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2019

Campbell, S. (2019). Towards a dialectical anthropology of capitalism. *Social Anthropology*, 27(3), 547-553. doi:10.1111/1469-8676.12597

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/145466>

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12597>

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Towards a Dialectical Anthropology of Capitalism

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Susanna Rosenbaum, *Domestic Economies: Women, Work, and the American Dream in Los Angeles*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 248 pp.

Kathleen Millar, *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. 248 pp.

Sohini Kar, *Financializing Poverty: Labor and Risk in Indian Microfinance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018. 280 pp.

Classical logic, Hegel observed, is premised on atomistic categories, forcing its thinkers to apply either-or judgements—contingency or necessity, universal or particular, discrete or continuous, and so forth. Dialectical reason, by contrast, recognizes such seeming antitheses as mutually-constitutive sides of conceptual wholes—empty, that is, in and of themselves (Hegel 2010 [1812]).

This insight gains relevance for the anthropology of capitalism due to our discipline's penchant for polemical reasoning, and one notable instance thereof. While its roots lie in earlier debates, the birth of anthropology's culture wars can be most readily set in the mid-1970s. For it was then that Marvin Harris (1974) published his *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches*, followed by Marshall Sahlins' (1976) *Culture and Practical Reason*. For Harris (1974:4), human cultural diversity could best be understood, not through 'spiritualized' explanations, but by tracing particular cultural phenomena back to their 'down-to-earth' material causes. For Sahlins (1976), by contrast, cultures were to be understood as symbolic orders operating according to meaningful internal logics rather than to cross-culturally recognizable material conditions.

With the ascendancy of postmodernism in anthropology by the late 1980s, support for the materialist camp declined precipitously. For anthropological studies of capitalism, this meant a turn away from the earlier structural Marxism of Maurice Godelier and Claude Meillassoux, for

whom patterned class relations were important social determinants, and towards the postmodernist deconstruction of capitalism advocated by J.K. Gibson-Graham, according to which capitalism is best studied through its cultural constitution.

While this binary continues to inform anthropological engagements with capitalism, evident, as well, is a trend towards a dialectical middle ground—one that sees capitalism as at once materially and culturally constituted. Such a framing recalls Michael Herzfeld's (1997) longstanding call for a 'militant middle ground' between the twin reductions of positivism and postmodernism.

It is in their implicit dialogue with this conceptual history that the books reviewed here gain especial importance. Each of these texts illustrates an effort to situate cultural analysis more firmly within political economic processes. Taken as a trend, these books suggest a shift in anthropology away from the more dualistic positions of yesteryear. Reviewing these books together thus provides an opportunity to reflect on what a properly dialectical anthropology of capitalism might look like.

In a classic 1976 article, Michael Burawoy analysed Mexico-to-US labour migration as a system reproduced over time. Though a sociologist, Burawoy's structural analysis was akin to concurrent anthropological structural Marxism, with which he shared an indirect association via the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute/Manchester School. Broadly, Burawoy argued that depressed social reproduction costs in origin countries enabled lower wages and thus higher profits in host countries—facilitating, thereby, the system's reproduction.

Of course, much of anthropology has since shifted from such structural analysis to questions of agency and everyday social construction. But the fact of that shift makes Susanna

Rosenbaum's (2017) ethnography of immigrant Mexican and Central American domestic workers in Los Angeles, *Domestic Economies: Women, Work, and the American Dream*, all the more interesting. For the book can be read as complimentary to earlier structural analyses of migrant labour systems. This is due to the author's ethnographic focus on the everyday reproduction of immigrant domestic labour. For Rosenbaum, this everyday reproduction serves in the aggregate to reproduce the broader system in which immigrant domestic workers are embedded (26).

