



MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE
FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Other Faces of Manchester

APRIL 17, 2015

Author: Lale Yalçın-Heckmann

These days Manchester may be better known for its Premier League clubs: United and City's superstar players are among the most highly prized commodities in the neoliberal world of today's global football industry.

But as John Alker showed us around the Manchester of Marx and Engels' day, before the University of Manchester's conference on 'The Quest for the Good Life in Precarious Times: Grassroots perspectives on value in the 21st century' (see <https://thequestforthegoodlife.wordpress.com>), we learnt about a very different Manchester. As we walked through the alleyways of old working class districts, John evoked the stench and overcrowding which, along with his girlfriend Mary Burns and the access she gave him to working class life, inspired Engels to pen his texts on the conditions of Manchester's popular classes. We heard how Engels juggled his writing with managing his father's cotton mills, enjoying the company of German-speaking intellectuals in elite clubs, and financing and working with Marx in Chetham Library.

John made no bones about pointing out the evils of capitalism, as he read passages from Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, and directed responsibility towards the statues of politicians like John Bright (because of his opposition to the legislation restricting the hours of labour), before taking us to the site of the bloody Peterloo massacre of working class protesters.

The ironies of the human condition, of crisis and indifference were themes taken up in the pre-conference roundtable 'Democratizing the study of economics', with participants from Manchester University's *Post-Crash Economics Society*. The students Zach, Catriona, Ben, Jonah, Christian and their Professor John O'Neill told us how they began by critiquing how the content of their economics lectures didn't change at all in response to the 2008 financial crisis, before extending the debate to the shortcomings of economics teaching in the UK and worldwide. Soon after they linked up with similar initiatives around the globe and found a sizeable audience keen to rethink how economics is done in the post-crash world. You can read about an international workshop they held at www.boombustboombust.com and find

further information at www.post-crasheconomics.com. The group gives an encouraging sign that a new generation of economists is looking to return to economic questions that the orthodoxy has tried to bury.

After these stimulating events, 'The Quest for the Good Life in Precarious Times', was the theme taken up by the conference organised as the Domestic Moral Economy (DME), group's final event, led by Chris Gregory and Karen Sykes. For two days on 25th and 26th March we heard reports from major research groups working on related themes in economic anthropology. **Chris Gregory's** opening remarks gave us the big picture about the changing value of land and rural and urban sources of wealth over the last two centuries. He then recalled the major models of exchange in anthropology: the Asian paradigm of generalized exchange (we interpreted this as Eurasian model) and the Pacific model of 'restricted exchange'. Criticizing Sahlins' classical work on 'Rich man, poor man, big man, chief' as an ahistorical generalization, he encouraged anthropologists to pay attention to historical transformations, such as the history of the Indian diaspora and indentured labour, or the presence of transnational family structures in the Pacific region as early as the 19th century.

The following two papers came from the younger members of the DME research group: **Rodolfo Maggio** presented his analysis of how the process of restoring value to a victim can transform witchcraft accusations into customary law in Gilbert Camp, on the Solomon Islands' Honiara. In **Rachel Smith's** research, working for the community or working for one's own household caused tensions for the migrants from Vanuatu and the community they left behind when they travelled to work in Australia. These tensions were worked out through moral discussions about obligations and expectations, about sharing the costs of ceremonies and communal work. **Jon Altman** took us to the Australian continent and relations between the state and indigenous communities. Jon, whose fieldwork with the Kuninjku people in Arnhem Land goes back to the end of 1970s, portrayed the ups and downs of the Australian state's policies on the questions of recognition and allowing full citizenship for this group. Neoliberal critiques of state support for lifestyles which diverge from the 9-5 model has reached a point at which the community's right to follow their traditional way of life is recognised, but the state won't pay. This means that access to the good life for the Kuninjku people has become a lot less secure, and there is a sense of disconnect between the generations. **Fiona Magowan's** contribution supported Altman's theses and illustrated how the domestic moral economy of the Yolngu people in central Australia has been fundamentally transformed by the self-regulation imposed by neo-liberal state policies. We remained in Australia for **Karen Sykes'** talk: her study of Papua New Guinean migrants showed how their senses of equality are changing in the transnational space between the influence of 'wantoks' (in PNG lingua franca people with 'one talk': fellow countrymen in the broadest sense) and Aussie 'mates', with their national egalitarian ideals. Sykes argued that there is no simple link between notions of

