

Capitalism and global anthropology: Marxism resurgent

Convenors

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Short Abstract

This panel engages with Marxian and related analyses of social dynamics as structured over time and place in the larger context of global capitalism. Contributors should be explicit about their theoretical/methodological approach and how it is situated vis-à-vis or within Marxist anthropology.

Long Abstract

Recent turmoil in the capitalist world system - signalled as the "crisis" - confronts us with the shortcomings of mainstream anthropology. Following the "globalisation" debate of the 1990s and its flat ontology of global versus local, many anthropologists already lost sight of the elementary structures of capitalism and their cyclical seismic changes. This briefly changed with an interest in "neoliberalism", which ironically however soon became yet another way of not speaking of capitalism. In response to the "crisis", then, we now see an even more defensive move toward "ethnographic theory" and "ethnographies of hope", sheltering behind the totems of fieldwork, the cultural, and the experiential. The lack of historically and geographically engaged theorizing in this move will lead to another dead-end in understanding the social in the context of capitalist change.

In this panel we hence seek to engage instead with the renewed interest in Marxian and related Polanyian, Braudelian, and other analyses of social dynamics as structured over time and place in the larger context of global capitalism. We look towards an anthropology that allies itself with history, sociology, and geography and can become a dynamic contributor to the social sciences by focusing on anthropology's strengths in studying the lived entanglements and critical junctions of past and present dynamics of capitalist integration and exclusion. We invite contributors to this endeavour to be explicit about their theoretical and/or methodological approach, discuss how it is situated vis-à-vis or within Marxist anthropology, and relate it to their empirical research.

Discussant: Jonathan Friedman

[Propose a paper](#)

Papers

Migration and geographies of dispossession

Author: Pauline Gardiner Barber email
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Short Abstract

As Marx describes, localized economic upheavals provide a vehicle for capital accumulation by multiple means, including the dispossession of rural (and more recently urban) populations and the mobilization of labour whose exits and entries into wage labour are calculated on terms beyond their control. Drawing on ethnographic research in the Philippines and in Canada's deindustrialized

hinterlands, this paper examines how “neoliberal” restructuring of Canada’s immigration policy further privileges capital through the delivery of migrant workers experiencing different modes of dispossession.

Long Abstract

Anthropologists offer unique purchase on global processes and local lives, but this necessitates attention to the workings of capitalism. As Marx describes, localized economic upheavals provide a vehicle for capital accumulation by multiple means, including the dispossession of rural (and more recently urban) populations and the mobilization of labour whose exits and entries into wage labour are calculated on terms beyond their control. While it has become fashionable to link such disruptions to livelihoods and ways of living with the agendas of neoliberal states, more probing of people's responses to displacement, dispossession, and enforced geographic mobilities is required to move us beyond facile pronouncements. Drawing on ethnographic research in the Philippines and in Canada's deindustrialized hinterlands, this paper examines how "neoliberal" restructuring of Canada's immigration policy further privileges capital through the delivery of migrant workers experiencing different modes of dispossession. State-pressured labour market adjustments in Canadian regional political economies include further restrictions for seasonal workers receiving (un)employment insurance. Such workers are challenged to enter labour slots now occupied by temporary foreign workers, primarily Filipino. Meanwhile, in immigrant source countries such as the Philippines, thousands of skilled worker applications have been cancelled, clearing new terrain for employer-driven "just-in-time" immigration. This paper contrasts the continued devaluation of increasingly educated Filipino immigrants with the dispossession of contemporary Canadian workers in regional economies where employment is unpredictable. Neoliberal policy diffusion among immigration countries is thus linked to domestic uneven development, surely the proper subject of anthropology enquiry.

Valuing Land, Valorizing Life: Contentious Land Politics in Contemporary India.

Author: Sarasij Majumder (Kennesaw State University) email
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Short Abstract

This paper explores politics of and around land acquisition for developmentalist projects through an analytical lens of anthropology of value. The central problem that this paper addresses is the persistence of a modernization narrative in provincial India despite popular protests.

Long Abstract

This paper explores politics of and around land acquisition for developmentalist projects through an analytical lens of anthropology of value. By turning our attention to situated regimes of worth and how the latter exists in a relation of both contestation and complicity with broader processes of capitalist accumulation, an anthropology of value perspective shows how everyday practices and meanings related to spatial access turn into aspirations, desires and collective or individual projects of improvement that both supports and challenges dominant narratives of change and development. The value analytic helps us connect questions of agency, subjectivity, change, structures of domination and power in a postcolonial context to reflect on political and economic alternatives to a neoliberal form of capitalism. The central problem that this paper addresses is the persistence of a modernization narrative in provincial India despite popular protests against developmentalist projects of highway construction or building factories. The paper proposes an ethnography of value and valorization by studying valorizing practices related to ownership of or access to land in rural

India. The paper argues that the recent anti-development protests around land have to be understood in terms of valorization practices that withdraw land and labor from the market or the commodity circuit to preserve them for a future imagined in terms of local or regional concepts of modernization, which are different from but overlaps with the state's vision.

