

45. Re/conceptualizing the Economic Subject: An Invitation for Contestation (Workshop)

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AG „Economic Anthropology“

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In economic anthropology and beyond, the universalist myth of the self-interested, utility-maximizing *homo oeconomicus* has long been debunked. Yet, it remained an ever-present hyper figure in the subdiscipline's conceptions of the economic subject that is reproduced even in its strongest rejection. By extension, economic subjects have been characterized along the lines of egoistic and altruistic orientation and conceived in immaterial terms of "interests" and "rationalities". These themes reoccur in the framework of "neoliberal subjectivation", as a specific mode of (economic) subject constitution by which the neoliberal brand of capitalism is deemed to proliferate. Though, outside of that context, the question of economic subject constitution has received curiously little attention.

This workshop seeks to expand the discussion on economic subjects and subjectivities through the perspective of a "human economy" (Hart, Laville and Cattani, 2010) – as it is practiced and experienced by real people with a plurality of needs. It focuses on economic subjectivity as a site of political and practical contestation about the means and ends of the economy. To promote such a wider debate, the workshop invites empirical and theoretical contributions that draw out new perspectives on the economic subject, as an abstract formation and an embodied being. These perspectives may derive from original ethnographic material or from rereading other economic anthropologic materials and reframing them; or they may be developed from bringing (non-economic) subject-theories in conversation with (economic) anthropological knowledge. In that, the workshop welcomes engagements with non-canonical approaches and diverse forms of knowledge. It further encourages contributors to reflect on the potential contribution of a distinct economic perspective on subjectivity to current contestations of power and (subject) recognition – in and beyond the academic discipline of anthropology.

Social personhood among transnational traders in Bolivia

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In this paper, I aim to think about social personhood among transnationally connected upward mobile Bolivian traders and petty entrepreneurs. As an occupational group, traders are especially exposed to business jargon and entrepreneurial terms which they have partly adopted. However, despite traders' liberal language, the specific qualities associated with their daily activities are not exclusively related to individual economic action, but include the interdependencies of market life and commercial mobility. Conceptions of relative advantage differ from mainstream entrepreneurialism focused on individual competitiveness and innovation. Traders express a relational understanding of business growth. 'Loyalty' is an expectation towards others (providers and clients) and a value that informs traders' commercial ethics. In this sense, they know how to be 'self-reliant to a high degree and belong to others' (Hart, Laville and Cattani 2010: 4).

Theoretically, I start from the premise that traders' social personhood, and related notions of social attachment and membership, is influenced by a broad set of policies, experiences and relationships that must be considered in their historical context and sociopolitical specificity (Ferguson 2013; Martin and Yaganisako 2020). The paper explores traders' social personhood in the interplay of ideas about personal independence and highly interdependent daily practices.

Between desires and duties: „lived“ entrepreneurship in India's rural digitization project

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Rural entrepreneurs running digital kiosks are vital agents of the Indian government's flagship e-governance program. My study investigates how they navigate the tensions presented by the double pursuits of community development and profit making. Planners of the program laud its public-private partnership (PPP) model and juxtapose economic wins with risk and volatile income possibilities. Critiques highlight the precarity that drives entrepreneurs to seek economic opportunities outside the program's prescribed norms. While valid, both perspectives fail to critically engage with entrepreneurship as a mode of economic subjectification wedged between expectations, aspirations, compromises, and renouncement.

The figure of the rural entrepreneur encapsulates three cross cutting impulses – provision of governance services, beneficiaries (and benefactors) of the state's focus on livelihood generation in rural areas, and vital infrastructures for new sites of capital accumulation. My research with Village Level Entrepreneurs (VLEs) asks how they actively imagine and interpret the multifaceted character of their role, which are sometimes at odds. To be an entrepreneur is to make these tensions *functional* and *complementary* through deliberate action. Entrepreneurs are the vocational embodiments of the tensions that arise from the open-ended

amalgamations of giving disenfranchised people access to rights while simultaneously generating new markets supported by government backing.

Human capital and virtuousness in person-centered expertise: The case of positive psychology in urban China

Gil Hizi, Universität zu Köln

Influential expertise for self-cultivation in capitalist societies tends to promote the principles of the market economy. This is evident not only in the commercialization of expertise, but also in the prescriptions for self-cultivation that prize productivity and accumulation, or that construct the person through entrepreneurial metaphors. Positive psychology, a field expanding in the last two decades, is an ultimate example of this process, which makes it subject to suspicion from the critical sciences and therapeutic practitioners. Yet this field also extends the emphasis of existential and humanistic therapeutic schools on meaning-making and virtue cultivation.

Drawing on evidence from urban China, which combines participation in psychology workshops, academic text by practitioners, and relevant items in the popular media, I analyze how discursive practices of positive psychology buttress the expansion of the information market economy in tandem with their attempt to overcome the mechanical reproduction and hyper materialization of social life. This paper contributes to understanding the tensions between human capital and virtue cultivation or individualized person-making and social morality in market-driven societies, and discusses the position of relevant expertise in these dynamics.

On economic subjectivities in commoning and the hope for post-capitalist futures

Katharina Bodirsky, Universität Konstanz

The “commons” and practices of “commoning” have emerged in recent academic and activist discourse as beacons of hope for shaping a future beyond capitalism and its manifold relations of domination. This discourse often rests on a vision of social transformation that grounds it not in political revolution but in the multiplication of alternative, non-capitalist value systems characterized by practices of mutual support (e.g. De Angelis 2017; Holloway 2010). An important aspect of this vision is the notion that alternative value systems shape alternative subjectivities. By entering into relations of sharing, mutuality, and reciprocity, commoners are seen to form themselves as non-capitalist economic subjects.

This paper takes a closer look at the imaginaries of the economic subject that are implicit in theories of commoning and shows how both more general anthropological insights in reciprocity, sharing and solidarity as well as recent ethnographies of “actually existing commons” render such visions more complex. Together, they point at the need of thinking economic subjectivities within their historical and social contexts – among others of relations of power also within the

commons – rather than as the result of “timeless ‘principles’ of social relations” as is frequently the case in theories of alternative economies (Narotzky 2012: 245).