

WORKSHOP 3: CONCEPTS, METHODS, OBJECTS I

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Towards an anthropology of 'economic practices': perspectives on the 'market nexus' from the Totonac periphery (Mexico)

Based on fieldwork among the Totonac indigenous coffee-growers of Mexico, this paper argues for a synthesis of recent trends in environmental anthropology and economic anthropology through a performance-based approach of 'economic practices'. It shows how, among the Totonac indigenous coffee-growers of Mexico, economic practices are subordinated to the social logics of ecological uses and conceptualizations closely linked to social reproduction. Starting from the ethnography of the 'market nexus' of the coffee-economy, I show how commercial cultivation is adopted within social norms and partly subordinated to these. Through this ethnography of the political economy of capitalism in the 'periphery', it appears that traditional approaches from both rural economy and anthropology are quite inadequate for the analysis of these 'in between situations'. I thus argue for the emergence of an 'anthropology of economic practices' (rather than an 'economic anthropology' which implicitly presupposes the universality of our economic categories) and propose a performance-based approach to practices of production and exchange as a starting point. In other words, we are to take the perspective of environmental anthropology on relations of production and exchange. Such a project has been partly undertaken by Hornborg (2001), though with a special focus on industrial technology. This paper suggests to take such a look on agricultural production, with a focus on performance rather than technological knowledge to bridge ecological and economic anthropology, as a contribution to a renewal of the latter applied to situations of 'development'.

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The battle over social responsibility in the Argentine worker-run companies

This paper argues that social responsibility for capital is fundamentally opposed to what it might mean for labour. I use ethnographic evidence to show that, contrary to dominant constructions of 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR) and the 'social economy', workers' struggle to build socially responsible enterprises reveals the conflictive social basis of the capitalist economy. In the wake of Argentina's recent socio-economic crisis that culminated with the capital flight and popular mobilisations of 2001, thousands of workers occupied and revived around 180 bankrupt or abandoned companies across the country. Against the authoritarian regimes of former owners, many reframed their organisations around assembly-based decision making, equal earnings and new social responsibilities. In response, politicians and scholars claimed that the worker-run companies formed part of the 'economía social'; a new sector in Argentina that could combine social and economic objectives. However, this paper critically examines the CSR formula prescribed by the government and international financial organisations. Whilst worker-run companies implicitly question alienation, because the labour process must still be a value-creating process they remain subject to capitalist imperatives that push them to reproduce "all the shortcomings of the prevailing system". The paper also looks at the political significance of the production of surplus value, arguing that as well

as the contradictions of profitability; the sustainability of socially responsible businesses confronts specific political challenges stemming from the structures and tactics of the Argentine state. Instead of institutionalising the right to work, governmental programs promote the ERs as self-financing private enterprises; whilst clientalistic practices deepen dependency and facilitate cronyism. However, as international financial organisations step up the pressure on national governments to improve corporate governance and accountability for capital, I ask whether workers' social accounting practices could lead to a more radical type of reform.

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'Uplift and Empower': Discourses of Responsibility in a Transnational Mining Corporation

This paper examines the discourse and practice of corporate social responsibility in a transnational mining company. Based on a multi-sited ethnography of the world's third biggest mining company, from their headquarters in London to the platinum mining belt of South Africa, I explore how new forms of moral authority are accumulated, authenticated and exercised through ethical regimes such as 'corporate responsibility', and the discursive practices to which they give rise. In particular, this paper focuses on a central pillar of CSR discourse: that of 'empowerment through enterprise' and its claim to bring the margins and peripheries into the inclusive and emancipatory embrace of 'the market' economy. Such a vision - and the goal of 'self-sustainability' that it extends - projects the company as a vehicle of empowerment, as it strives to 'uplift' 'beneficiaries' with the injunction to 'help yourself' to a piece of 'the market' and grab the opportunities that it offers. In contrast to this vision of mutual independence and impersonal market relations, this paper examines how the practice of CSR generates powerful moral bonds between the corporate donor and recipient that inspire deference and dependence, rather than autonomy and empowerment. The moral bonds created by such forms of corporate largesse not only reinforce old social hierarchies but represent a powerful mechanism for recruiting loyalty and manufacturing consensus. In this way, I argue, CSR serves to empower the corporation rather than the supposed subjects of their empowerment initiatives.

As such, the discourse of CSR confounds the widely-held distinction between moral economy and the supposed amoral rationality of a neoliberal market economy that 'favours severing the economy from social realities'. Rather, as this paper argues, the phenomenon of CSR offers to secure and extend the 'free market' discourse by incorporating, rather than attempting to exclude, the social world from its project. In this way claims to moral probity are entwined with economic imperatives, asserting that the interests of material accumulation can be pursued alongside those of moral well-being. Ultimately, this paper contends that the moral economy of CSR represents, not an opposition to the contemporary world of corporate capitalism, but the very mechanism through which corporate power is authenticated, extended and endowed with moral authority.

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From CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) to CSR (Corporate Social Regimes): the politics of ethical compliance in the South Indian garment industry

Despite the growing body of information on the economic impacts of labour codes/standards on industries, firms and workers, relatively little has been written on the political changes that such 'technical tools' engender in the relationships between western buyers, supply firms in developing countries, and their subcontractors and workers. This paper focuses on the ways in which ethical standards imposed on producing companies and their workers help to constitute not only measurable and auditable conditions of work, but also the nature of social and power relationships between different social actors. Ethical codes and standards not only contribute to the manufacturing of commodities to specified standards but they also generate new social regimes of hierarchy, power and inequality. In particular, the paper discusses the processes through which western buyers and chain stores enforce compliance with company codes of conduct and voluntary labour standards among their garment suppliers in Tiruppur, South India. It looks at the ways in which fear and intimidation are central to interactions between buyers and suppliers in negotiations surrounding implementation. Supply firms' experiences of fear and intimidation are key to understanding their very different reactions, which include compliance, evasion and resistance. In particular, it is suggested that power hierarchies between buyers and suppliers and, further down the chain, between suppliers and their subcontractors and workers, are constituted through these very exchanges that surround labour codes and standards, which include accusations, suspicion, fear and intimidation.