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Reimagining Livelihoods: a theoretical triumph lacking achievable solutions

In sustainable development courses, it is always taught that sustainability in city planning encompasses the "three Es": economy, environment and equity. The inclusion of these three is usually to compel stakeholders who are focused on the economy to also consider implications on equity and the environment, or to demonstrate how developments in equity and the environment are also positively connected to the economy. In *Reimagining Livelihoods: Life Beyond Economy, Society, and Environment,* Ethan Miller delves into why the inseparability of the 'hegemonic trio' has led to the supremacy of economy. He argues that the system in which the trio exists has made it impossible to elevate both the economy and the environment, which has led to a language conceptualized in solely economic terms. Miller himself is an activist for communal living, and resides where his book is contextualized, in Plum Creek, Maine. In the introduction, Miller explains how conflict over the development of a resort in a largely undeveloped forested area reinforced the need for the inseparability of the hegemonic trio. He combines interviews with Plum Creek stakeholders, engagement with post-humanist, post-modern, feminist, and Marxist texts to develop the concept of livelihood within the postcapitalist political imaginary. Drawing on theory from Deluze and Guattari, Latour, Escobar, and Haraway, Miller focuses on posthumanism, Marxist views of exploitation, labor, and surplus, as well as an investigation into the pluriverse. Although his arguments regarding livelihoods, commoning, and dependency are especially compelling, many of his solutions reside

within the realm of changing the language and our relationship toward the hegemonic trio, without realistic ways to disseminate this on a large-scale.

Miller divides the book into four parts: Problematizing the Trio, Tracing Hegemonies, Decomposing the Trio, and Recomposing Livelihoods. In Part I: Problematizing the Trio, he uses interviews of professionals in Maine to establish the hegemonic trio of economy, society, and ecology, as well as problematize their separation. Miller argues that these become articulated through linked processes of material engagement and meaning-making into assemblages. In Part II: Tracing Hegemonies, Miller identifies ways in which the hegemonic categories reinforce the effects of the capitalist system on nature and culture. He reviews the ways in which the hegemonic trio are both forces and domains. He explains that they are forces in that the hegemonic trio is above human agency and can shape and determine it from the outside. As domains, they act as specific bounded spaces. Miller explains this in the context of the economy, "indeed it is a particular territorialization that enables a set of common identifications and thus stabilizes this economy as a site for management and policy intervention" (37). In line with post-humanist thinking, he argues for the inclusion of non-humans in our definition of society, environment, and economy under the abject-environment. Lastly, he draws upon the dynamics of hegemonic actualization to show the role of nature- culture, and capital-state to show the mutual forces and processes that conceptualize and reinforce economy, society, and environment.

In Part III: Decomposing the Trio, Miller shows the problems and questions brought about by the hegemonic trio in the form of hesitations in his interviews. He delves into the idea of ethical negotiations and community economy. He argues that the economy cannot be something that one party (or any party) 'controls'. Compromise means settling in the middle, and neither party is really satisfied, so Miller argues that this fails to enact "creative transformation"

where more effective negotiation would have both sides would own up to their own positions and be open to transformation (144). In Part IV: Recomposing Livelihoods, Miller attempts to demystify the fog bank, and proposes the idea of ecopoiesis, the "becoming of belonging", or a focus on ever changing conditions (137). He proposes ecological livelihoods, which represent ethical interconnections between the hegemonic trio, and looking beyond just human agency. He categorizes three processes, being made by others (allopoiesis), making a living for others (alterpoiesis), and making a living (auopoises). He lists the 5 essential elements of ecological livelihoods: livelihoods must apply to everyone, livelihoods must avoid generalizations that attempt to capture difference into structure, livelihoods must immeasurable, livelihoods must not accept trajectories of development, and they must always be seen as open-ended and revisable. (171). Miller lists eight "ontological coordinates for commoning," which include: constituency values, measurement and comparison, performances of the whole, knowledge and uncertainty, needs and strategies, surplus, and incentives (200). Lastly, he concludes with a warning that in order to move from the anthropocene and begin to address the irreversible damage that a capitalist political economy has facilitated on the environment, we must move past humanist ways of thinking toward a commons and livelihood that encompsases all beings.