Central to Rosenbaum's analysis is the recognition that, in Los Angeles, immigrant domestic workers are structurally necessary to one variant of the American Dream—the material and ideological project of (mostly white) middle-class upward mobility. This necessity rests on the fact that low-waged immigrant domestic workers subsidize the socially reproductive labour that enables their employers—typically white, and especially women—to pursue professional careers without sacrificing the care and attention they believe their children require in order to ‘succeed’ (58). Children's success, meanwhile, along with their parents' full-time employment, are both ideologically pivotal to the American Dream—an irresolvable contradiction it would seem were it not for the availability of low-waged immigrant domestic labour. Immigrant domestic workers have therefore, through their labour, ‘made possible the prosperity that defines white middle-class subjectivities’ (16).

At the same time, the place of domestic workers within this arrangement creates additional ideological contradictions. While the American Dream is premised on individual success through hard work, the presence of subordinated domestic workers at the heart of this ‘success’ belies the claim of achievement outside privilege. Middle-class employers have for this reason continuously reasserted the foreignness of hired domestic workers in order to safeguard the ideological belief that they (employers) are not, in the US context, privileged (82). Like this, employers have sought

to mask their own material privilege by displacing class hierarchy onto racialized difference—a displacement only possible given ‘the presumption that Americanness [is] whiteness’ (13).

From a different vantage, the segregated landscape of Los Angeles likewise distorts and partly hides this class privilege. This it does by geographically separating (mostly white) suburban employer neighbourhoods from (often racialized and immigrant) working-class neighbourhoods. This racialized class apartheid is also evident in the segregation of transport—between middle-class cars and working-class buses. These ‘spatial distinctions’ inform a middle-class habitus and reproduce the class relations that structure immigrant labour in the city (17).

And yet, despite the odds set against them, many immigrant women likewise come to hope for, or embrace the ideology of, upward mobility—the ‘immigrant version of the American Dream’ (158). It is, in part, this ‘dream’ that motivates these women to endure low-waged domestic work. At the same time, conditions of want—specifically, ‘poverty, a narrow labour market, and an individual’s need to provide for their families’ (147)—further inform this willingness to persist in Los Angeles. Together, these factors have motivated many immigrant women to continue in low-paying jobs with ‘less-than-ideal employers’ (142). The point is that an ideology is never solely discursive; it obtains its effectivity only when materially grounded.

Taking hold of these multiple analytical strands, Rosenbaum weaves together an account of how material and ideological aspects of immigrant domestic labour in Los Angeles shape and inform the lives and labour of the many women who continue to endure in what is an often poorly paid and exhausting occupation. Within this regime of immigrant domestic labour, distinctions between persuasion and compulsion are blurred; the material and meaningful are shown to be mutually constituted forms of power.

‘The dump is a desert,’ writes Kathleen Millar (2018:1), opening her monograph, *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio’s Garbage Dump*. While desert it may be, it is to the intimacy and creativity of social life here that Millar shortly introduce us—‘here’ being Jardim Gramacho, Rio de Janeiro’s largest dump. The individuals who populate this site, we learn, are the hundreds of informal waste pickers—*catadores*—who labour daily, sifting through each delivery in search of papers and plastics for resale, or discarded items whose use values have yet to be exhausted.

Millar’s intent in this text is to render for us, her readers, a humanistic portrayal of *catadore* life and labour—a portrayal that goes beyond tropes of waste, abjection, and redundancy, which all too often sensationalize accounts of precarious lives in dehumanizing ways (5). And Millar does, to my mind, achieve her end. But what is offered as ethnographic richness is delivered as theoretical relevance. For the book is centrally a contribution to anthropological theory—the theory of precarious labour under contemporary capitalism specifically. What a more prosaic author might have rendered as a weighing of push and pull factors, Millar depicts, through an eloquent phenomenology, as labour’s potential to transform experience—the dump as locus of ‘visceral repugnance and revulsion’ (56) becomes, in time, a site of friendship, sociality, and comic relief. This is most certainly not a reduction to push and pull factors. It is rather a statement of how *catadores* learn ‘to see the dump differently’ (58). The book thus asks us to reconsider the contemporary ‘crisis of work’ so that we might open up the anthropological imagination to the ways individuals in the most precarious of circumstances realise ‘modes of inhabiting the everyday’ (91) that remain meaningful and rewarding.