Marxism, postmodernism and the cultural turn

Author: James G Carrier (Oxford Brookes) email
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Short Abstract

Interest in Marxist anthropology has been stimulated by the recent economic crisis, but it also reflects the limitations of important disciplinary orientations over the past few decades. This paper identifies those orientations and their limitations, and relates Marxist approaches to them.

Long Abstract

The recent economic crisis has stimulated many to think again about the nature of social life and of the ways that we approach it. This rethinking has an ethical dimension, as the crisis makes the question of justice especially insistent. It also has a more purely academic dimension, as it has raised questions about how we can understand the nature of the crisis and its consequences. This paper seeks to locate this re-thinking in terms of the recent intellectual history of important parts of anthropology, particularly postmodernism and the cultural turn. It argues that these marked a fundamental shift in the ways that many anthropologists saw the world and the processes that exist within it, and the sorts of questions that they could ask about that world, including questions about topics that conventionally come within the purview of Marxist thought, especially the topic of class. The paper argues that the crisis has not only encouraged doubts about important institutions in the world, such as those in the financial system and national governments. In addition, it has encouraged doubts about those older anthropological orientations. This paper suggests that one of the reasons why Marxist orientations have become more popular recently is that they help overcome some of the important ethical and academic limitations of postmodernism and culturalism.

The Trade Unions of Nepal and South Africa: The global contexts of the national movements resisting neoliberalism

Author: Mallika Shakya (University of Pretoria) email
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Short Abstract

Developing a more nuanced picture of the historical and materialist roots of the 'new Left', I situate how the trade union movements in Nepal and South Africa are embedded in their national histories of crypto-colonialism. Enlarging the scope of the embeddedness concept, I then juxtapose these findings with presumptions of anthropological studies of global neoliberalism.

Long Abstract

Michael Herzfeld (2005) argued that 'crypto-colonies' are doubly victimized. Not only have they suffered the effects of colonialism itself until the 1940s, their exposure to the rise of neoliberalism in the 1990s could not be challenged by reliance on the discursive and material socio-economic

achievements of anti-colonial struggle. What then does the renewed global interest in Marxian thinking mean for these countries?

In this paper, I offer a comparative analysis of the trade union movements in Nepal and South Africa to discuss what Kozloff (2008) called 'new Left' for the distinctively different context of South America - a fusion of indigenous rights movements, revived trade unions and resistance to hegemonic neoliberalism. A defining feature of both the Nepali and South African movements is a more pronounced recognition of the different and possibly overlapping social and cultural identities that shape economic, political and social realities. Both of these movements are much more explicitly concerned with addressing the inequalities and exploitation associated with social attributes such as race, caste and ethnicity.

In its heydays, neoliberalism prominently spoke the language of development in both Nepal and South Africa. As national trade union movements increasingly spoke out against such policies -- through anti-Panchayat movement in Nepal and anti-apartheid movement in South Africa -- their actions became embedded in a changing global context of movements which were much more diverse than is often acknowledged.

Don't Lefebvre and Harvey ever space out? On Majorcan Oeuvres and Production-as-a-Totality in the Global Tourism Industry

Author: Marc Morell (Independent researcher, linked to Universitat de Barcelona and Universitat de les Illes Balears) email
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Short Abstract

This paper looks at the appropriation and transformation by the global tourism industry of collectively laboured social spaces. Such labour contributes to the surplus extraction in tourism as the capitalist subsumption of its oeuvres leads to the conversion of social space into land-as-a-commodity.

Long Abstract

This paper calls for attention to a process of accumulation in tourism that takes place outside the arenas of service-related labour and building activities. Instead I show how the global tourism industry also depends on the rather invisible appropriation of the localised, unwaged, yet highly productive labour stored in collectively produced social spaces.

In order to unveil this appropriation, I bring together the work on urban space of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey. In applying their analysis to accumulation processes in the tourism industry of Majorca, I introduce a concrete example of how this industry incorporates the reproduction of social relations into the very process of production, thus, production-as-a-totality.

I illustrate this with two ethnographic sketches: First, how collective labour intended to rescue the built heritage and to liven up a gentrifying neighbourhood on the margins of the centre of the capital city is appropriated as the area becomes part of the existing tourism circuit. Second, how the conservation efforts towards the Northern Majorcan mountain range serve the same pattern of accumulation as it becomes a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Such collectively laboured oeuvres, are thus converted into capitalist exchange value, land-as-a-commodity, which ultimately turns collective labour into unwaged labour for capitalism. What is happening is a quasi-perennial "original accumulation of capital".

