

Ethan Miller

Reimagining Livelihoods: Life beyond Economy, Society, and Environment

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The state of Maine – the far northeast corner of the United States – has vast forestlands, a rocky coastline, a dependence on natural resource-based industries, and the least urbanised population of the country. Policymakers and officers of diverse state bureaucracies, environmental and community activists, directors of chambers of commerce all push in one way or another for a better future for the state and its people. *Reimagining Livelihoods* builds on a long conversation between the researcher-activist author, Ethan Miller, and these people. Miller invites readers to rethink their conceptions of the grand categories – ‘economy’, ‘environment’ and ‘society’ – that structure our understanding of how people make their living and their lives.

The book was worthy of the 2020 Outstanding Publication Award of the American Association of Geography’s Cultural and Political Ecology Specialty Group. It tacks between deep theory and rich empirical material to carefully, insidiously open up alternate ways-of-seeing in the readers’ minds.

After a useful introductory vignette and overview of the argument, the book continues in four parts. The single chapter of Part I uses the worldviews of Maine policy professionals to establish the existence of a hegemonic trio of ontological categories – economy, society and ecology. Miller suggests these categories became ‘articulated’ through linked processes of meaning-making and material engagement; they then become stabilised ‘hegemonic assemblages’, the dominant ideas and institutional domains.

Part II establishes the strength of the economy-society-environment edifice. It identifies the ways in which the hegemonic categories enact and reinforce the classic power relations and divisions of capitalism and between nature and culture. Chapter 2 reviews the ways in which the three categories are each both *forces* and *domains*: objects that confront Maine’s policymakers, and terrains which they seek to control. Chapter 3 rallies a multitude of field-based examples to investigate the ways in which the categories establish boundaries between themselves – what is within, what is without – that ironically highlight their interconnectedness. Chapter 4 places the trio of categories within the power relations of capitalism, the state, nature–culture divides, and the development teleology.

Part III shows the cracks in the edifice. According to Miller, the hegemonic trio is at the same time strong and fleeting: ‘We are *actually* in the grip of a totalizing, hegemonic mega-assemblage, the material-semiotic power of which is substantial and cannot be vanquished with the wave of a performative-discursive wand; and at the same time, this totalization is utterly incomplete, as Mainers are always already in the process of rupturing, exceeding, and

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escaping this assemblage and enacting others' (p. 29). In this line of thought, Chapter 5 highlights most strongly Miller's deep interviews, by bringing to the fore the hesitations and even sometimes heretical thoughts expressed by economic strategists, social workers and environmental managers. The theme in Chapter 6, also extensively digging into the interview material, is how pervasively people feel the need to resort to multiple economies, multiple societies, multiple environments in order to account for the inherent violence done by the hegemonic categories. The edifice crumbles, fog reigns. Miller ends with a metaphorical rhetorical question – if each category is dissolved into a fog bank, what happens when they collide, are they not a 'single nebula' of 'diffuse gradients' (p. 127)?

Part IV wants to 're-compose' something out of this nebula to replace the edifice. Chapter 7 proposes and develops at length the idea of *ecopoeisis*, a 'becoming of belonging', to describe how interviewees Irene, Paula, Harriet and Nora weave and negotiate new, non-hegemonic conceptualisations of the challenges they face in their work in Maine. In Chapter 8, Miller locates the concept of 'livelihoods' – a frequent refrain in the discourses of various actors he interviews – as a promising foundation for reconceptualisation of the trio. He traces the conventional origins of the term, and then outlines a proposal for 'ecological livelihoods', where the ecological represents an infinite ethics of interconnections. His ecological livelihoods apply to all living singularities (not just rural people), avoid generalisations, are immeasurable and incommensurable, non-teleological, 'open-ended, always-revisable, experimental tools for enhancing the capacities of collectives to enact forms of life' (p. 171).

Chapter 9 expands on how lives and livelihoods, means and meanings are made at the intersection of three processes: being made by others (*allopoiesis*), making a living for others (*alterpoiesis*), and making a living (*autopoiesis*). Miller then builds on theories of (un-)commoning to propose how this triad can be explicitly politicised. In Chapter 10, Miller descends from this theoretical plane and proposes a variety of central principles and transversal questions arising from both his theories and his interviews. These could be eminently translatable into actionable discussion points for open-minded policymakers and activists. The Conclusion, then, consists of a charismatic manifesto for thinking otherwise, memorably suggesting that economists, social workers and environmentalists be replaced with 'livelihood workers'.

The book backs and grounds its critique and creativity in profound theoretical discussions. The roots are too numerous to catalogue, but are most prominently based in the community-based economics approach of J. K. Gibson-Graham and the ontological philosophies of G. Deleuze and F. Guattari. Unfortunately, the theoretical heaviness, reliant on the jargon of the initiated, is exhausting and will keep the discussion in the tallest ivory tower (notwithstanding the clear prose with which it is delivered). A highlight, however, is how Miller translates evocative quotes and vignettes from real policymakers,

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managers and residents of Maine into trampolines to accelerate his theorising. As ethereal as it gets, the text remains firmly grounded in the nuances and struggles of actual people whom Miller clearly engaged in penetrating discussions.

A question to end on: what is so wrong with the categories ‘economy’, ‘society’ and ‘environment’ that we should throw them out, and replace them with another set that is even harder to explain? The argument Miller makes is radically destabilising to today’s conception of the world – and that is the point, to show it as an impermanent assemblage, always becoming though sharply powerful, and to struggle against this hegemony of thought to bring forward alternative, caring, just ways to think about and act on what constitutes our living world.

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