



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

Convenors: Dr Leo Hopkinson and Dr Teodor Zidaru-Bărbulescu – LSE Anthropology
Workshop Dates: January 4th - 8th, 2021
Expression of Interest submission deadline: September 18th, 2020
Submit EOIs to: afterlives.of.competition@gmail.com
Attendance at the workshop will be entirely remote.

What Competition Is, What Competition Does: Ethnographies of Competition and Its Afterlives

-Workshop: Call for Papers-

For actors in diverse fields the world over, competition is a self-evident and ubiquitous logic which drives progress and creates value. For biologists, it is the mechanism of adaptive evolution; for governments and economists it animates global markets; and billion-dollar global sporting industries perform competition as a spectacle of virtue, belonging and community. Although clearly different, these fields often invoke one another's terms - biologists describe evolutionary 'fitness', politicians and economists seek to 'level playing fields', and sportspersons describe the 'evolution' of athletes and teams - suggesting that logics of competition are fundamental to these varied contexts. Nevertheless, anthropology has relatively little to say about competition as an ethnographic object. By theorizing competition from the ground up through ethnographic and historicizing accounts, this workshop will interrogate what is shared across its diverse invocations.

We were struck by the centrality of competition in our own fieldwork. For Hopkinson, competition is an animating force in Accra boxers' imagined sporting futures. Yet, "fair competition" rarely materializes as they build careers in the sport, raising questions around what "competition" actually is for boxers, and how the disjuncture between the imagined concept and lived reality shapes boxers' life strategies and subjectivities. For Zidaru-Bărbulescu, contradictions between ideas and experiences of competition prevailed in projects as varied as church-building, community fundraising, and political campaigns. All showcase how, in rural southwest Kenya, overcoming the contradictions of competitive logics in an unequal national and global playing field requires displays of divine election.

Previous analyses have shown competition's contradictory effects: supposedly keeping unequal power relations in check (Carrier 1997) yet facilitating inequality (Scott 1985); as a fundamentally relational concept (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002, cf. Polanyi 1968), yet central to shaping atomistic neoliberal selves (Gershon 2011); and as causing both group formation and schism. While this work naturalizes competition as the self-evident pursuit of a finite resource, the workshop will revitalize anthropological engagements with competition by addressing it as an ethnographic object, the meaning and effects of

which come about as it is used in practice. Hence our proposed focus on the “afterlives” of competition – how competition continues to shape lives and subjectivities even when, as so often happens, its promise fails to materialize.

We welcome submissions engaging with, but not limited by, the following questions:

- What reality(ies) are imagined and enacted when competition is invoked in different contexts?
- How does the failure of competition to materialize in practice shape subjectivities and life strategies?
- Do locally specific accounts of competition produce different concepts and forms of value?
- Are forms of coloniality (re)produced when competitive logics are naturalized at a global scale?
- Can competition produce equitable and effective cooperation (rather than only undermine it)?
- Do diverse accounts and understanding of competition create space for resistance or social change?

The workshop will be held remotely in the week beginning 4th January 2021, in sessions spread over the week. Participants will be invited to pre-circulate article-length draft papers which will form the basis of session-long plenary discussions, with the aim of working towards submitting a special issue proposal in 2021.

We invite expressions of interest which outline your ethnographic and theoretical concerns, and propose a paper for the workshop (max 400 words total). If you would like to be involved in the workshop, please send an expression of interest and/or any questions to afterlives.of.competition@gmail.com by September 18th 2020.