

by the recognition that capitalism is not “all there is” despite capital’s massive economic, discursive, and political power. In a vein similar to for example J.K. Gibson-Graham and recently Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (*The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 2015), he argues for recognizing the diverse economic forms already in place in our current societies. In the book, Elder-Vass tackles this task firstly by building up a theoretical approach, “new political economy of practices,” and secondly by applying this approach to a variety of current digital economies.

Crucial for Elder-Vass’s approach is the political and strategic re-definition of economy to include also non-market alternatives. For this purpose, he defines economy in terms of provisioning. This means that economic activities are not only those that happen in a market relation but also all those that provide the goods and services that people need. More precisely, the economy is “the provision of goods and services through commodity exchange plus the provision of equivalent goods and services through other social practices” (p. 32). This definition opens up the possibility to account for non-capitalist economic forms, such as the gift economy, as equally worthy of attention as commodity exchange.

At the heart of Elder-Vass’s new political economy is the concept of appropriative practices. This concept directs attention to the ways in which different practices produce benefits and harms to those who participate in them. While in cultural studies and feminist theory, the concept of appropriative practices implies a critique of certain relations of power, for Elder-Vass the concept of appropriation is neutral in the sense that appropriative practices are simply those practices around any process of production that determine the allocation or transfer of its benefits. Practices, which are primarily a product of social norms, combine and form different complexes. It is precisely this idea of complexes of appropriative practices that allows the fine-grained analysis of different forms of diverse or hybrid economies, as it makes possible recognizing the simultaneous presence of both capitalist and non-capitalist practices within a certain economic form.

In *Profit and Gift*, this theoretical framework is developed and put to work in an empirical analysis of digital economies through cases such as Apple, Wikipedia, Google, and YouTube. While Apple is analysed as an example of how monopolies can be constructed through intellectual

Theorizing the diversity of digital economic practices

Dave Elder-Vass: *Profit and Gift in the Digital Economy*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2016. 257 pp. ISBN 978-1-316-50938-8

In *Profit and Gift in the Digital Economy*, Dave Elder-Vass provides a compelling theoretical approach to researching hybrid economic forms in the context of digital economy. Elder-Vass’s central argument is motivated

property rights and technology, Wikipedia serves as an example of commons based peer production regulated by commonly shared and established social norms. These analyses definitely show the strength of Elder-Vass's approach as it allows distinguishing how different practices such as gift giving and capitalist profit making can co-exist and interact to produce economic outcome within digital economies. The empirical analyses also highlight the role of technology in the formation of these practices.

In discussing the appropriate practices around Google, Elder-Vass develops specific concepts with which to dissect and understand different forms of gift giving: inducement gifts that induce transactions, solicitation gifts that are linked to a request for a return gift, and loaded gifts whose acceptance entails a hidden return. These concepts are an example of how detailed distinctions can be extremely useful in making sense of current digital practices. For instance, the concept of a loaded gift allows dissecting how a non-commodity or non-commercial relationship can become part of practices which however yield a revenue for a third party. This makes sense for example in understanding the logic of many blogging platforms in which content is produced as a gift (or as free labour as I would put it)

by contributors, but the platform itself is about making profits through advertising.

In developing his theoretical stand, Elder-Vass takes what for me seems a rather polemic approach in comparing Marxism and neoclassical economics, seeing both as "deeply flawed" and unable to provide a basis for any kind of viable political economy. Proposing his theoretical model as an antidote to the flaws in these traditions, his argument builds on proving both previous theoretical traditions fatally wrong. This leads him to dismiss in a single chapter not only Marx's labour theory of value but also the concept of modes of production. While the discussion of Elder-Vass around these concepts is thought-provoking, it is close to impossible to have a properly grounded critique of a whole tradition within such a small space. This is also noted by Elder-Vass himself as he says that there is considerable debate and diversity within the tradition itself, but he engages with these debates only so far as it seems useful for his general argument of Marxism as flawed. To me it seems that engaging more with these discussions, and also post-Marxist theories that explicitly discuss knowledge production, such as those of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, would have provided additional depth to the overall argumentation of the book.

Overall, however, *Profit and Gift* provides a painstakingly argued and very useful theoretical approach, and the empirical analyses are both interesting and accurate. In addition, the empirical chapters show how the framework of appropriative practices is not only theoretical but can also function methodologically directing attention to certain kind of practices and connections. I believe the book will be valuable for any researcher seeking to recognize, distinguish, and make sense of digital economic practices.

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