

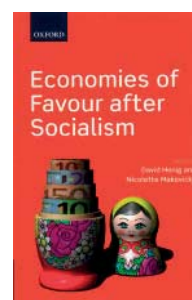
David Henig and
Nicolette Makovicky (eds.)
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Economies of Favour after Socialism

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The social complexity surrounding “favors” is presented here under conditions that make them particularly intriguing – namely, in societies with a socialist past. Those interested in the topic can be sure that *Economies of Favour after Socialism* offers more than a window through which we can observe cosmologies of favors in Bosnia, ways of fulfilling obligations in South China, or modes of reciprocity among Polish artisans and merchants: it opens a window that allows us to form an anthropological appreciation of the complexity of an *act* that a large number of those concerned with the “economy” tend to see as falling outside of the economic domain. The main argument in this edited volume is that favors are *modes of acting*, components of the rhetoric of friendship and mutuality, and not simply actions “which appear to mix instrumental and affective relations, goal-oriented and gift exchanges, and ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ institutional ties,” as the editors clarify in the introduction.

This extremely stimulating book, whose reflections should engage scholars interested in post-socialist societies as well as a broader audience, is the result of a

conference entitled *Economies of Favour after Socialism: A Comparative Perspective*, held in January 2012 in Oxford. The theoretical discussions and the presentation of the cases follow the guidelines of that conference, which in general terms is a broad discussion of Alena Ledeneva's well-known notion of "economies of favour". The title of the book could be misleading and cause occasional readers to believe that the impressive discussion offered by the eleven contributions is only relevant for those interested in ex-socialist societies. This is simply not the case, because the "economy of favours", as Caroline Humphrey points out, is a way of conceptualizing a series of informal economic activities that merge favors with well-known practices in many other regions of the globe: gifts, bribes, patronage, clientelism, kickbacks, illicit benefits, and different forms of "compensation."

After an introduction in which the editors delineate the theoretical contribution of the book and show how the chapters contribute to the overall project, the book continues with two contributions that resonate through the rest of the contributions. Alena Ledeneva again presents a theorization of the *blat*, which serves her to explore the *sistema*, the network-based system of informal governance under Putin. This fascinating chapter incorporates the final recommendation to conduct an ethnographic study of the world of informality: in her contribution, the reader can find conceptual innovation and methodological experimentation. Caroline Humphrey's contribution, meanwhile, poses the question concerning the significance and persistence of favors and proposes a differentiated perspective of these practices. Her answer is that favors always leave something open and uncertain; that is, they are ambiguous as to

what we can expect from the givers of the favor. The final answer is that the favors, due to this ambiguity, facilitate lasting social relationships and feelings of self-worth in the context of certain social networks. It is also worth mentioning Chris Hann's attempt in his article to argue against exaggerating the existence of a "socialist personhood." Hann's contribution focuses on *pálinka*, the name of an alcoholic beverage that also refers to a way to understand a series of exchanges in the economy of favors and a particularly important sector within the illegal or shadow economy. However, the emphasis is on the need to avoid falling into nostalgic sentiment, to avoid exaggerating the past of strong ties under socialism and drawing stark contrasts with the extreme atomization of individuals typical of market societies.

The above contributions are a testimony to the book's depth, but they also suggest that scholars of the economy and markets have yet to fully comprehend the entirety of the world of informal practices that are part of the economy and are, as the editors clarify, constitutive of sociality. Finally, despite the unstructured organization of the book and occasional missed opportunities, I recommend *Economies of Favour after Socialism* to those interested in what happens behind the façade of the state: informality, illegality, and economic practices that go unregistered. This innovative and inspiring edited volume provides a reflection on social phenomena that are certainly to be found beyond the boundaries of ex-socialist societies. In that sense, the book should also provide a source of inspiration for scholars conducting research in other regions of the world.