, through contrasting larger scale analyses to the body of literature that Strong (2020: 211) conceptualises as 'actually existing austerity'. This everyday understanding involves exploring both the monetary and experiential micro-geographies of austerity. Finally, I explore how this conceptualisation could help us theorise the current Covid-19 crisis.

2. The everyday economy

Within economic geography, there has been a turn to examining the everyday implications of living in the economy (Yarker, 2017). This has combined insights from cultural and economic geographies to understand how people experience the economy (Yarker, 2017). This stresses a focus on real people and families: it takes seriously how they experience the

economy in the everyday. Indeed, focusing on the everyday is more-than-representational as it moves beyond representations to understand affective experiences (Hitchen, 2019). However, underlying the everyday epistemology is a politics of everyday suffering and resistance, as it highlights the injustices caused by neoliberal economic policies (Pimlott-Wilson & Hall, 2017).

Furthermore, the term everyday necessitates further discussion and definition. Yarker (2017: 4) adopts a Lefebvrian approach to define the everyday, suggesting that it entails 'the ordinary, mundane and familiar practices and experiences of daily life'. Beyond this, through a feminist analysis, Hall (2018, 2019b) demonstrates that the everyday is relational — as intimate relationships with family and friends get reworked through interactions with the economy. Thus, an everyday focus stresses the ordinary and intimate relational experiences of everyday life.

Moreover, as Hitchen and Shaw (2019) demonstrate, the everyday experience is altered by the spaces in which we can exist, which are shaped by the economy. Thus, the everyday is not aspatial — it occurs in space, both physical and existential — or in Shaw's (2019: 975) terms 'in the world'. Indeed, as Shaw (2019: 975) summarises, 'human being is always being-in-the-world'. Thus, an everyday analytic, in paying attention to the micro-geographies of the economy, must pay attention to the spaces in which the economy manifests. This spatial manifestation of the economy is dynamic, as it affects people with varying intensities at different times (Raynor, 2017; Hitchen, 2019). In short, an everyday epistemology entails paying attention to peoples' ordinary and intimate relational experiences of everyday life that are unevenly and dynamically spatiotemporally shaped by the economy.

2.1 Post-colonising the everyday

Crucially, this everyday epistemology contrasts to the previous universalising ideas of capitalism as an abstract force which manifest in structural examinations of the economy (Pollard et al., 2009), by emphasising the difference in experiencing the economy (Hall, 2017). Thus, this epistemology also aids with the project of post-colonising economic geography. This is achieved through engaging with the messiness of the economy in everyday ethnographic accounts in diverse contexts (Pollard et al., 2009). While current epistemologies of economic geography with their universalising visions flatten difference (Jazeel, 2019), an everyday epistemology emphasises difference. This attention to difference, on terms true to those differences, is central to post-colonising geography (Jazeel, 2018). Indeed, in focusing on difference, an everyday epistemology highlights the inequality produced by particular economic logics, as I demonstrate in the context of austerity.

3. Grounding austerity

To show the utility of an everyday epistemology, I use the example of austerity in the United Kingdom (UK) to contrast larger scale analyses with an everyday epistemology. Austerity, simply defined, refers to the cutting of public spending with the explicit aim of reducing a

government budget deficit (Hall, 2019b), although Blyth (2013) suggests that it is a neoliberal ideological project.

Larger scale analyses of austerity have been crucial in showing how the UK's austerity has been profoundly unequal. As Gray and Barford (2018) suggest, cuts have been made to almost every government department. However, in terms of a real percentage change in budget, the largest cuts were to the local government section of the Department of Communities and Local Government; displacing austerity from the national to local government. As deprived local governments receive more national government funding, deprived areas have experienced greater budget cuts (Hastings et al., 2017; Gray & Barford, 2018). This has geographical ramifications, as some regions are significantly more impacted than others — for example, London and the North-West of England experienced far greater cuts than the South (Hamnett, 2014; Gray & Barford, 2018). Thus, austerity creates a division between those local governments that can withstand the cuts, such as through using local reserves, and those that cannot — accentuating territorial injustice (Gray & Barford, 2018). Furthermore, as Beatty and Fothergill (2014, 2020) demonstrate, the implications of national level policies, such as welfare, are also profoundly uneven. Older industrial areas, some London boroughs and less prosperous seaside towns are most impacted by austere welfare reforms, due to higher levels of unemployment and incapacity claimants (Beatty & Fothergill, 2017). Moreover, these inequalities are also societal as certain groups of claimants lose more money from austerity than others (Beatty & Forthergill, 2016). As such, macro-analyses of austerity critically highlight how austerity is unequal, demonstrates the importance of large scale analyses.