As theoretical grist for her analysis, Millar draws on the writings of E.P. Thompson, and specifically Thompson’s notion of moral economy. This turn to Thompson follows from Millar’s broader arguments concerning Thompson’s enduring relevance for the anthropology of labour,

which she has convincingly argued elsewhere (Millar 2015). Thompson—expressly Marxist in his analysis—played a key role in centring agency and culture in the history of class struggle. Millar’s embrace of Thompson’s arguments thus usefully distances her own work from vulgar materialism, to one side, and vulgar culturalism, to the other. She thus points, for example, to the ‘anti-economistic’ character of Thompson’s class analysis, which informs her own interpretive phenomenology of labour. And yet she also recognizes class as a relation of surplus value extraction (11 - 12), which ties catadores’ labour ‘into a 200-billion-dollar global recycling industry’ (8). By re-centring class in this way, Millar’s conceptual orientation aligns well with the trend I seek to highlight towards a dialectical middle ground in the anthropology of capitalism.

Consider Millar’s use of plasticity as a metaphor for the informality of waste collection (127 - 128). She adopts this metaphor from out of the very labour process she is documenting—from the plastics, that is, which catadores collect for resale. Informal waste collection is plastic, Millar argues, in its malleability, which provides catadores with comparatively more autonomy to shape their everyday lives than would the formal waged employment that is otherwise available to them. The plastic metaphor is indeed ingenious, as it points to the dialectical character of this labour form. That is to say, plastic is inescapably material—its potential forms thus limited. Yet being at the same time malleable, it is not rigidly pre-determining.

Continuing to argue for an anti-economistic class analysis, Millar proposes ‘desire’ in place of ‘scarcity’ as the determining factor shaping catadore lives (100). As a paradigm for understanding life amid precarity, ‘scarcity,’ Millar argues, leaves ‘little room to ask why this work is taken up by those who pursue it, how it emergence from and fashions particular social and political relations, and how it expresses different visions of what life is for’ (4). The point is well made. But I remain unpersuaded that a focus on desire negates the relevance of scarcity, or that

desire and scarcity are usefully conceived as competing paradigms. What is more, replacing an analytic of scarcity with one of desire can lead to a rather privileged conception of personal autonomy. It is worth recalling Talal Asad's (1993:3) critique of the anthropological celebration of agency in the 1980s. By analytically privileging personal agency, while disregarding capitalism's structuring constraints, anthropologists had, Asad (15) argued, missed 'the politically more significant condition that has to do with the objective distribution of goods that allows or precludes certain options.' Note that Asad preceded this argument with a disclaimer that he had 'no wish to defend economistic Marxism' (4). Attention to scarcity, he might well have added, does not in itself render an analysis economistic.

I would thus contend that variables of scarcity and desire need not be treated as mutually exclusive; they are complimentary and co-constituted. The catadores with whom Millar spoke evidentially desired the relative autonomy waste collection allowed—desired, that is, given the scarcity of preferable alternatives. Analytically, both desire and scarcity are relevant, with catadores' labour consequently overdetermined.

In 2014, the World Economic Forum hosted a panel discussion titled, 'Ethical Capitalism – Worth a Try?' Among the panel's guests was Muhammad Yunus—Nobel Laureate and decades-long proponent of microfinance. Despite the capitalist system's 'triumph' in poverty reduction, the host began, inequality in most countries had 'widened dramatically,' with gains from current growth accruing largely to those at 'the top of the income distribution.' Was 'ethical capitalism' a better strategy for addressing the livelihood concerns of the world's least well off? The question continues to be asked, and it thus gives Sohini Kar's (2018) ethnography, *Financializing Poverty: Labor and Risk in Indian Microfinance*, its topicality. For as Kar shows, the moral language of

‘financial inclusion’ continues to undergird calls for extending credit to those who lack the collateral needed to access conventional bank loans (59). Kar’s book, however, is a *critical* interrogation of microfinance as a strategy for poverty alleviation and women’s empowerment—an interrogation she pursues by following microfinance lenders and borrowers through the slums of northern Kolkata.