Ethan Miller has an incredible talent for weaving theory, interviews, and facts into a well-written narrative. One of his biggest successes was his introduction of the hegemonic trio, which led into problematizing the trio, and then seamlessly into the concept of livelihoods as a way to reconceptualize these problematic distinctive categories. To back this up, he drew upon feminist scholars that emphasized the undervalued work of women, nature, and peasants and how this fit into ideas of subsistence. Furthermore, he used examples such as the stigma of dependency to frame how the idea of ecological livelihoods is superior to the status quo.

Dependency is seen as a bad thing now, but in reality, we are dependent on the environment and we are dependent on each other, as he explained through the framework of allopoiesis and alterpoiesis. He set up ideas about commoning and uncommoning early on by framing ecological livelihood as a communal idea. He argues that commoning focuses less on things in common and more on processes of social labor through which that which is in common is produced and reproduced (187). He describes it further as, "the myriad of ways in which livelihood relations are rendered into shared spaces of mutual exposure and negotiation through which living singularities actively respond to ethical demands posed by specific instances of an ontological in-common" (189). This was a compelling argument because it provides some of the language he calls for throughout the book to describe processes that affect all aspects of the trio. He goes further by offering transcommoning, a way to construct and maintain connections between and across multiple commons. The inclusion of the different systems of commoning was especially helpful because it was one of the most concrete plans or ways offered to conceptualize a world (or worlds) beyond the hegemonic trio. One of the main issues with transcommoning, however, is the need for widespread buy-in beyond just one community.

Another standout argument was Miller's description of 'multiplying articulations.' His description of multiple words and economies was surprisingly understandable; how beyond the value of a dollar, we have things like ecosystem services that do not require an exchange of money but are essential to our communal livelihood. He also brings in the feminist argument about what we value as labor and what is worth being paid within the existing system. He characterizes this other economy as being characterized by life-sustaining labor and uses this to explain that it is not really a conflict between economy and environment, rather conflicts between different economies, or "divergent economic articulations" (112). He explains that there

are two economies, the economy of capital-based metrics, money, and profit; and a second economy of sustenance, well-being, and livelihood. This is the clearest explanation of a pluriverse that I have encountered, and was especially coherent in how these economies differ and why his proposed economy is preferable, although not easily implementable.

Although many of Miller's arguments were persuasive and well-explained, some seemed less grounded. One of his underlying assumptions early on is that "an environment exists only in relation to the being whose environment it is" (48). He tends to focus his arguments and assumptions on individuals, and the behavioral descriptions of many of those individuals seem to be grounded in Western thought. He continues to argue that this center is made up of wealthy white men. Isn't that assumption counterintuitive? Rural women from Cameroon would have a different center that starkly contrasts one of a white western man. He very much centers his work on the idea of an individual from rural Maine, and that comes through as a result of his underlying assumptions. Furthermore, Miller spends very little time discussing race or ethnicity and how that would lead to differing relationships to the economy and environment. This idea of communal livelihood seems intertwined to the ways in which specific groups view the environment, economy, and society. Furthermore, it seemed as though the people he interviewed mostly saw the economy as a stabilizing force. They tend to be capitalists with hesitations, but only in the introduction did we really see people who recognized their disenfranchisement from the capitalist system. Although we do not know the details of race, class, or ethnicity of Miller's interviewees, how would their answers have been different if they were Black workers who had generationally been left out of the system of land-owning? How would this have changed their relationship to the environment or the economy? How would this affect their trust in any type of community-ownership model? It seems as though any scaling up of communal livelihoods would

have to reconceptualize the normative view of an individual's relationship with the environment to be more inclusive.