3.1 Monetary micro-geographies

However, alongside the utility of larger scale analyses, an everyday epistemology is useful in understanding the inequality of austerity. To demonstrate this, I draw on the literature that Strong (2020: 211) terms 'actually existing austerity'. For example, Hitchen's (2016) work with families affected by disability, one of the groups most impacted by austerity, highlights the significance of austerity for families. One of Hitchen's (2016) participants, Nathalie, had her funding cut from £15,000 to just £7,000 in a single day. Through exploring the monetary micro-geographies of people and families, such as Nathalie, an everyday epistemology highlights that aggregate data hides the extremes of the cuts. This demonstrates that the impacts of austere cuts are cumulative, rather than linear: people experience austerity from the combining effect of multiple different welfare and service cuts (Newman, 2017). This is overlooked in larger scale analyses, such as in Beatty and Fothergill's (2014) article, as they consider only aggregate data for locations alongside losses from individual welfare cuts, ignoring the cumulative nature of welfare and service cuts. This obscures the racial and gendered inequalities of austerity (Greer Murphy, 2017; Emejulu & Bassel, 2018), as the cumulative nature of cuts for individuals and families are hidden. In showing the difference and inequality produced through the everyday implications of austerity in Britain, this epistemology contributes to post-colonising economic geography — as ethnic minority groups are significantly more impacted by austerity (Hall et al., 2017). Indeed, to use Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) term, this inequality is intersectional — race, gender and other identities intersect to shape experiences of social oppression (Hopkins, 2019). In highlighting

the intersectional experiences of austerity (Hall et al., 2017), these everyday monetary micro-geographies contribute to post-colonising economic geography. As an everyday epistemology takes seriously the individual family, it highlights the cumulative impacts of the cuts which can give greater understandings of the inequality produced by austerity.

3.2 Micro-geographies of austere experience

More fundamentally than numerical analyses of individual families, however, an everyday epistemology foregrounds peoples' experience of austerity, which is similarly unexplored in traditional epistemologies of economic geography. Indeed, the analytical focus of Hitchen's (2016) article is not monetary, but rather on how her participants experience austerity, through the theoretical lens of affective atmospheres. Atmospheres, as Anderson (2016: 746) puts it, are 'ephemeral affective impressions that envelope particular enclosed forms'. Austerity as an atmosphere is not a continuous presence, but rather becomes more intense at certain moments (Hitchen, 2016). Nathalie experiences this in the frustration and disappointment when she cannot spend time with her friends (Hitchen, 2016), demonstrating how austerity moves from the background into the foreground of the spaces of everyday life (Hitchen, 2016; Hitchen & Raynor, 2020). This allows us to conceptualise austerity as a multiplicity — as an incoherent phenomenon that is more-than-economic as it alters peoples' everyday lives (Hitchen, 2019). Building on this, Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar (2019) demonstrate how austerity leads to weariness due to its ordinary, chronic and gradual nature. This is not only about existing cuts, but also the anticipation and worry of future cuts (Horton, 2016; Hitchen, 2019). Furthermore, these cuts do not impact isolated individuals, but rather families and friends. Thus, austerity is necessarily relational — it has a direct impact on family and friendship fragility (Hall, 2019b). As van Lanen (2020) demonstrates, austerity has an impact on the family through causing financial stresses, particularly for female participants due to gendered responsibilities around budgeting (Hall, 2016; Stenning, 2020). For families impacted by austerity, crises are always looming; although austerity is a policy at the societal state scale, it is translated into intimate familial crises (Stenning, 2017; Hall, 2019). Examining peoples' experiences highlights that austerity is far more than an economic policy, but rather a personal crisis within everyday life. As such, this everyday epistemology of austerity highlights how austerity emerges in ordinary and relational experiences with different intensities across times and spaces.

While an everyday conceptualisation reveals how austerity impacts on peoples' everyday lives, it also reveals how people can resist austerity. Indeed, as Elias and Roberts (2016) suggest, the everyday is both a site where the economy shapes the lives of the most vulnerable, but also a site where neoliberal reforms are resisted. As Strong (2019) argues in the context of foodbanks, austerity is a disputed process: state retreat is not an end, but rather a beginning of responses from other actors beyond the state. However, foodbanks are not the only form of resistance to austerity — indeed, feminist theory and praxis highlights the importance of a quieter politics of austerity (Hall, 2020). Everyday actions, such as mutters of encouragement, can be conceptualised within a politics of care as a way of building a politics of togetherness during austerity (Hall, 2020). Similarly, rendering visible the invisible aspects of home and the stresses of austerity, as Daisy, one of Jupp's (2017) participants, does through a film, can highlight the gendered nature of austerity (Hall, 2020),

and engender resistance. Thus, an attention to the everyday spaces of the economy, as demonstrated through the example of austerity, also returns agency to people as it shows their practices of resistance to neoliberal austerity polices — which are obscured at larger scales of analysis.

4. Understanding coronavirus

At the time of writing, we are in the middle of the Covid-19 crisis. An everyday epistemology is crucial to help us understand the Covid-19 crisis. Coronavirus is clearly, to borrow from Hitchen (2019: 3), 'more-than-economic': it is both a public health and economic crisis combined. An everyday epistemology highlights how this crisis impacts on people, and crucially, how people resist this crisis through a quiet politics of care. Covid-19 certainly demonstrates the deadliness of neoliberalism's uncaringness (Neely & Lopez, 2020). This is highlighted in the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) for National Health Service (NHS) workers — as austerity cuts led to a decline in the value of the stockpile by 40% over the last six years (Davies et al., 2020). This led to NHS workers risking their lives to care for patients: here, neoliberalism's uncaringness is laid bare, as reducing spending in the decade of austerity was valued higher than the lives of care workers in a public health crisis. The combined impact of austerity and coronavirus on the daily lives of doctors is clear, as these PPE shortages led to worries over both their health and their families health became central concerns (Jacobs et al., 2020).