Theoretically, *Financializing Poverty* contributes to the anthropology of capitalism by highlighting the ways microfinance structures the lives of poor women in the global south—taking Kolkata as an entry point. But this structuring is no economic determination of women’s lives by an abstract financial logic. In Kar’s account, we see a dialectical process whereby microfinance programs ‘enfold’ (17) the poor into global financial networks, while women ‘domesticate’ (109) new financial logics into existing economic relations and moral worlds. In order to grasp the culturally specific valuations that inform the everyday practices of financial lending she observes, Kar turns, like Millar, to Thompson’s moral economy (153). But she also employs the arguments of political economists like David Harvey (84, 87), who have sought to make more global statements about the trajectories of contemporary capitalism.

Central to Kar’s analysis is recognition that the rise of microfinance has not occurred in isolation, as though microfinance were but a new financial opportunity offered to women amid generic, pre-existing poverty. Rather, the expansion of microfinance is deeply imbricated with broader processes of neoliberal restructuring, which governments in India have pursued since 1991 (64). Here, extensive privatization of health and education has forced poor households to seek out loans to pay for formerly public services (44). At the same time, the spread of microfinance opportunities among the poor has allowed India’s governments to pursue further privatization, since the burden of managing structural poverty can now be offloaded onto the shoulders of the

newly financialised poor. Consequently, while advocates promote microfinance as a means of creating women micro-entrepreneurs, most of the borrowers Kar encountered used their loans to cover everyday necessities, even though ‘on paper’ their loans were designated for businesses (43 – 44). It has thus become difficult, notes Kar, to distinguish micro-entrepreneurs from ‘the millions who already work in the informal economy’ (47).

It is in her use of the concept of domestication that Kar best illustrates how global finance becomes vernacularized. For Kar, ‘domestication’ refers to the ways individuals incorporate global finance into their immediate social worlds—the everyday logics, practices, and relations that shape their lives. Stated otherwise, individuals are neither perfectly determined by, nor wholly autonomous of, global capitalist processes. ‘Rather than reproduce a singular grand narrative of global capital,’ writes Kar, ‘attention to local particularities and historical contingencies reveals the dialectical processes through which global capital interacts and intersects with vernacular capitalism, competing elites, and local politics’ (39).

In northern Kolkata, this vernacularization is not without its insidious effects. We see this in everyday practices of risk assessment, whereby loan officers evaluate borrowers’ likelihood of repayment. In a context of patriarchal norms that position men as household heads, loan officers have obliged women borrowers to secure male relatives as guarantors (127). In this way, rather than being ‘liberated’ as micro-entrepreneurs, women borrowers come under additional obligations to male relatives. Such arrangements, Kar tells us, have produced ‘conservative rather than transformative outcomes for borrowers’ (137).

The massive shift of global capital from manufacturing to finance seems, at times, to have created a world where profit no longer rests on labour. But what Kar’s study reveals is instead the continued centrality of labour—the labour of informal petty producers, to be sure, but also the

laborious comings-and-goings of loan officers and women in microfinance groups who must manage frequent, time-consuming meetings. Such labour has become necessary to maintain access to the credit needed to get by in a world of declining public services. Microfinance, as a class relation, has like this become a key site of surplus extraction and capital accumulation in the contemporary world.

Each of the books reviewed here engages the anthropology of capitalism in highly productive ways. Their authors put fine-grained ethnography in conversation with wider political economic analysis. I would thus stress that ethnographic attention to affect, agency, desire, subjectivity, and the like, is not irreconcilable with broader political economic theorizing. To emphasize one approach over the other is only problematic when political economy gets reduced to bourgeois positivism, or cultural analysis is pursued solely as a reading of intertextuality.

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