equality and ideological positions, but that “different forms of equality generally co-exist, ... frequently people choose between different kinds of equality in the course of a life”. With **Keir Martin**’s discussion of recent debates around economic development in East New Britain Province, we returned to the home country of the Papua New Guinea migrants and focused on changes in land tenure after the volcanic eruption of 1994. This catastrophe was apparently not unwelcome to all, providing developers with the opportunity to discuss ‘customs’ and ‘reforms’ of land ownership. Keir pointed out the contradictions in these discussions: how sometimes there was too much custom (when matrilineal kin tried to claim land) and sometimes too little of it (when the community was unable to look after its communal assets). **Matti Eräsaari** presented the last research project from the Melanesian group, on Fijian notions of the ‘good life’. He talked us through the complex connections between notions of common land, colonial policies and who was categorised as native and immigrant in Fiji, and demonstrated how Fijian ideas about equality emerge through practices of exchanges at village funerals.

Chris Gregory reminded us of Mauss’ *Manual of Ethnography* as he described moral values at the grassroots level in Bastar, part of the Indian state of Chhattisgarh. The story of the rise and fall of Chamru and his household was a window onto the multiple and integrated moralities in the town. In this fascinating story of (male) Chamru told by a woman, we were left wondering how and at what level of temporality, materiality and sociality set our moral compass: between Naxalites and Bastarians, traditional economies and the new boom, and between ‘asset rich’ and the ‘cash poor’, we’d be a long time searching for one fixed idea about how to be good or live well.

With **Niko Besnier** we broadened our geographical range from the Asia-Pacific region to take in postcolonial spaces of Africa. Besnier’s own research focused on professional athletes from Fiji, Tonga and Samoa whose travel to Japan involves enormous transformations in value: their sport-star salaries reaching home through remittances, and people back home appreciating the sacrifice migrants make for the good life of the family. The larger ERC project which Besnier leads explores value, reciprocity and masculinity in this transnational and professional space of globalised sports.

The first day of the DME Conference ended with the general discussion chaired by **Jane Guyer**, with the participation of **Deborah James**, **Susana Narotzky** and **Chris Hann**. The discussants drew the day’s debates together around the themes of political economy and moral economy, and the tensions between them. Chris Hann asked what was regionally specific about the kinship and life-cycle rituals discussed during the day. He also raised the challenge of linking domestic moral economy to competing concepts, such as Aristotle’s *oikos*, Karl Polanyi’s *householding*, Stephen Gudeman’s “house economy” and – of course - moral economy à la E.P.

Thompson.

The second day of the conference started with three papers from the South (Africa and Asia). The ERC Project led by **Deborah James**, 'Popular economies in South Africa' featured in the first two presentations. In her own paper James talked about indebtedness in South Africa in terms of mediated capitalism. Neoliberal policies in this country, she argued, work through the mediation of many intermediaries, meaning that state and market aren't so much opposed as intertwined. **Lizzie Hull** took up this thread, showing us how the state and market are entangled through government grants and household struggles in rural South Africa. Lizzie described how monthly grants shape dependency in complex ways: by disciplining spending habits, distributing expectations and responsibility unevenly between household members, and hiding precarity. **Laura Baer** also addressed the state and market but through the prism of work and productive powers. With her study of Indian shipyards and male labour, she argued that the act of working for wages "cross-cuts the 'domains' of economics, kinship, citizenship, 'nature' and the divine". The managerial frames that we use to think about wage labour aren't sufficient, according to Laura; instead, we need to look at it through "the various ethics of kinship, ritual and humanity that are conjoined in the act of labour".

