

## **Nurturing Economic Diversity: Alternative Economic Logics for Urban Planning, Research, and Activism**

Myfanwy Taylor, 12 July 2021

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[The Migrant's Paradox Forum](#)

This short essay proposes nurturing economic diversity as alternative economic logics for urban planning, drawing on research and activism with market traders, industrial firms and small businesses contesting commercial displacement in London.

Agglomeration economies – the benefits of co-locating in cities - are produced by and drawn upon by a diversity of actors, extending across different sectors of the economy to include the social, cultural and political (Amin and Graham, 1997; Robinson, 2006; Scott and Storper, 2003). However, as Suzanne Hall (2021) demonstrates in *The Migrant's Paradox: Street Livelihoods and Marginal Citizenship in Britain*, economic diversity is often invisible to the lens of urban planning. Rather, city strategies and plans are rooted in the economic logics of centrality, focusing on a small sub-set of economic activities (e.g. international financial services, creative or high-tech industries) in an attempt to compete in the global economy (Robinson, 2006; Hall, 2021). This narrow focus produces poverty, inequality and displacement by ignoring, marginalizing and excluding those economic activities that secure the majority of urban lives and livelihoods. This short essay proposes *nurturing economic diversity* as alternative economic logics for urban planning, drawing on research and activism with market traders, industrial firms and small businesses contesting commercial displacement in London.

The idea of London as a global city, whose success depends on specific international financial functions, has been embedded in metropolitan plans and strategies since 2000. This global-city approach produces poverty as well as wealth (for the few), contributing to a crisis of reproduction (Edwards, 2002; Massey, 2007). It also obscures the economic diversity and complexity that have been key to London's long-term economic resilience (Buck et al, 2002; Duranton and Puga, 2000). Since the early 2010s, this economic diversity has been threatened by the increasing pressures to redevelop relatively low-cost workspace as housing, resulting in a workspace crisis (Taylor, 2020). Often, plans and development proposals do not acknowledge the existence or importance of market traders, industrial firms and other small businesses that rely on low-cost workspace. In *The Migrant's Paradox*, Suzanne M. Hall examines how economic precarity and racist and anti-migrant policies, enduring inequalities and discrimination combine to produce these vulnerable yet adaptive 'edge economies' (2021). Such factors make migrant, black and ethnic minority traders and small businesses particularly vulnerable to commercial displacement (see also Román-Velázquez, 2014). They also produce everyday 'unheroic' forms of solidarity and resistance across varied intersections of dispossession and marginalization (Hall, 2021).

In this context, I have worked with groups of market traders, small businesses and their allies and supporters to mobilize new narratives about their role and contribution in order to challenge plans and developments and to advance alternative proposals (Taylor, 2017, 2020). This has involved working across and challenging divides between research and activism. My praxis has combined action-oriented interviews with threatened firms with everyday organizing work to support collective discussions and action and embedded critical engagement with planning policies and processes. This approach has been particularly inspired by Seven Sisters Market/Wards Corner (Tottenham, London), threatened with demolition since the early 2000s and the only remaining market serving London's Latin

American communities. Here, my discussions with market traders, local businesses and community leaders revealed the Market's role as "a space of economic flourishing and a space of refuge, rich with resources, connections and therapeutic benefits" (Taylor, 2019: 8). These discussions also provided opportunities to strengthen and renew the long-term alliance between market traders, local businesses and local residents formed to resist demolition and advance an alternative community plan (Unit 38, 2019).

By working across divides between research and activism, researchers can play a role in strengthening the fragile and loose coalitions marginalized traders and small businesses typically form with similarly threatened local residents and community groups (Taylor, 2020; see also Hall, 2015, 2021). Such support can help marginalized economic actors to build power and insert themselves into urban planning processes influenced by elite and powerful business interests. Working in this way demands long-term engagement and collaboration, however, evading academic expectations for time-bound linear research producing contained scholarly outputs. Academic contributions are produced instead through rich entanglements with collaborators and are intimately connected with other lively outputs, such as local economy surveys, community plans and handbooks.

In this case, working with traders and small businesses threatened with commercial displacement also helped to sketch the contours of alternative economic logics for urban planning based on *nurturing economic diversity*. In this approach, detailed local economy studies provide a starting point for incremental and collaborative work with traders, small businesses and the wider community to further develop existing strengths and address needs and desires in the locality. This approach could go some way towards addressing the current disconnect between urban planning and the everyday economies through which people make their lives and livelihoods, offering the potential for more socially-just and inclusive urban economic development.

## References

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