

‘Conceptualising ‘the economy’ to make urban land markets work for the poor’

Colin Marx
Isandla Institute

Discussant comments

Sophie Oldfield
Department of Environmental and Geographical Science
University of Cape Town

‘Conceptualising ‘the economy’ to make urban land markets work for the poor’ is an interesting and ambitious paper that aims to ‘re-conceptualise’ (p.1) and ‘re-place’ (p. 17) the market in order to ‘offer a basis for a progressive politics of transforming how poor people access urban land’ (p.20). This task is large, to say the least! My comments on the paper briefly will (1) explore the conceptual and theoretical debates the paper raises; (2) consider the rich potential in anchoring these theoretical debates to the heterogeneous practices of the ‘poor’ and of the market economy; and (3) reflect on the methodological challenges involved in ‘repacking’ our stories and theories of how economies, land, and poor people intermesh in our cities.

Colin’s paper sets out to demonstrate the ways in which ‘mainstream’ economic theories presume that economic growth is driven by formal, thus ‘non-poor’ (rich) economic activities, parts of the city, by firms and particular types of economic actors. South African debates on land and land markets thus reflect the dominance of a ‘first’ formal, regulated productive, growth-oriented market economies over a subordinate and disconnected ‘second’ informal un-regulated, un-productive, survivalist township economies. In these binaries, theories and processes, the poor -- their activities and their land uses -- are represented as non-productive, as consumptive, as informal, and as locally bound and therefore limited in use. Towards the end of the paper (~p.18-21), Colin argues, in contrast, that we can understand economics (economists, policy makers, economic models and theories) as performance, as cultural devices that are produced and performed, and that hold great power. He argues instead for analysis of actual activities by a range of actors (the informal economy, the state sector, household economies, non-profit and co-operative sectors, p. 18) that ‘co-constitute each other in networks of interdependencies that are all responsible for economic growth’ to challenge dominant market analyses of the poor in general and representations of their economic potential and land use in particular.

I found the richest part of Colin's argument in this last section of the paper. Here, he suggests some interesting and provocative ways to conceptualise economics and its partiality. In particular, he urges us to move from a binary to a networked and relational understanding of markets to better grasp the agents, institutions and their interplay in understandings of urban land and urban economic to challenge dominant conceptions of who is productive, which pieces of land and parts of the city hold economic potential, and how agents and places inter-relate in practice. He argues that markets reflect social relations; in other words, market institutions, agents, and discourses are not neutral, but part and parcel of the distribution of power, and in particular, the inequities that shape and divide our society.

These ideas are important because they challenge us to analyse the fragmented ways in which we understand land, economic value, and land markets in practice. We slip so easily, and acceptingly, into explanations of our cities that build on divisions of formal and informal, rich and poor, white and black, and suburb and township. By challenging us to think about networks and relationships between the first and second economies, the informal and the formal, the township and suburb, and so on, we are forced to think about how economic and social practices cross, redraw, and in many instances, blur these powerful and conventional ways of understanding South African cities. Colin suggests that if we focus on activities and trace practices and economic performances, our cities are constituted in a rich diversity of patterns, relationships, and practices. From this theoretical vantage point, markets are clearly constructed and performed rather than given and natural. Everyday economic activities by 'poor people' and 'rich people', powerful formal market institutions and agents, inter-relate, forcing us to situate notions of productivity and value across and between the different spaces of our cities.

It's a challenge to 're-pack' this complexity and broader array of economic activities and spaces and processes for economic growth. A set of research questions and methodologies are needed to better locate the variety of ways in which land is regulated and to capture a richer more nuanced sense of agents, institutions and movements to make clear the relationship between theories of economic growth policy and practice. Analysis of how dominant theories of economic growth interplay with policies on land in our cities is critical to articulate and then critique the ways in

which dominant growth-oriented ideas play out in practice, both discursively in the realm of policy making and policy speak, and, then in practice where, as the paper comments at the end, all is much muddier and complexly inter-related. This is a specific challenge for Colin: to ground the paper's focus in policy, and practices of policy makers, urban land markets, and a range of ways in which 'poor people' survive and work. But, also a collective one, that calls for ethnographies of the 'wealthy,' of formal actors such as real estate agencies and the deeds office, as well as ethnographies of 'poor people's' economic practices and the ways in which they are embedded and part of all sorts of 'formally' acknowledged processes.

Colin's paper challenges us to rethink dominant understandings of economic productivity and value, particularly ideas about land markets driving our economy, he provides an alternative ideas of pathways or a road map, so-to-speak, that points to inter-connections rather than disconnections. While he demonstrates the problems of remaining in a binary, dichotomous model, there are consequences if we do not step out of, or move beyond binary economic models and discourses. Mainstream economic analysis supports and maintains the status quo, in particular policies and economic practise that support and often pressure market mechanisms and institutions to prioritise investments in wealthier, formal, often predominantly or formerly white suburban and central parts of our cities, areas with so-called 'growth potential.' We therefore maintain legacies of exclusion and re-enforce our sense of a divided economy, city and society. In consequence, we loose out on a huge potential, missing out and glossing over the actual ways in which the economy is maintained and performed and we fail, in Colin's words to 'challenge power relations that perpetuate poverty and inequality' (p.21).