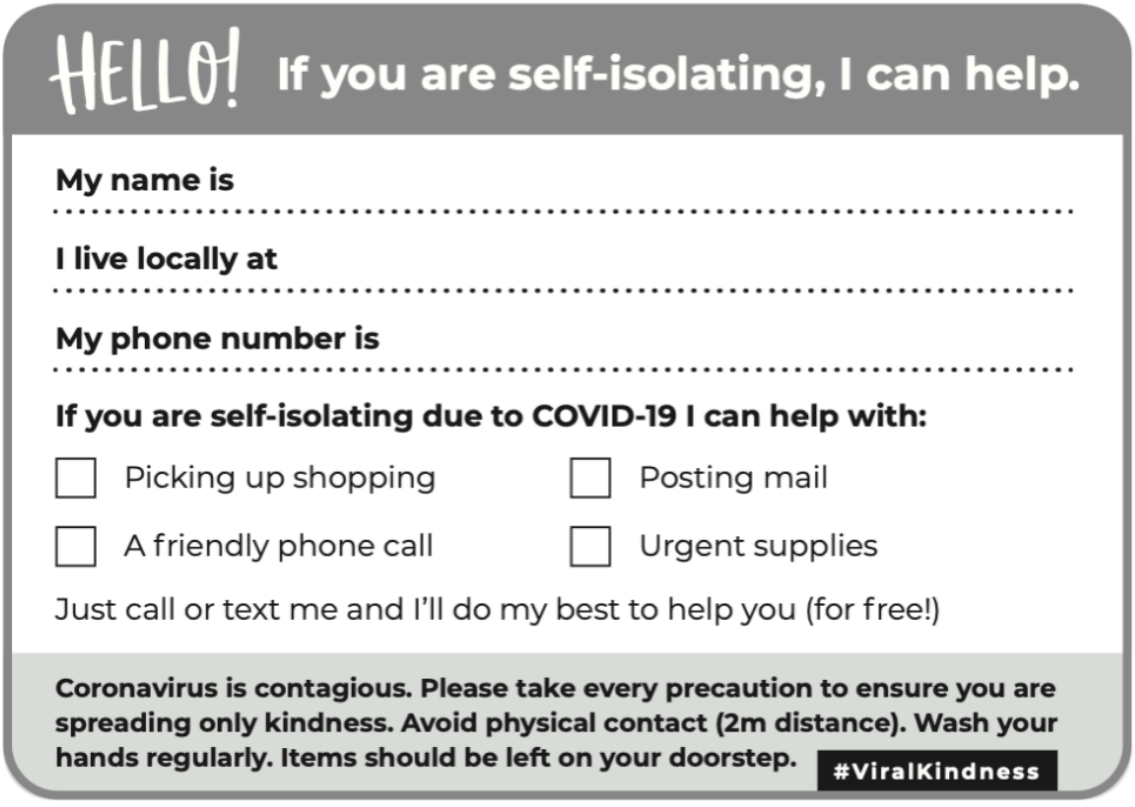

Figure 1. A 'Viral Kindness' sheet which people posted to the local community to be able to give help during the Covid-19 crisis (Hill, 2020).

However, more than this, the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted how communities can come together to resist economic logics. Although the Covid-19 crisis is one of the deepest recessions in modern history, through simple materialities such as letters of 'Viral Kindness' (Figure 1) in the mailbox, communities have come together to resist the more-than-economic impacts of this crisis. While the Conservative government's furlough scheme has around one million people ineligible (Chapman, 2020), which will only increase as it is scaled back (Partington, 2020), communities have stepped in to fill these gaps in provision. Indeed, this highlights how this care is ultimately a political act of resistance (Hall, 2020): it builds a politics of togetherness at a time of exacerbating inequalities. While there is no doubt that this crisis has been damaging, through this quieter politics of care, communities worked together to resist some of the economic ramifications of Coronavirus.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, an everyday epistemology of the economy is a crucial perspective. As Horton (2016) suggests, this epistemology should not supersede state and city scaled analyses, but rather should be explored alongside this crucial geographical work to extend and add nuance to this scholarship. As I demonstrated through the example of actually existing austerity, an everyday epistemology allows us to highlight the inequalities and impacts of the economy at a more intimate and personal scale. As Hall (2017) suggests, much research has focused on the large scale financial implications of austerity, but experiences of austerity are characterised by difference. It is important that we, as scholars, are willing to take seriously the differences produced by the economy on a personal scale, and thus an everyday epistemology is crucial. More than this, however, an everyday epistemology opens us up to see the vast array of ways in which people can resist the ramifications of particular economic logics. Indeed, in the context of Coronavirus, it is now more important than ever that our epistemologies of economic geography take into account resistance to neoliberal economic policies.

6. References

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