Names are important, but not everything. He spends a lot of the book problematizing the naming of these ideas, and the contexts within which they exist. You cannot change the name without changing the context in which these categories exist, but how do you really change the context of the economy without dismantling capitalism or the environment without restructuring the nature-culture, human-environment divides? How do you make people shift their focus from this to a communal livelihood? To change the way we handle development disputes, Miller is arguing that we have to change the way we conceptualize economy, environment, and society because we tend to separate them. By giving them new names and responsibilities, people lose familiarity with high-level and indescribable concepts, which tends to make this an inaccessible topic. Additionally, his argument about the essence of the trio being about well-being and self-sufficiency was not fully persuasive. It seems as though he focuses mostly on individual and community actors and neglects to really delve into an important part of his own story, developers. There are actors who engage with others within society, economy, and environment who have already met their basic needs of livelihood and sufficiency and have other priorities as well. How would they engage in this communal system? If development is a form of progress, would that no longer exist? Quality of life arguments tend to center on use-value, and making things better for the existing community, while many of those actions inherently also raise the exchange value.

Of the eight "ontological coordinates for commoning," measurement comparison seems to be the least feasible condition. On this condition, Miller argues that commoning compels "value beyond measure," which is arguably true. However, in the world where we currently exist

within the hegemonic triad, numbers are everything. It is how we rationalize our actions toward climate change and our empathy toward immigrants. We use numbers as a method with which to rationalize our morality and use arguments based on metrics instead of morals, which is highly problematic. However, it is not likely or feasible to ask for a change in how we measure progress. To make a better system is one thing, but to convince others to join, especially disenfranchised individuals, will constitute proving that this measures up to or beats the current system they live within. Trust is not enough, and Miller was unable to provide an alternative way to conceptualize improvement, harm, or progress, because he does not want any form of measurement. But without any measurable metric of success or failure, how will we know that any new conceptualization of livelihood is working?

Although the interviews were successfully weaved throughout to remind readers of the localization of these issues in Maine, there was no general contextualization of when or how these interviews were conducted. The book begins by talking about this conflict of development, but we never hear more about how the situation developed, or how the interviewees changed their perceptions during the process. Miller did not contextualize the professionals within the conflict, nor explain at what point in time they were interviewed. Not situating the interviews and development conflict within the writing made it difficult to follow and disconnected much of the book from what seemed like the original research framework. Lastly, Miller seemed to focus his interview efforts on professionals in Maine related to the hegemonic trio. It seemed like there was a gap in the inclusion of diverse community members or activists, who might have provided a different frame of reference, view of economy, or relationship with nature.

Although the book gives immense insight into the need for a new framework of livelihood that connects environment, society, and economy, it also seems inaccessible for a

general audience. Even if the target audience was academics, the language was inaccessible, and there were many theoretical frameworks introduced with little to no background. Names, such as Bruno Latour, were dropped without much introduction, and readers were expected to understand ideas about hegemony and labor without much description. Reconceptualizing relationships and changing language seemed to be some of the most conceivable solutions that Miller proposed, however, the tools with which those can be achieved remain mostly within the scope of academia. Although he proposes many compelling questions, he does not actually answer all of them. He asked, "what ways of speaking might help to more potently express, connect, and strengthen ethical ecopoietic processes that escape capture by the hegemonic trio?" (146). He brings in Gibson-Graham (2006) to answer, "If we abandon the concept and resort to an ontology that doesn't include an economy, we are at risk of being ignored" (147). Here, he is both stating that we need the language to express the hegemonic trio but is also bringing in literature to explain that this language needs to include the economy in order to be salient. This contradiction never gets fully addressed, and represents the main problem presented by his work. Miller is correct in his assertions but flawed in his solutions.

Miller asks an environmental business owner, "at what point are we trying to make a fundamentally problematic system sustainable by greening it versus figuring out how to change our relationship" (216). Our solutions for climate change at this point are just that; attempts to compel the people with the means of production and extraction to see why it is economically essential to mitigate the effects, which usually takes precedence over a moral appeal. Miller does a fantastic job of weaving Marxist and post-humanist theory into interviews and a narrative about commoning and livelihoods. Despite its faults, this book is a compelling argument for reconsidering our relationships with not only the environment, but also with the economy and

society. Miller's own experiences in a communal living environment clearly play a role in how he conceptualizes an improved idea of livelihood. Hopefully in future works, he will build upon his framework of Maine to be more inclusive and make the idea of communal livelihood more accessible and achievable.