By emphasising that theoretical and methodological insights need to be combined in order to understand the capitalist subsumption of collective labour, I stress ethnography is an essential project for social anthropology rather than a self-explanatory program per se.

Towards a Historical Sociology of Dispossession and Subordination in India's Adivasi Heartlands: A Gramscian Approach

Author: Alf Gunvald Nilsen (University of Bergen) email
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Short Abstract

This paper articulates a historical sociology of the processes of dispossession and subordination through which Adivasis have been adversely incorporated into the political economy of postcolonial India. The paper draws on Gramscian perspectives on uneven development and modern state-making.

Long Abstract

This paper presents an historical-sociological account of the processes of dispossession and subordination through which Adivasis have been adversely incorporated into the political economy of capitalist development in postcolonial India. Specifically, the paper uses a Gramscian framework to trace the historical processes through which Bhil Adivasis in Western India have been constituted as marginal peasants and migrant labourers whose material deprivation is compounded by political disenfranchisement in relation to the Indian state.

The lineages of contemporary poverty and political disempowerment among Adivasis in India is located in two intertwined processes of restructuring that unfolded under colonial rule: on the one hand, the "primitive accumulation" of land and forests as these were incorporated in colonial revenue systems and global orbits of commodity exchange; on the other hand, the transition from a precolonial system of "shared sovereignty" towards the colonial prerogative of "exclusive sovereignty". Further, this political and economic structure was reproduced after independence as postcolonial processes of state formation were negotiated within a "passive revolution" that entrenched dominant structures of class power across spatial scales in independent India.

Theoretically, the paper will argue that a conceptualization of these processes entails an analytical engagement with "connected histories" of capitalist development and state formation across significant historical time and spatial scales. Drawing on Gramscian perspectives on uneven development and modern state-making, the paper articulates some central elements for a critical historical sociology of contemporary patterns of adverse incorporation among India's Adivasis.

A Class Analysis of the Creation of the Neoliberal Subject: The Case of Jordan

Author: Mayssun Soukarieh email
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Short Abstract

The paper challenges the anthropological analysis of the creation of Neoliberal subjects and subjectivities. An alternative model for studying such subject creation is developed based on ethnographic studies of policy programs for Jordanian youth promoting entrepreneurship and micro-credit schemes.

Long Abstract

A key challenge confronting critical studies of development entails understanding the diverse but often interconnected trajectories of socio-spatial change in different regions of the capitalist world system. In doing so, there is a need to be sensitive to the interplay of the forces of present day global capitalism with local histories and "culture", in other words "local histories of capitalism" and their entanglements with earlier global formations. Yet, this cannot be achieved if we plainly dub the study of capitalism as "economism". Instead this papers shows how the "tyrannies of science" can be overcome without a retreat from studying the workings of capitalism and resorting to premature celebrations of cultural globalization as recent studies of the creation of neoliberal subjectivities do.

In showing how to overcome this trap, this paper builds on an in-depth ethnographic study of two entrepreneurship and micro credit youth programs in Jordan. It will focus on how analytical sensitivity to the historical formation of classes in the area challenges the literature on neoliberal subject creation. Employing a critical ethnographic approach the paper argues for the inclusion of class analysis to overcome the limitations of the dominant Foucauldian framework employed in studying neoliberal subject creation as this does (1) not sufficiently account for the historical and geographical contexts in which such subjects are created and (2) fails to account for the coercive violence that accompanies the imposition of neoliberalism and (3) ignores how neoliberalism is contested from below.

Capital flight, personal power and economic mystification in Central Africa.

Author: Joseph Trapido (School of African and Oriental Studies) email
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Short Abstract

In Kinshasa an ideology of largesse means that politicians who have stored billions in off-shore accounts are proclaimed as wealth creators. I draw on Marx's theories of alienation and fetishism, and on theories of underdevelopment.

Long Abstract

In Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC, the ability of 'extraordinary individuals' - be they politicians, gangsters, celebrity courtesans, popstars or pentecostal pastors - to acquire and distribute material and emotional goods on retinues, are crucial to popular ideas of legitimacy such that politicians who have stored billions in off-shore accounts are locally proclaimed as wealth creators. While recent political theories about Africa have tended to connect such figures to Weberesque ideas of patrimonialism or charisma, this paper hopes to demonstrate that Marxist forms of analysis offer greater insight into such phenomena. Specifically this paper will show how these forms of personal politics are underwritten by stable forms of appropriation, rooted in longue durée political economic facts about controlling the wealth of the interior and using it to truck with powerful outsiders. Drawing particularly on Marx's theories of alienation and fetishism, and on theories of underdevelopment, I look at the role of such ideologies in the perpetuation of a political economy of scarcity.