The following session was devoted to the work of the ERC-funded "Grassroots Economics" research group led by **Susana Narotzky**. Like REALEURASIA, this research group is still for the most part at the pre-fieldwork stage, so Susana outlined its starting points and theoretical premises. The group of researchers from four countries in Southern Europe will be exploring the real-life economic practices that normal people engage in to make a living, asking questions such as: how real people make economic decisions within the constraints of austerity politics; how Southern Europe has become a peripheral region and the impact of state austerity on labour-capital relations; and how different generations try to help each other make a living in a post-crisis world. **Jaime Palomera** described the historical emergence of home-ownership in Spain. He described how the financial sector encouraged an increasing sector of Barcelona's urban poor to take up mortgage debt, leading to a process of commodification and erosion of the social relations between them. As a result, low income immigrant communities are facing problems in securing the livelihoods for the next generation, and having to look to diverse ways to make a living. **Diana Sarkis Fernandez** outlined the moral dilemmas facing small farmers and temporary migrant workers following the Syrian Economic Reforms. Following Susana, she argued that theoretical perspectives on the moral economy and political economy perspectives need to be joined if we are to understand how economic dependencies in the household are shaped by the reconfiguration of large-scale political and economic structures.

On the final afternoon of the conference, **Chris Hann** presented the main themes and priorities

of our own REALEURASIA project. He was followed by an ex-Max Planck researcher, **Andrew Sanchez**, who presented some of the research that he carried out while a member of the 'Industry and Inequality in Eurasia' group. Andrew, who looks at India's informal scrap metal economy, described workers views on suffering, concluding that "suffering is [understood as] an intrinsic characteristic of life for the city's informal 'labour class'". My own contribution (**Lale Yalçın-Heckmann**) reflected on the moral economy in my former research site in rural Azerbaijan and how this moral economy is linked to hierarchical relations between wife-givers and wife-takers. Taking my host household as an example, I explored the changing affinal and generational relations as the proportion of the elderly population increases and care costs soar. I described how elderly household members are forced to 'make kin' to meet their healthcare costs.

In the final general discussion, led by **Chris Gregory**, ably supported by **Jon Altman**, **Fiona Magowan** and **Keir Martin**, we returned to the main themes of the conference. How do we account for the elements of security in insecure times? How can we examine how people are re-imagining the value of being financially independent? Where we see the state retreating and the family coming back to the centre of social life, how do we talk about livelihood? Is this making a living or mere survival? How should we think about the good life, and local forms or repeated patterns of moral economy? When we talk about "re-embedding" the economy into society, how do we take account of ecology and the environment? Should we understand today's protest movements as "double movements" in Polanyi's terms: citizens' reactions, whether 'Occupy' or 'Pegida', to crisis in market society? Who has access to dignified lives in today's world?

There were some critical voices coming from economic historians like REALEURASIA's **Matthijs Krul**, who brought the dialogue with economics back into the picture. He reminded the economic anthropologists in the room that we need to engage critically with economic theory to understand how people relate to public goods, how 'neoliberalism' could be defined and how it works, and to strengthen the theory that we can offer to other social scientists.

In closing the event, **Jane Guyer** convened a few other senior colleagues to join her around an imaginary Maussian round table. She suggested that we "make more of the 21st century", engage with its big theory (à la Thomas Piketty), and work more on how people are trying to secure livelihoods for future generations. This will mean paying attention to temporalities and contradictions, as well as ideas about collectivities and cosmologies, both new and old. We ended this long and multi-vocal brain-storming with a Manchester song Jane recalled, sung almost in harmony... certainly for the REALEURASIA participants, including all eight doctoral students, it was a memorable Manchester visit indeed.

*My thanks go to Lucy Fisher, Chris Hann and Matthijs Krul for comments and corrections on

this text.

© 2003-2022, Max-Planck-Gesellschaft